

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MAGGIE SHAYNE

THE OKLAHOMA



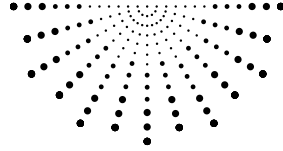
BRANDS

THREE HOLIDAY ROMANCES

CHRISTMAS KISSES

CHRISTMAS KISSES

THE OKLAHOMA BRANDS



MAGGIE SHAYNE



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CONTENTS

The Brands Who Came for Christmas

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Epilogue

A Mommy For Christmas

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Sweet Vidalia Brand](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

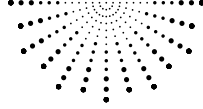
[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

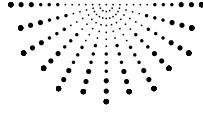
[Chapter 9](#)

[Also Available](#)

THE BRANDS WHO CAME
FOR CHRISTMAS



PROLOGUE



MAYA

Most people in Big Falls, Oklahoma, thought it must have been a case of immaculate conception when they saw me, Maya Brand—eldest of the notorious Vidalia Brand’s illegitimate brood—with my belly swollen and my ring finger naked.

Personally, I thought it was more like fate playing a cruel joke. See, all my life, I had struggled to be the one respectable member of my outrageous family. I went to church on Sundays. I volunteered at the nursing home. I wore sensible shoes, for heaven’s sake! I never aspired to notoriety. I just wanted to be normal.

You know. Normal. I wanted a husband, a home, a family. I wanted to be one of those women who make pot roast for Sunday dinner, and vacuum in pearls while it simmers. I wanted a little log cabin on the hillside behind my family’s farm, with a fenced-in backyard for the kids, and a big front porch. I wanted to sit down in one of the pews on Sunday and not have the three women beside me automatically slide their butts to the other end.

And it had been starting to happen—before the big disaster blew into town. Bit by bit, I’d felt it happening. The PTA moms and church ladies in town had been slowly, reluctantly, beginning to accept me. To see me as an individual, rather than just another daughter of a bigamist and a barmaid. And it wasn’t that I didn’t love my mother dearly, because I did. I do! I just didn’t want to be like her. I wanted to be like those other women—the ones who were always asked to bake for the church picnic, who did their grocery shopping in heels, and who drove the car pools. The ones who slow-danced with their handsome husbands on anniversaries and holidays, and who took golf or tennis lessons with groups of their friends. They have minivans and housekeepers, manicured lawns and manicured nails, those women.

What they do not have are mothers who own the local saloon, or sisters who ride motorcycles or pose for fashion magazines in their underwear.

Still, I was certain my background was something that I could overcome with effort. And, as I said, my efforts had actually been working. Once or twice, one of those other women had smiled back at me in church. The ladies on the pew hadn't moved so far away, nor quite as quickly, and one of them had even returned my persistent "good morning" one Sunday.

Things had been going so well! Until that night....

That night. He ruined everything! Made me into the biggest (literally) and most scandalous member of my entire family! The good people of Big Falls have stopped gossiping about Kara being a jinx—then again, none of her boyfriends have wound up in the hospital from any freak accidents lately, either. They've stopped whispering about Edie, who found the success she chased to L.A. when she became a lingerie model for the Vanessa's Whisper catalogue. Mom just about had kittens over that one. The locals used to speculate on Selene, because of her oddball customs and beliefs. Vegetarianism and Zen and dancing around outdoors when the moon was full, were not big in Big Falls. And Mel used to generate gossip for being too tough for any man, with her motorcycle and her unofficial job as bouncer at the OK Corral. That's our family's saloon; the OK Corral. Because we live in Oklahoma. Cute, huh?

But the point is, no matter how much I wished that my sisters would conform, or that my mother would suddenly cut that wild black hair of hers to a style more fitting for a woman her age, and maybe convert the saloon into a restaurant like that nice Haggerty family a town away—none of their antics did as much damage to my standing in the community as that one night of insanity with that man. That drifter with the eyes that seemed to look right through my clothes. Right through my *skin*.

I suppose, if I'm going to tell you about all this, I should probably start with him, and that night.

See it all started just short of nine months ago....



CALEB

How was I to know that one night of insanity would change my life forever? I mean, I was respectable, responsible, highly thought of. The Montgomerys of Oklahoma were known far and wide. We had money, and we had power. The name Cain Caleb Montgomery had a long and proud history. My father, Cain Caleb Montgomery II, served two terms as a U.S. senator. His father, Cain Caleb Montgomery I, served five.

I am, as you have probably guessed by now, Cain Caleb Montgomery III. And already my political career was well underway. I had just stepped down from my second term as mayor of a medium-sized city. On the day all this insanity began, my entire future was being planned for me. My father and grandfather, and a half dozen other men—men whose faces you would recognize—sat around a large table plotting my run for the U.S. Senate.

They discussed when and how I would declare my candidacy nine months from now, just a little before New Year's Day. They discussed what I was going to stand for and what I was going to stand against. They didn't discuss these things *with me*, mind you. They discussed them with each other. I was an onlooker. A bystander. They went on, telling me what I was going to wear, eat, and do on my vacations, as I sat there, listening, nodding, and growing more and more uneasy.

And then they went too far. There we all were, in my father's drawing room. Eight three-piece suits—seven of them straining at the middle—seated around a long cherry wood table that gleamed like a mirror. The place reeked of expensive leather, expensive whiskey and cigars of questionable origin. And all of a sudden, one of the men said, "Of course, there will be a *Mrs.* Montgomery by then."

"Of course there will!" my father agreed, smiling ear to ear.

And I sat there with my jaw hanging.

“Got anyone in mind, son?” A big hand slammed me on the back, and a wrinkled eye winked from behind gold-framed glasses. “No? Great. Even better this way, in fact. We can start from scratch, then.”

And suddenly they were all talking at once, growing more and more excited all the time.

“She should be blond. The latest analysis shows that blondes hold a slight edge over brunettes or redheads in public opinion polls.”

“Of course, there’s always dye.”

“Medium height. Not too tall.”

“Yes, and not too short, or she’ll have to wear heels all the time.”

“And of course, she has to be attractive.”

“But not too attractive. We don’t want any backlash.”

“Educated. Not quite as well as you, though, but that goes without saying.”

“Well versed. She should have a good voice, nice rich tones. None of those squeaky ones. And no gigglers.”

“Oh, definitely no gigglers!”

“Sterling reputation. We can’t have any scandals in the family. That’s probably most important of all.”

“Absolutely. No scandals.”

“We can run background checks, of course. Just to be sure. And—”

“Wait a minute.”

They all fell silent when I finally spoke. Maybe it was because of the tone of my voice, which sounded odd even to me. I placed both my palms on the table and got slowly to my feet. And for the first time in my entire adult life, I let myself wonder if this was what I really wanted. It had been expected of me, planned for me, even from before I was born. Everything all laid out, private school, prep school, college,

law school. And I'd gone along with it because, frankly, it had never occurred to me to do otherwise. But was it what I wanted?

It shocked me to realize I wasn't sure anymore. I just... wasn't sure. Giving my head a shake, I just turned and walked out. They all called after me, shouting my name, asking if I was all right. I kept on going. I felt disoriented—as if, for just one instant there, a corner of my world had peeled back, revealing a truth I hadn't wanted to see or even consider. The fact that there might be more for me out there. Something different. Another choice.

Anyway, I went out that night looking to escape my name. My reputation. My identity, because I was suddenly questioning whether it was indeed mine. Everyone who knew me, knew me as Cain Caleb Montgomery III. CC-Three for short. Hell, without the name and the heritage, I didn't even know who I was.

I shed the suit. Dressed in a pair of jeans I used to wear when I spent summers on my grandfather's ranch. God, I hadn't been out there since my college days, and they barely fit anymore. I borrowed the pickup that belonged to our gardener, José. He looked at me oddly when I asked but didn't refuse.

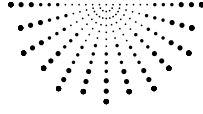
And then I just drove.

Maybe it was fate that made me have that flat tire in Big Falls, Oklahoma, on the eve of Maya Brand's twenty-ninth birthday. Hell, it had to be fate...because it changed everything from then on. Although I wasn't completely aware of those changes until some eight and a half months later.

But really, you have to hear this story from the beginning.

It all began nine months ago, on the day I began to question everything in my life....

CHAPTER ONE



APRIL FOOLS' DAY

Maya had always been of two minds about working at the saloon. Of course, it wasn't a five-star restaurant, or even a respectable club. It was where the ordinary folk liked to come to unwind. You would never see the church ladies or the PTA moms on the leather bar stools munching pretzels and sipping beer at the OK Corral. But they didn't have to see Maya waiting tables to know she worked there. It was a small town.

Everyone in Big Falls knew she was a barmaid.

And it probably didn't do her efforts at becoming respectable much good at all. But the thing was, this was the family business. It put food on the table. And it was an honest business, and one her mother had worked hard to make successful. It meant a lot to Vidalia Brand. And respectability or no, family came first with Maya. Always had. That was the way she'd been raised.

So she helped out at the OK Corral, just as her sisters did. Well, all except for Edie. Edie was off in L.A. chasing her own dreams. And respectability didn't seem to be too high on her list.

Anyway, April Fools' night started out like any other Saturday night at the Corral. Kara helped in the kitchen, where her frequent accidents were heard but not seen. Selene waited tables, so long as no meat dishes were ordered. Mel tended bar and served as unofficial bouncer. And Maya did most of the cooking, and gave line dancing lessons every Tuesday and Saturday.

In fact, the only thing that truly set this particular Saturday night apart from any other was that it was Maya's last Saturday as a twenty-eight-year-old woman. On Sunday, she would turn twenty-nine. And twenty-nine was only twelve months away from thirty. And she was still single, still alone. Still an outcast struggling to make herself acceptable. Still living with her mother and working at the Corral. Still... everything she didn't want to be. Still a virgin.

So she was depressed and moody, and she'd sneaked a couple of beers tonight, which was totally unlike her. As a result, she was just the slightest bit off the bubble, as her mother would have put it, as she walked out of the kitchen. Wiping her hands on her apron, she strained her eyes to adjust to the dimmer light in the bar. Dark hardwood walls and floor, gleaming mahogany bar, sound system turned down low for the moment. Just enough to create a soothing twang underlying the constant clink of ice and glasses, the thud of frosted mugs on the bar, and the low murmur of working men in conversation. The light fixtures were small wagon wheels suspended over every table, a bigger one way up in the rafters dead center. Dimmer switches were essential, of course. The only time the lights got turned up to high beam was when they closed the doors to clean up. The row of ceiling fans over the bar whirred softly and tousled her hair when she walked underneath them.

And then she looked up.

And he was there.

He'd just come through the batwing doors from the street outside. He stopped just inside them, and he looked around as if it was his first time at the Corral. And as Maya looked him over, she thought he seemed just about as depressed and moody as she was.

"Now that looks like a cowboy who's been rode hard and put away wet one too many times," Vidalia said near her ear.

Maya started. She hadn't even heard her mother come up beside her. And though she tried to send her a disapproving glance for her choice of words, she found it tough to take her

eyes off the man. “Who is he?” she asked. “I don’t recognize him.”

Vidalia shrugged. “I don’t either.”

He wasn’t tall, but he wasn’t short. Not reed thin or overweight or bursting with muscle. Just an average build. He had dark hair under a battered brown cowboy hat that bore no brand name or markings she could detect. His jeans were faded and tight as sin. His denim shirt was unbuttoned and hanging open over a black T-shirt with a single pocket. Even his boots were scuffed and dusty. But none of that was what made her so unable to look away. It was something about his face. His eyes, scanning the bar as if he was looking for something, or someone. There was a quiet sorrow about those eyes. A loneliness. A lost look about the man, and it touched off that nurturing instinct of hers from the moment she saw it.

She walked closer without even knowing she was doing it, and those lonely eyes fell on her. Blue. They were deep blue. So blue she could see that vivid color even in this low lighting. His lips curved up in a fake smile of greeting, and she forced hers to do the same. But the smile didn’t reach his eyes. They still looked as sad as the eyes of a motherless pup, and they latched on to hers as if she was his last hope.

“Can I help you with something?” she asked him at last.

He shrugged. “Can I get a beer?” he asked.

“Well now, this *is* a saloon.” She took his arm for some reason. Kind of the way you’d take hold of a stranger lost in a storm, to lead him home. “Mister, your shirt’s wet through.”

“That’s because it’s raining outside.”

“Yes, but when it’s raining outside, most people stay inside.” She took him to a table near the fireplace. It was in the area where the line dancing lessons would be starting up in a little while, but the man was chilled to the bone. He had to be.

He took the seat she showed him and looked at her sheepishly. “I had a flat on my pickup. Had to change the tire in the rain.”

“I’d have let it sit there until it let up.”

“I hear it hasn’t let up in days.”

“You have a point. Our weather’s been nothing short of freakish this year.” She signaled Selene, who came right over. “Hot cocoa. Bring a whole pot.”

“Um, I asked for a beer.”

“It’s your call, of course. But beer will make you even colder. You want to catch your death?”

He blinked up at her, then shrugged in surrender.

“And see if you can find a dry shirt kicking around, will you, Selene?” Maya called.

Selene nodded, tilting her head as she examined the stranger. Of them all, she was the most strikingly different. Her hair was long, lustrous, perfectly straight and silvery blond. Her eyes were palest blue, so they, too, often seemed silver. They seemed silver now, as she narrowed them on the man.

“You new in town?” Selene asked him.

“Just passing through,” he told her.

Selene’s gaze slid from his face, to her sister’s. “That’s odd. I got the feeling you were here to stay.” She shrugged, tipping her head sideways, and said, “Oh, well,” as she turned to hurry away.

The stranger sent Maya a questioning glance.

“This month she’s convinced she has ESP,” she explained. “Last month she was exploring her past lives in Atlantis.”

He grinned widely. “Your sister?” he asked.

“How’d you guess?”

“There’s a resemblance.”

Maya smiled back at him, feeling warm all over just from the light of his smile. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“You were meant to.”

There was something in his eyes that made her heart quiver. She cleared her throat, searched for something to say,

and came up with the lamest line ever uttered in any bar in any town, ever. “So, where are you from?”

His smile died. All at once, just like that. He lowered his eyes, cleared his throat “Umm...a long ways from here. You wouldn’t know it.”

“Try me.” She wasn’t sure why she said it. Curiosity, she supposed. She wanted to know his story. What had hurt him. What had sent him out into the dark rainy night to a strange town, a strange bar, a strange woman....

He looked up again. Seemed about to say something. Then seemed to change his mind. “Tulsa. I’m from Tulsa.”

“Well, now, Tulsa’s not that far away. And I’m pretty sure everyone in this room has heard of it.” She smiled gently at the way his eyes widened and he looked around. “Hey, don’t look so nervous. I’m not gonna tell anyone where you’re from if you don’t want me to.”

His gaze met hers again. “I appreciate that.”

“Are you in some kind of trouble?” she asked.

He shook his head slowly. “I’m not wanted or anything, if that’s what you mean.”

The reply that popped into her head was that he most certainly *was* wanted. Right now. By her. But she bit her tongue and didn’t speak. The fire snapped, and its scent made her nostrils burn. The glow from the flames painted his face in light and shadow, and she took advantage of the chance to explore it more thoroughly. He had a straight nose that began high and was on the large side. It made her think of royalty, that nose. His jawline was sharply delineated, and strong, and he hadn’t shaved in several hours. A soft dusting of dark whiskers coated his cheeks and his chin. Reaching up, she took off his hat, again moving without thinking first. It was unlike her to be this forward with anyone. But she took the hat off, and it was wet. His hair underneath, though, was dry. Brown and fire-glow red in places, when the firelight hit it. It was thick, wavy, but short. If it grew long, she thought, it

would be curly. But short it couldn't be. He kept it that way to keep it tame, she mused. He liked control.

And now who was pretending to have ESP?

“Stealin’ my hat, ma’am?” he asked, his voice very soft, very deep, and stroking her nerve endings like callused fingers on velvet.

“Umm...it’s wet.” Turning away to hide the rush of heat to her face, she hung the hat on one of the pegs beside the fireplace. Then she spoke to him over her shoulder, avoiding his eyes. “Might as well hang that shirt up here, too,” she told him.

His reply came from close beside her. “If you say so.” A second later, his damp denim brushed her arm as he leaned in close to her to hang it up beside his hat. His shoulder was pressed to hers, his hip. He looked down slowly, and his mouth was only inches from hers as he turned toward her....

“Ahem!”

Maya jumped and the stranger spun.

“Your cocoa is here,” Selene said, her mysterious silver eyes sliding from one of them to the other. She put the pot on the table, set a cup beside it and tossed a Denver Broncos sweatshirt over the back of the chair. “It belongs to a friend of mine, so make sure I get it back.”

“Thanks,” the man said. He took the sweatshirt and pulled it on over his T-shirt, arms first then poked his head through and sat back down.

Selene stood there watching the two of them intently.

“That’ll be all, Selene,” Maya said.

Sighing, looking very deep in thought, Selene turned and left them.

“Selene, hm?” the stranger said. “Fits her.”

“You think?”

“Sure. Mystical. Lunar. Isn’t it the name of some Greek moon goddess or something?”

“Could have been. Mom used to read lots of mythology.”

“So?”

She blinked, saw him looking at her, and, finally, read his eyes. “Oh. Maya. My name is Maya Brand.”

His brows went up.

“As in the Earth Mother goddess,” she explained.

“And does it fit?”

“Oh, I’m a long way from being anyone’s mother. I’m still...I mean, I...” She bit her lip. “You haven’t told me your name yet.”

He averted his eyes. “Caleb.”

“Just Caleb?” He didn’t answer.

Then she looked at her watch. “I have to go start the line dancing lesson.”

He met her eyes, held them. Then, slowly, he got to his feet. “That’s great. I’ve always wanted to learn line dancing.”

Oh, hell.

This was not good, whatever it was. She was waiting for a respectable man, with a position of authority. Someone so established that being his wife would set her firmly into the midst of the “good people” of Big Falls and no one would ever think of brushing her off again. She didn’t want to get involved with a dirt-poor drifter who couldn’t even afford a decent pair of boots. And especially not a man who was just passing through.

Above all else, Maya wanted a man she could depend on. A man who would be there for her, no matter what. One who would climb mountains, swim oceans, if that was what it took to be there when she needed him. A man who would be as honest and loyal and true as...as some silver screen cowboy from days gone by. What she *didn’t* want was a drifter or a liar or a cheat. A man like her father, who had never once been around for her mother when the chips were down. A man whose exploits had shamed his entire family so much they

were still trying to live them down—even though he'd been dead for over twenty years.

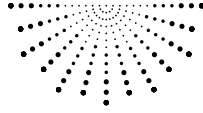
And yet *this* man—who was already hiding something, keeping some secret behind his blue, blue eyes, and who was obviously a drifter and poor as a church mouse—this man was the one to come along and cause her circuits to overload. Go figure!

It must be physical attraction, she reasoned. Some chemical thing that she had no control over. But whatever it was, it was powerful. And its timing was damn near uncanny. Especially when she'd only just tonight been bemoaning the fact that she was a year from thirty and still a virgin. Untouched. Untempted...until now. Now she was extremely tempted to forget her morals and her ethics and her goals in life for one brief fling with a man whose eyes told her clearly he would be willing to oblige.

She'd never been so powerfully drawn to a man in her life.

Or maybe it was just the beer.

CHAPTER TWO



Maya Brand, he thought as he watched her across the table, pouring his cocoa and stirring it absently and looking at him as if...as if she couldn't look at him enough.

Caleb knew he was running away. Shirking his responsibilities, worrying his father sick, more than likely, and letting a lot of people down. He knew that. And he knew it couldn't go on. He had to go back. To pick up the legacy and carry it forward. It was what was expected of him. His life plan. He'd worked for these goals for years, and it was all coming together finally. In just over a year he would announce his candidacy for the U.S. Senate. He would step into the shoes of his father and grandfather. He would fulfill his destiny.

He didn't know why the hell he'd put on these clothes or borrowed José's pickup or driven clear out into some hole-in-the-wall town. Last minute jitters? A sudden attack of nerves? A desire to sabotage his own success?

Whatever it was, he'd arrived at the door of this little saloon angry, wet, and confused. But this...this was something different.

Maya Brand was an exceptionally beautiful woman. Oh, not the way most people would think of beauty. Her hair, for example. It wasn't "done" or sprayed. Its color wasn't artificial, but a deep milk brown. It was long and wavy, but not curly, exactly. It fell over her shoulders. She didn't fuss with it. Her face...was clean. So clean he could see the slight sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of her nose. Very

slight. But there, not covered by makeup. Her shape was not bone thin. She was curvy. Wider at the hip than most women would probably like to be or see as ideal. On her it was good, especially in the snug-fitting jeans she wore. He wanted to rest his hands just above her hips and hold her close to him.

But the most attractive thing about her, he realized with the part of his mind that was still functioning on some rational level, was that she didn't have a clue who he was. She didn't look at him and see Cain Caleb Montgomery III, heir to millions, former mayor, future senator. She didn't see anything but a man in dusty boots and worn-out jeans. And it seemed to him that she liked him anyway.

Why?

It puzzled him and drew him. What was there about him that she could see to like? He'd been Cain Caleb Montgomery III for so long he wasn't sure who plain old Caleb was anymore. And he suddenly found he wanted to know. And he thought maybe this woman might be able to show him.

She went to the center of the floor, where a small crowd had already gathered. Men in their best blue jeans and western shirts with pearl snaps. Women in short skirts and cowboy boots. Caleb had never line danced in his life. He figured he would probably make a fool of himself. But it would be worth it just to have an excuse to get close to Maya Brand.

She stepped to the front of the room, looked around, and then glanced at him almost reluctantly. Everyone else had a partner. Everyone but him.

He shrugged. "Looks like you're stuck with me."

She smiled, not just to be polite, he thought. "You say that like it's a bad thing. Come here."

Damn, he liked the way she said "Come here."

He moved to stand beside her at the head of the class. Maya waved to the woman at the far end of the bar. The woman at the bar waved back. She looked like a shorter, curvier version of Sophia Loren. Exquisite bone structure, dark coloring. Mexican, he thought. She had a head of raven

curls that reached to her waist and a few laugh lines around her eyes that only added to her appeal.

Maya called, “Crank it, Mom. Let’s start ‘em with the Boot Scoot.”

Caleb blinked and looked at Maya. “Mom?”

“If you’re gonna look so shocked, Caleb, you really ought to do it when she’s up close enough to enjoy it,” Maya told him.

“She’s your mother,” he said, still not believing it.

“Vidalia Brand, mother of five, and the most notorious female saloon owner in seven counties,” Maya told him, and there was more than a hint of pride in her voice and in her eyes.

“Wow.”

The music came up, and he had to focus on Maya’s instructions and try to imitate her footwork for a time. It was okay, though, because he had to get up close beside her and, every once in a while, hold her hand or slip his arm around her waist, so he didn’t mind at all.

And every time he looked down at her, her eyes were sparkling and staring right up into his. And her cheeks were pink with color, her lips full and parted as she got a little breathless. He hoped not entirely from the dancing.

Once he had the moves down, they ran through the dance again, without stopping after each step to explain the next one, this time. And though he got lost once or twice, he had it down soon enough, so he could resume the conversation.

“Mother of five, you said.”

Maya nodded.

“So the cute one with the short, raven hair who’s tending bar and sending me daggers would be...?”

“That’s my sister Melusine. She’s kicked the stuffing out of some of the baddest men in town. Some of them for far less serious offenses than calling her cute.”

He lifted his brows. “But she’s so small.”

“She’s strong and she’s fast, and most importantly, she’s mean. Hot tempered anyway. Rides a motorcycle and takes karate lessons. Goes rock climbing. She’s a year younger than me, but she kind of sees herself as the protector of the bunch. Guess she figured if our father wasn’t around to do it, someone had to.”

He nodded, searching her eyes. There had been a flash of pain when she’d mentioned her father. “Would I be out of line if I asked what happened—to your father, I mean?”

She smiled up at him as they moved to the music. “Stick around this town more than five minutes and you’ll hear all about it. It’s the juiciest gossip Big Falls has ever had.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“I’m intrigued.”

“Most everyone is.”

The music stopped, the dance ended. Maya turned to her group. “Ten-minute break. You know the drill.” Some of them wandered off to tables, the rest room, the bar, while others just stepped closer together and wrapped their arms around each other as a slow, sad song came wafting from the speakers.

Before Maya could turn to go, Caleb slid his arms around her waist and pulled her close, started moving her slowly in time to the steel guitar. She tilted her head curiously but didn’t pull away. She put her arms around his neck and smiled a little nervously.

“Tell me about your father,” he urged her. He wanted to know all about this woman for some reason. Why did she so intrigue him? Was it because she was exactly the opposite of the political wife his father and the others had described to him? Or was it something more?

She shrugged. “Okay. It’s public knowledge, anyway. My father met my mother when she was seventeen. They had a brief affair, and then he went his way and she went hers. By

the time she found him again to tell him she was pregnant, he was on the East Coast with a wife of his own. Still, time passed, and he came back. Told Mom things hadn't worked out with his first wife, that they'd split up, and he asked her to marry him. She did."

"Doesn't sound so scandalous to me," he said. He was listening as much to the sound of her voice as to her story. Her tone was deep, rich. Erotically husky.

"Well, that's because I haven't gotten to the scandal yet. See, Daddy-Dearest wasn't divorced from his first wife at all. Not even separated from her. For ten years he managed to get by with two families. He traveled all the time on business—or we thought it was on business. What he was doing was dividing his time between the wife he had in Silver City and the one he had here in Big Falls, Oklahoma."

"He was a bigamist?"

She waggled her brows. "Told you it was scandalous."

"So what happened?" he asked. "Where is he now?"

Maya lowered her head. "He got involved with a bad crowd in Silver City. In the end he tried to mess with the wrong people and was murdered, along with his wife. I never did learn what became of the two kids he had with her. It was only after he was dead that we found out about his other life. By then my mother had five daughters, every last one of us illegitimate. I was young at the time, but I remember it like it was yesterday. It damn near destroyed Mom." She lifted her head, looked across the room with admiration in her eyes. "But she came through it."

"She must be one hell of a woman," he said.

She looked up at him. "She is."

"And she's raised one hell of a daughter," he said.

She lowered her head quickly. "You don't know me well enough to say that."

"I know you well enough to know that I'd like to know you better, Maya Brand. I'd like that a lot."

Thick lashes lowered; then she glanced up from beneath them. “I...think I’d like that, too.”

“I’m awfully glad to hear that.” He leaned in closer, intending to steal a kiss, but she artfully turned her face away before he could accomplish that. When he lifted his head again, he felt eyes on them from everywhere in the bar, and he thought maybe that was why. Her sisters, her mother—and for some reason, every customer in the place—seemed to be watching them intently.

Okay. So he was going to have to get her alone if he wanted to do anything more than dance with her. It shouldn’t be a problem. Nothing he’d ever wanted in life had been difficult for him to have. Especially women.

He stopped himself then. This was different. Always before he’d been Cain Caleb Montgomery. Everyone knew the Montgomerys always got what they wanted. It was a patriarchal dynasty, practically his birthright.

Here, tonight, he was just Caleb. And she was like no other woman he’d ever met.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I was out of line.”

She lifted her face to his, and he was tempted to get out of line again. “I can’t kiss a man who hasn’t even told me his last name, Caleb,” she said.

And he got a feeling—a feeling that the way he answered that one, simple question might easily have some great impact he would feel for a long time to come. It was one of those moments when you just sense things looming—like a crossroads. More than anything, he wanted this delicious anonymity to go on. He’d learned more about her—and about himself—in the last couple of hours than he ever would have or could have as Cain Caleb Montgomery III.

So he made his choice. He chose to lie to her.

“Cain,” he said. “My name is Caleb Cain.”



She thought he was looking less heartsick than he had when he'd arrived.

And she hadn't minded dancing with him at all. Sure, he was a drifter, on the skids, and from out of town. Sure, he barely had two nickels to rub together, from the looks of him. But tomorrow was her damned birthday, and he was drop-dead good-looking. His touch made her tingle, and she really was getting tired of being good all the time.

No steady boyfriend, no prospects in sight. Hell, one more year and she would be a thirty-year-old virgin. Being the good one was not turning out at all the way she had hoped it would. So if dancing real close and real slow with a handsome stranger was bad, well, then she would be bad. Just for this once.

She ignored the look of surprise on her mother's face when she lifted her head from his shoulder to see her across the room. She ignored the way Vidalia elbowed Mel and pointed at her, and the way Mel's brows came down hard, and the way Selene folded her arms and nodded knowingly, while Kara peeked out of the kitchen looking curious and excited for her. She ignored everything except the man she was with. And how good and strong his arms felt wrapped tight around her. His breath tickled her ear and her neck, and she grew warmer. She might very well be good, and respectable, and pure. But she was also a woman. A Brand woman. And never had she felt it more than she did in this stranger's arms.

At some point later, she realized she was laughing. Laughing out loud up at him, and he was laughing, too. Her skin was warm, and her heart was racing, and she felt incredibly alive.

He walked her back to his table, eyed the now cold cocoa and said, "Am I allowed to have a beer now?"

"Sure you are. In fact, I think I'll join you." She held up two fingers, not even looking toward the bar.

"Think someone saw you?" he asked.

She winked. “Believe me, they haven’t taken their eyes off me since you walked in.” Then she pursed her lips. “On second thought, I’d better get that beer myself. They’re liable to water it down or something.”

He looked surprised but said nothing as she went to the bar.

When she came back, he was deep in conversation with one of her regulars, a local fellow by the name of Jimmy Jones, but they stopped talking the minute she arrived, and Jimmy tipped his hat to her and skulked away, never meeting her eyes.

She set two foaming mugs and a filled pitcher on the table, then sat down and sipped from one. “So what was Jimmy telling you about me?”

“What makes you think he was talking about you?”

She thinned her lips, lowered her brows, gave him the look. She’d learned the look from her mom, and she was pretty good at delivering it, in her opinion. All the Brand women were.

He smiled. “Okay. You win. He was. He said you come from a wild family. That you Brand girls are the talk of the town.”

“Oh, but I already told you about our notoriety.”

He smiled. “You left out some things.”

She sat down, grinning. “I’m dying to hear. What did he say?”

Tilting his head to one side, Caleb’s smile faded. “I don’t want to say anything to ruin the night for us, Maya. It’s been... too nice.”

She drew her brows together, turning to look at Jimmy, who immediately looked away. “My goodness. It must have been pretty bad.”

“No, it really—”

She reached across the table, clasped his hand and said, “I’ve been putting an awful lot of effort into making myself respectable in the eyes of the good people of this town, Caleb. It would help me a hell of a lot if you’d be honest with me right now. What did Jimmy say about us?”

He cleared his throat, turned his hand over and closed it around hers. “He seems to think Selene is either a Communist, a Satanist, or both.”

She laughed. It came out in a burst, and she clapped a hand over her mouth. Then she took a long drink of beer and said, “She’s a vegetarian and a feminist who believes in UFOs, Bigfoot and reincarnation. I suppose that does make her a Communist and a Satanist in Jimmy’s eyes.”

“You have a beautiful smile, you know that?”

She felt her face heat. “Stop changing the subject. What else did he say?”

He drew a breath. “He seems to think one of your other sisters is...uh...cursed somehow. A ‘jinx’ is the way he put it.”

Again her smile didn’t falter. “That would be Kara. She’s somewhat accident-prone—and, I have to admit the men she dates seem to have a tendency to...get hurt But it’s just a string of bad luck.” She frowned. “I hope the jerk doesn’t let her hear him say something like that.”

“If he does, I’ll punch him in the nose for you.”

She smiled. “You won’t have to. Mel will.”

“Mel. Right. f Jimmy thinks she’s a sex fiend. He didn’t say it flat out, but he implied she was into whips and dog collars. A dominatrix type.”

She rolled her eyes. “It would serve Jimmy right if I told Mel what he said. He’s still pissed because she broke his nose last year when he got fresh with Mom.”

He nodded. “Then it’s safe to say you don’t have a sister who’s a porn star?”

Her jaw dropped. “Edie is a lingerie model in L.A. Quite a successful one, too. But no, she’s no porn star.”

“Probably a big relief to your mom,” he said lightly.

“Not really. To Mom, there’s not that much of a distinction between the two. They haven’t spoken since Edie left home.”

She pursed her lips, then sipped her beer and set the mug down. “So? What did our friend Jimmy have to say about me?”

Caleb’s eyes shifted away from hers. “Nothing.”

“Oh, come on, Caleb. Of course he said something about me. What would have been his point in talking to you at all if not about me? Hm? You’re not here with Edie or Mel or Kara or Selene tonight. You’re with me. So what did he say?”

He shook his head slowly. “He...told me I might as well give it up and go look elsewhere for fun tonight. Told me you don’t date, don’t even like men.”

She leaned back in her chair, took a long pull of her beer. “Well now, this is interesting. I’ve been wondering what the locals are thinking and saying about me.”

He licked his lips, looked away from her.

“What?” she asked, coming upright again. “What’s that look?”

“What look?” he asked, still not meeting her eyes.

“That look! There it is again! Jimmy Jones said something else, didn’t he? He told you what they’ve been saying about me around town. Didn’t he, Caleb?”

Sighing deeply, he finally looked at her. “You don’t want to know, hon. Trust me on this one.”

“Of course I want to know. I’ve been bending over backward to become socially acceptable around here. Hell, this is the first real chance I’ve had to find out how my efforts are panning out. So spill it, Caleb. Tell me what he said.”

Caleb pursed his lips. “It’s not gonna make you happy, Maya. And it seemed to me you were starting to enjoy

yourself a little bit. You sure you want to ruin all that?"

"Tell me."

He nodded, took a drink of beer, licked the foam off his lips. Made her tummy tighten in response. She took another drink of her own, and he spoke. "He said that as near as anyone can figure, you must be one of two things. Either you're frigid or you're gay."

Maya choked and sprayed beer like a geyser. It hit Caleb square in the chest and rained down on the table between them.

He jumped up automatically, arms out at his sides as the beer dripped from his borrowed sweatshirt.

Maya grabbed a napkin and lunged at him, dabbing his chest, wiping his chin. "God, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

He stilled her hands, took the napkin from them and lifted it to gently wipe the beer from her lips. Maya went still, lowering her eyes.

"I shouldn't have told you," he said softly.

"No. No, I needed to know the truth."

"If it helps any, I told Jimmy that if he said another word, I'd knock his teeth out."

She smiled, but it felt weak. "I appreciate that."

"Why does this hurt you so much, Maya? Why do you care what some ignorant fool like Jimmy Jones thinks of you, anyway?"

Closing her eyes, she shook her head slowly. "I've been trying to be the good one. The responsible one. Trying to be good enough for the upper crust residents of Big Falls." She closed her eyes, shook her head. "Trying to be something I guess maybe I'm not and never will be." She sat back down. So did he.

"Hey. Maybe you don't fit in with those kinds of people, Maya, but don't ever think it's because you aren't good enough."

She looked across the table at him, smiled a little. “Thanks for that.”

“I meant it. But for the rest of it—I know what you’re going through.”

“You do? You’ve been trying to be respectable, too?”

He shrugged and seemed to think about it. “More like I’ve been trying to live up to other people’s expectations of me.”

“While I’ve been trying to live them down.”

He smiled at that. “And the results so far have been pretty lousy.”

She drew a breath, sighed. “I’m a saint. I live like a nun, but nobody gives me any credit for it.”

“I’m expected to live my whole life according to someone else’s plan. I’ve never even questioned it, so they assume I never will.”

She drank her beer, surprised to see the bottom of the glass so soon. She was even more surprised when he refilled it for her. “I, um...I don’t drink very often,” she said.

“Me either,” he said. “But tonight I’m going to do what I want, instead of what other people want me to do. If I want to drink, I’m going to drink. So there.”

She pursed her lips, tilted her head. “Yeah. You know what? Me too.”

She took a nice long drink. Then she glanced out at the floor, where her dancers were getting ready to begin again. “Ready for round two?” she asked him.

“You lead, lady, and I’ll follow.”

She did lead. She led him out onto the dance floor, then back to the table for two more beers when the line dancing was done. And then she was on the dance floor with him again when a slow song came on, and everything was different.

He held her closer, tighter, than she had ever been held in her life, and he said softly, “I’m liking this way too much, Maya.”

She said, “I am, too.”

“Yeah?”

She nodded, looking up into his eyes, liking what she saw there. Feeling the sting of all her efforts to be respectable having failed, the depression over her impending birthday, and the effects of too much beer, she knew she was in trouble tonight. And she didn’t even care.

“You want to get out of here?” he asked her.

She nodded. “Yeah...I do.”

His smile was slow, but gentle somehow. “Your family...?”

She glanced toward the bar. Her younger sister, Mel, was looking decidedly violent just now. Leaning on the hardwood, watching them through narrow eyes. Her short, dark hair and pixie-like features hid an explosive temper and a body to match.

Maya felt warm all over in spite of that cold surveillance. Then she frowned at Caleb as a thought occurred to her. “Are you okay to drive?”

“I’ve only had two beers all night, hon. And the second one’s still half full.” He nodded toward his mug on the table. “But how about you?”

“It’s my birthday,” she said, and that was her only reply.

He frowned. Then he looked at her empty mug on the table, and she could almost see him mentally counting how many beers she’d had tonight. Then, licking his lips and sighing deeply, he looked at her again. He said, “As much as I hate to say this, Maya Brand, I think we ought to call it a night. Tell you what. You show me where I can get a room for the night, and we’ll continue this tomorrow.”

She lowered her head, thinking that she didn’t want the night to end so soon. But it was a good sign, she thought.

It said a lot about his character. “You’re a real gentleman, aren’t you, Caleb Cain?”

“I try to be.”

She nodded. “Okay, it’s a deal.”



“So who, exactly, is that stranger?” Mel asked, when Maya carried the empties back to the bar. Caleb had gone to the fireplace for his hat and his shirt, and gone out to start up his truck.

“Hell, sis, he was just a man. Had a flat, changed it in the rain and came in to get warm.”

“Well, shoot, since when do we have body heat on the menu?”

“Melusine Brand, you hush up!” Vidalia said. She came out from behind the bar, slipping an arm around Maya’s shoulders. “You okay, hon? You look a bit flushed and flustered.”

“Fine. Tired, but fine.”

“That young man...he new in town?”

She sighed. “Just passing through,” she said. And if her regret was audible, she couldn’t help it. “He’s looking for a room. I said I’d show him the way to the boarding house.”

They all looked up at her, silent, eyes wide.

“*I’ll* show him the freaking boarding house,” Mel said, balling up her apron and slamming it down, starting around the bar.

Maya grabbed her shoulder, halting her in her tracks. “I’m pushing thirty, Mel. If I want to spend some time with a man, it’s my choice to make.”

“But...but—”

“She’s right, Melusine.” Vidalia spoke with authority, and Mel calmed down. She didn’t like it. But she backed off.

Then Kara popped out of the kitchen and said, “What’s going on? Did someone call a family meeting and forget to tell me?”

“Maya met a handsome stranger,” Selene said. She was sitting on a bar stool to the right, playing around with one of those decks of cards she was always messing with. “And now she’s going to show him the way to the boarding house.”

Kara’s eyebrows went up. “The one I saw you dancing with, Maya?” she asked.

Maya nodded.

“Wow. What a hunk.”

“Shut up, Kara,” Mel snapped.

“He’s your soul mate, Maya.”

They all turned at once to see Selene leaning over and staring down at her tarot cards, which she’d laid out in some strange pattern on the gleaming mahogany bar.

“Oh, for the love of—”

“The cards don’t lie,” Selene said softly.

“Those cards come from the devil, Selene, and you oughtn’t be messing with them,” Vidalia put in.

Maya rolled her eyes. “I’m going now. You all have given me a headache.”

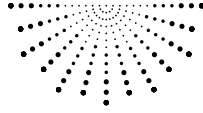
Each and every one of them eyed her speculatively as Maya grabbed her coat off the peg near the door, put it on, hoisted her purse and sent them a final wave. She knew what they were thinking...and she didn’t particularly care.

“Be careful, sweetheart,” she heard her mother say just before she stepped out into the rain. “Don’t do anything you’ll be sorry for later on.”

Those words echoed in Maya’s mind and sent a little shiver down her spine. She shook it off, ignored it, pretended not to hear her mother’s words over and over again in her head as she tugged her collar up around her, ducked against the rain and ran across the wet parking lot to the battered pickup that

waited with its wipers flapping madly and its headlights shining through the rain onto the road sign that said Leaving Big Falls. Come Back Soon!

CHAPTER THREE



He got out of the truck to run around to her side, open her door and help her get in. It was no small distance from the pavement to the pickup floor, after all. And she wasn't long legged.

Funny, he hadn't noticed that before. He usually liked leggy women, taller and thinner than this one. More coiffed. More "done." Or maybe he only thought that was what he liked because he hadn't met Maya Brand.

He stood there watching her the way a scientist would watch an unknown species. She settled into the seat, flipped back the hood of her dark blue raincoat, thrust her fingers into her hair and shook it. He had no idea what that little ritual was, but he liked the result.

Then he realized she was staring at him.

"You're getting all wet again, standing there in the rain, Caleb."

He was, he realized. His shoulders were damp, and a steady drip was running from the brim of his battered hat. He closed her door and ran around to the driver's side to get in. Then he put the truck in gear and prepared to pull out of the parking lot, into the wet, shining, deserted road. "Which way are we headed?"

"South," she said.

He frowned at her, and she smiled. Damn, what a smile she had. "That way," she told him, pointing a finger toward his side of the vehicle.

He turned the wheel, and they were off.

He hated being this noble. But she had been drinking a little bit tonight. And then there was her reaction to the remark that jerk had made about her sexuality. Caleb had been all prepared to take Maya Brand somewhere private and explore that question for himself. But he couldn't do that to her now. So he'd just stick around in this town for a day longer, see her again when she was clearheaded and he could be sure she was with him because she wanted to be.

She told him where to turn off the main road, and he found himself driving over what was little more than a muddy path, barely wide enough for one vehicle. He worried where he would go if another one came along.

“Are you sure this is the right way?” he asked her.

“Uh-huh. I sure am. Just keep going.”

He flicked the wipers down a notch as the rain seemed to ease off, and he kept going.

“See that turnoff there?”

“You mean that deer trail?” he asked, sounding skeptical.

She laughed. It was a deep and throaty sound that made him squirm with awareness. “Trust me,” she said.

She had, he mused, an honest face. So he turned. But he didn't find a boarding house when he drove in through the tall red pines lining the path. What opened out before him was startling enough to make him hit the brake pedal. Then he put the truck in Park, shut it off and just looked.

He'd driven right up to the face of a waterfall so big that about all he could see through the windshield was a wall of froth. He didn't say anything, and after a moment, he realized he was holding his breath.

“No one should come to Big Falls without seeing...well, the big falls,” Maya said. As she spoke she was opening her door, sliding out of the pickup truck.

Caleb followed suit, stepping out of the truck onto a flat, stony bit of ground that seemed solid enough. Tipping his head

back, he looked up to where the falls began, high above. A few yards ahead of him, the ground ended, and when he looked down over the drop he saw a river unwinding below. That river was all that stood between him and the massive waterfall.

“This is incredible,” he told her.

“I thought you might like it.” She walked away from him, and he turned to see what she was up to. He watched her as she looked around, then she frowned, shaking her head.

“What’s wrong?”

“Look.”

He did, seeing what she was pointing out. A ring of stones, surrounding the charred remains of someone’s campfire. Around that, on the ground, a dozen or more beer cans and soft drink bottles were scattered. She bent and started picking them up. “This is a favorite spot for partying.” She carried an armload of cans to the truck and tossed them into the back. “We can dump them in the bin back in town.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He went to pick up the rest of the cans and took them to the truck. Then they both stood there, beside the pickup. He pretended to be looking at the falls, but mostly he was stealing sideways glances at her. He didn’t really know what to do next...what she’d had in mind when she’d steered him way up here.

Licking her lips, seeming just as nervous as he was, she said, “The rain’s letting up.”

He tipped his face up to the sky, then took off his hat and shook the water off it. “Looks like it’s stopped altogether.” He opened the pickup door, tossed the hat inside, didn’t bother closing the door again. Maya was right, it had stopped raining. The only moisture hitting his face now was the spray from the falls. He watched the clouds skitter away from the tiny sliver of the waning moon above. A few stars managed to shine, too.

When he looked down again, it was to see Maya staring at him, her face tipped up to his. Licking his lips, and knowing he shouldn’t, Caleb slid his hands around her waist anyway. “I’m going to kiss you now, Maya Brand,” he said.

“It’s about time, Caleb Cain,” she replied, and her palms slid up the front of him to curl around his shoulders.

He lowered his head and pressed his mouth to hers, pulled her closer, kissed her. It was good. He’d been wanting to kiss this woman for hours now, and it was every bit as good as he’d imagined it would be. Her lips were soft and willing to do whatever he suggested. So when he nudged them apart, she complied right away. She shivered against him just a little when he touched the soft curve of her upper lip with his tongue, and he felt the breath stutter out of her mouth into his. Encouraged, he delved deeper, tasted her fully. She tasted like beer. And that was a reminder to him that none of this was a very good idea.

But then her hips arched against him, and he groaned and kept kissing her. His hands slid down to cup her backside, and when he squeezed her closer, she wriggled against him in a way that almost made him roar as loudly as the falls were doing.

He lifted his head and stared down into her glittering, heavy-lidded eyes. “If you want to stop, Maya, now would be the time to tell me.”

She shook her head once from side to side and shucked off her jacket, letting it fall to the rain-wet ground.

“You...you’ve had a few beers.”

“Not that many.” Her hands came to his chest, her fingers flicking the snaps of the denim shirt open and pushing it down over his shoulders.

“You were upset by what that redneck said in the saloon.”

“Was I?” Her hands went to her own blouse now. It was white, button-down, clean. She undid the buttons one by one, opening the blouse. She wore a white cotton bra...which she filled to overflowing.

“It’s...it’s cold and d-damp out here.”

The blouse came off. She tossed it to the ground with the coat. The bra came next. “You’re right, it is.”

“Oh, hell.” His hands covered her breasts before he could give them permission. Weighty and full, nipples taut with the bite of the chilly air. He ran his thumbs over them and watched her catch her lower lip between her teeth and close her eyes.

“You’re an adult woman,” he said. “Who the hell am I to tell you what’s good for you?”

Her hands again, tugging his T-shirt over his head, and he didn’t want to let her breasts go long enough to take it off, but he did, and when he touched them again he used his mouth. The hell with nobility. She’d only had three beers. He’d counted several times in his head since they left that bar. Three beers. She was not incapacitated.

And she was not young or innocent or naive. And he was only human.

Warm flesh and stiff nipples on his tongue made him hungry for more, and when her fingers tangled in his hair to hold him to her, he suckled her harder, nipped with his teeth, tugged and pulled at her nipple until she made whimpering sounds and fell back against the side of the pickup. Her nails dug into his back. He attacked her other breast, pressing her back to the cold metal of the truck as his hands tugged at her jeans, found the button, found the zipper, shoved them down, baring her from waist to ankles in one hurried motion. She kicked the jeans off, tearing free of her boots at the same time. He looked her over and shivered. Then he closed his hands at her waist and lifted her, set her bare bottom on the seat of the pickup, shoved her legs apart and bent to bury his face in between. He tasted her. Salt and woman coated his tongue, and he delved deeper, spread her wider, tasted every part of her, until she was quivering and moaning and tugging at his hair and shaking. So close to ecstasy. But he didn’t take her there... not yet.

He fumbled with his jeans, freed himself, and again clasped her waist and lifted her, pulling her forward this time, and down. Wrapping her legs around his waist and settling her over him, he managed not to move for one brief moment. Jaw clenched, he whispered, “You sure, Maya?”

Her answer was a pleading sound from deep in her throat as she rocked her hips. So he pulled her lower, sheathed himself slowly inside her heat. And it was so good his knees nearly buckled. And when she moved lower and cried out, his knees did buckle, and he lowered them both to the ground, because he couldn't do otherwise.

Her coat was his bed as he fell backward, pulling her with him. They moved together, and he forgot to think, to perform, to do anything, as they rolled and clung and twined around each other. Until at last he lost himself to his climax as she trembled and murmured his name and then screamed it out loud.

Breathless and weak, he enfolded her in his arms, and they lay there on the damp ground for a few moments, sated. But then their body heat cooled, and she shivered in his arms.

“Let's get you out of the cold,” he told her.

She didn't reply. He pulled back so he could look at her face. Closed eyes, relaxed features, maybe a hint of a smile. And another shiver.

“Sound asleep,” he muttered. “Guess that says a lot about my technique, doesn't it?”

He got to his feet, and began to put her clothes back on her. Her pretty white blouse was stained with mud here and there, but he pulled it over her arms as she hung like a ragdoll in his. Then he buttoned it up with no small amount of regret. Her coat was going to be a real mess, once they got off it and picked it up off the wet ground. But before he could do that, he had to replace her panties, which were easy, and her jeans, which were not.

She stirred when he wrestled her into the jeans, opened her eyes and smiled crookedly at him. And it occurred to him for one, panicked moment that maybe she'd had more than three beers tonight after all. Maybe she'd been drinking before he'd ever arrived on the scene.

A rush of guilt swamped him, and he closed his eyes. Please, Fate, he thought, don't let me have taken advantage of

a woman too inebriated to consent. He was a lawyer before he'd ever been a politician. That was the way it was done in the Montgomery family. And he knew damned good and well what a rape charge would do to his political career.

“Caleb,” she muttered.

He looked at her, at the pure honest goodness of her. “I’m an idiot. You’re not the vindictive type, are you, Maya?” He asked the question as he put on his own clothes.

“Hmm?”

He cupped her chin. “Tell me you wanted this.”

She smiled. Then she hiccuped. Caleb closed his eyes tightly and felt a bit ill. “Oh my God,” he whispered. “How much have you had to drink tonight, Maya?”

She shrugged. “I don’t drink,” she said.

“Not ever?” He blinked in surprise.

She shook her head. “It wouldn’t look good...you know, to the church ladies.”

“Church ladies, huh?”

He wrapped his arms around her and helped her get to her feet. She leaned against him as he picked up her coat, but it was soaked almost clear through. So he put the denim shirt he’d been wearing around her shoulders, and walked her toward the passenger side of the truck.

“Caleb?”

He looked down at her. “What, hon?”

“Is sex always...so...so...you know? Good?”

Caleb stopped walking. “Well...no. Not always. At least, it hasn’t been for me. How about you?”

Her grin was shy and beautiful as she lowered her head. “I wouldn’t know,” she said very softly.

She might as well have picked him up over her head and tossed him into that river. “What do you mean, you wouldn’t

know?” She reached for the door handle. “Maya? Are you telling me that this was...that you were a...a...?”

“Virgin.” She said it flatly.

“Oh, hell.”

She shrugged. “Tomorrow’s my birthday,” she said. And she smiled a smug little satisfied smile as if that was supposed to mean something quite profound. Then she stepped up into the pickup, only she missed the step and almost fell face first—would have, if he hadn’t caught her.

What the hell had he done here? He could see the headlines now.

Senatorial Candidate’s Night On The Town:

Montgomery Deflowers Virginal Good Girl After Getting Her Too Drunk To Say No!

“Oh, hell,” he said again. He helped her into the truck. Closed the door. Then he went around to the other side and got in himself. He started the engine, then sat there a minute resting his head on the steering wheel.

“Are you all right, Caleb?” she asked him.

He glanced sideways at her. Wide eyes just as blue as the sky on a clear summer day. That sprinkling of freckles. The look of pure relaxed contentment. She was not a political disaster waiting to happen. She was an angel who’d given him a night he would never forget. Smiling crookedly, he reached out, cupped her face with his hand, and said, “Probably you’d do well not to tell anyone about this.”

She smiled back at him. “I might be tempted to. I mean, just to prove that the current theory is wrong.”

He knew what she meant. What that redneck at the saloon had said, that she was either frigid or gay. The jerk didn’t have a clue. Maya Brand was made for loving.

“I won’t tell, though,” she said. “Caleb...tonight was about proving something to myself, not so much to the rest of this town.” She shrugged. “Besides, I really think I’m starting to

make some inroads with the church ladies. No sense blowing it now.”

He nodded. “No regrets, Maya?”

She shook her head, then tilted it to one side. “Not a one. You?”

“Not a one.”

“You’re a good man, Caleb Cain,” she told him softly. “I can tell.”

“You really think so?”

“Uh-huh.”

He backed the truck around, drove down the path from the falls, and turned onto the road to head back the way they’d come.

“Whoever is trying to tell you what to do with your life... don’t you let them. I get the feeling a man like you won’t be happy unless you’re doing what you want to do...not what someone else thinks you should.”

“What did you do, Maya? Catch your sister’s ESP?”

She shrugged. “Maybe I did. Turn right down here.”

He did, driving in silence along Main Street. It was charming, small. Rockwellesque, with an Oklahoma twist.

“That building there on the left—that’s Ida-May’s boarding house. Our place is another five miles along this road. Think you can find your way back alone?”

“I think so.”

“Good.”

He kept driving. She was silent, but he got the feeling she wanted to ask him something. Finally he pulled into the driveway of the old-fashioned farmhouse, white with red shutters. Every light inside blazing. A small red barn stood off to the left. Maya turned to him and said, “You *are* staying the night at the boarding house, aren’t you, Caleb?”

He smiled at her. “Of course I am. I want to see you again, lady.”

She brightened. Then he pulled her close and kissed her, long and slow. And even while a little voice told him this was not possible, his heart kept whispering that it was. That it had to be.

When he lifted his head she flung open her door, jumped out and ran all the way to the house, not even giving him a chance to walk her to the front door. She waved once, then went inside.

Caleb turned the truck around and drove away.

It was late. He was feeling guilty. Decidedly guilty. Running away from his life was a selfish thing to do. Not that he regretted it. But maybe it was time for him to do what Maya had suggested. Figure out what he wanted his life to be, instead of continuing to live by the expectations of other people.

Maybe it was time he made his own decisions.

He flipped open the glove compartment and pulled out his cell phone. He’d had it turned off, until now. But he supposed the right thing to do would be to call his father, tell him that he was having some doubts about his future, and that he would be back just as soon as he decided what he wanted to do with the rest of his life.

Maybe he didn’t want to tie himself to the city. To a senate seat. To a political alliance instead of a marriage.

He hit the power button on the phone. Glanced down at the lighted number pad. Before he could punch the first number, the phone beated in his hand, startling him so much that he damn near dropped it.

Frowning, he brought it to his ear. “Hello?”

“Caleb! Thank God we’ve finally reached you!”

His heart iced over at the tone of the voice even before he recognized it as that of Bobby McAllister, his longtime friend

and adviser, even before Bobby said the last words Caleb had expected to hear.

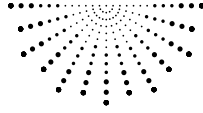
“You’re father’s had a stroke, Caleb. We need you to get home right away.”

For a moment he couldn’t speak. He was too stunned to speak as the information registered. And when it did, his first instinct was to deny it. To accuse Bobby of lying, but of course he knew better. “My God,” he finally managed. “Is he —”

“We don’t know anything yet. He’s in the hospital. It’s... it’s serious, Caleb. Please, get home.”

“I’m on my way,” he said. He tossed the phone down and pressed the accelerator to the floor.

CHAPTER FOUR



Maya walked into the familiar comfort of the farmhouse with a crooked smile on her face. She sailed past her mother and her sisters, ignored all their questions and demands, and floated up the stairs to her bedroom. She was asleep almost before her hair dampened the pillows.

Twelve hours later, she gradually came to. It was a dull, foggy sort of awakening, and it came with a pounding head and a queasiness in her stomach that grew worse by several degrees when she tried to move. “Damn,” she moaned. “Why am I so...?” And then memory came. And she sat up fast, despite the rush of dizziness. “Oh my God, what have I done?”

“That’s the best question I’ve heard in a while.” Maya turned toward the sound of her mother’s voice. Vidalia had been sitting in a chair by the window, but she rose now. Her waist-long ebony curls were pulled around to one side in a ponytail that trailed down over her shoulder. She wore jeans that showed off a figure no mother of five grown daughters ought to still have, and a denim blouse with flowers embroidered at the shoulders.

“Oh, Mom.” Maya put her hand to her head and fell back on the pillows limply.

“You wanna tell me about it?”

Tears burned at the backs of her eyes, so she kept them squeezed tight. “I don’t know what got into me.”

She heard soft steps as her mother crossed the room, felt the shift of the mattress as Vidalia sat down on its edge. A comforting whiff of her mother's violets-and-vanilla body wash reached her senses. As fresh as all outdoors. "Come on, sit up. Sip this." Her voice was soothing, and her cool hand stroked the hair away from Maya's face. "I had a feelin' you'd be sick this morning. As little as you touch the stuff, even a few beers can make you sick."

Maya forced her eyes open and saw that her mother's other hand held a glass of what looked like tomato juice and smelled like the spice aisle at Gayle's Grocery. She grimaced, but she sipped. And when the tiniest relief seemed to coat her stomach, she sipped some more.

"Now I want you to stop beatin' yourself up over whatever happened last night," Vidalia said.

"You wouldn't say that if you knew what happened last night."

Her mother smiled. "Well, now, let me take a stab at it, hmm? You got the birthday blues. Lord knows, child, I've had 'em, too. They hit you any time you turn an age that ends in nine. Except for nineteen, of course, which doesn't count."

Maya frowned and lifted her head.

"Drink," her mother said. So she drank. And Vidalia went on. "People tend to think these crisis points hit us at the round numbers. Thirty, forty, fifty. But they don't. It's the dang nines. By the time you turn thirty, you'll have had a year to get used to the idea of turning thirty. But twenty-nine—well now, that's a shocker. All of a sudden you're looking at thirty seriously for the first time."

Draining the glass, Maya set it aside.

"Better?" Vidalia asked.

"Stomach is. Head still aches though."

"Give it time to work. Old family remedies never fail. Now, where was I?"

“Trying to make me feel like I haven’t done something horrible.”

“Oh, right.” Again, Vidalia smiled. “So you had a couple of drinks last night And a handsome cowboy came along, and you had a good time with him. It’s not the end of the world, you know.”

Swallowing hard, lowering her gaze, Maya said, “I took him up to the falls, Mom. I...we....” She bit her lip. “God, what was I thinking?”

Stroking her hair, which was her specialty, Vidalia said, “You had sex with him?”

Maya nodded, feeling as guilty as a schoolgirl caught cheating on a final exam.

“Hon, you’re twenty-nine years old. And sex is a celebration of life. It’s acknowledging that you’re not just a good, decent upstanding, respectable person, but a woman. A real live red-blooded, glorious woman. And that’s okay. There’s nothing wrong with that. I mean, all right, technically, it’s a broken commandment, and the Reverend Jackson would probably disagree with me. But God forgives, daughter. And He *expects* us to slip up now and then.”

Maya looked up, sniffing. “You really think so?”

“Of course I do. Making mistakes and learning from them is part of the whole point of the human experience. So long as you used protection, there’s not a thing in the world all that terrible about a grown woman....” She let her voice trail off, probably because Maya’s eyes had flown suddenly wider and her hand had clapped to her mouth. “Maya? Honey? You... you *did* use protection. Didn’t you?”

Her mother pulled Maya’s hand from her mouth. “*Didn’t* you ?” she repeated.

“I...I don’t...know. I mean, it was dark, and I was....”

“You were what?”

Maya swallowed hard. “I was...drunk.”

Vidalia blinked. “How drunk?” When Maya didn’t answer, she slammed her hands to her thighs. “Maya, I’d have never let you leave with him if I thought you’d had more than a beer or two!”

“I just...wasn’t thinking last night. God, Mom, I don’t know if he used protection or not!”

Closing her eyes slowly, her mother sighed. “I think that’s something you might want to find out, child.”

Nodding hard, Maya got out of bed and looked down to see that she was still wearing the same clothes she’d had on last night. Her white blouse had mud stains here and there, and her jeans were wrinkled. But there was a new addition to her ensemble. Caleb’s denim shirt. “I’ll shower, and then I’ll go talk to him. He’s staying over at the boarding house.” Then she paused, and a smile tugged at her lips. “He said he wanted to see me again.”

Her mother bit her lip, saying nothing.

“I really like this man, Mom. I mean...he’s not what I thought I wanted...not well-off or respectable or any of that... but there’s something about him.”

Sighing softly, Vidalia managed a smile that looked shaky. “Well now, that’s nice, hon. That’s real nice. You go shower now. Go on.”

Nodding, Maya hurried into the bathroom.



She used the hair dryer, so her brown hair was bouncier and seemed thicker than usual. She wore a pastel blue dress with an A-line skirt and a tab collar. And she even added a hint of makeup, something she so seldom did that she had to borrow it from Selene’s room. She looked in the mirror and nodded in approval. She looked perfect. Respectable. Good. Even pretty. If she had time, she thought, she would bake some cookies or something, to show off how good she was at that. Cooking was something she loved and was very good at. But that would

have to wait. Surely Caleb would be staying on for a little while. Even though she'd been drinking last night, she'd still felt something—something extraordinary—between them. He had to have felt it, too.

He had to.

She took the beat-up family station wagon and drove into town, taking her time, humming along with the country song on the radio. Then she pulled into the tiny lot at the boarding house. And the first whisper of doubt crept along her spine when she didn't see his rusty pickup parked there.

Still, she got out and went through the front door to the big screened in front porch, and across that to the inner door, where she rang the bell.

Ida-May Peabody answered in a moment, greeting her with raised eyebrows. "Why, Maya Brand. Aren't you looking nice today! Whatever brings you here first thing in the morning?"

"A guest of yours...left something at the saloon last night," Maya said, holding up the shirt "I've come by to return it."

Mrs. Peabody blinked. "But hon, I've only got two folks staying here. Maddy Sumner's cousin, Lois, who's here for the wedding, and Ol' Hank."

She shook her head. "This man would have just checked in late last night," she said. "Caleb Cain?"

The woman shook her head.

Fighting a rising sense of unease, Maya rushed on. "He's about so tall, dark hair, blue eyes, early thirties or so...." But Mrs. Peabody just kept on shaking her head from side to side, very slowly. "Are you sure?" she asked, almost brokenly.

"Sorry, Maya. No one like that has been near the place."

Closing her eyes slowly, drawing a deep breath, Maya said, "Thanks, anyway, Mrs. Peabody. I must have misunderstood him. Sorry to have bothered you."

"No trouble, dear." Mrs. Peabody closed the door and left Maya standing there, holding the stranger's shirt and feeling a

little bit used. A little bit betrayed. And a whole lot disappointed.

“I have no one to blame but myself,” she muttered, drumming up the will to turn and walk back to her car. She got in, tossed the shirt into the passenger side and told herself she shouldn’t be crushed over this. She should chalk it up to experience, hope to God there would be no life-threatening or life-altering repercussions, and move on.

She should.

So why did she have the feeling that wasn’t going to be as easy as it ought to be?



Three weeks later, her mother dragged her to an appointment with Dr. Sheila Stone, an ob-gyn in the nearby town of Tucker Lake. And while she knew these things were necessary, Maya hated every second of it all the same. Still, the doctor—a stern, handsome redhead with close-cropped hair and wire-rim glasses—took blood and urine samples, and subjected Maya to a thorough exam and a handful of advice.

“I assume you realize the chance you took by having casual sex with a man you didn’t know,” Dr. Stone said. “I’m not here to lecture you on morality or even stupidity, Maya. But for the love of God, use a condom next time.”

“I told you, I was drinking. This is totally out of character for me, and it won’t happen again.”

Her face softening, Dr. Stone nodded. “We all do dumb things sometimes, I suppose. Are you worried?”

“Shouldn’t I be? Wouldn’t you be, Dr. Stone?”

“Yes, I guess I would. And my patients call me Dr. Sheila.”

“I don’t plan to be one of your patients,” Maya said. “This is a one-time visit.”

Removing her gloves, Dr. Sheila went to the sink to wash her hands. “Actually, Maya, the truth is you’re going to have to come back a few more times.”

Maya blinked. “I am?”

“I’m afraid so.” She tugged paper towels, wiped her hands dry. “Certain venereal diseases or pregnancy should show up right away, of course. But for HIV... well, you’re going to have to be tested again in six weeks, and after that in six months, and after that—”

Maya held up a hand. “This is insane.”

“That’s what I try to tell people. It is insane—especially when a ninety-nine-cent item in a foil wrapper would prevent all the worry. Well, most of it, anyway.”

Sighing, Maya said, “What if I can find the man?”

The doctor shrugged. “Well, if he’s willing to be tested, and if his test came back clean, and if he was the only person you’d had sexual contact with—then we could rest assured you hadn’t contracted the virus.”

Maya drew a deep breath, held it a long moment, and sighed. “Then I suppose I should swallow my pride and contact him.”

“I suppose you should.” Turning, she walked to the counter and glanced down at the urine sample to which she’d added chemicals. She was very still for a moment.

“Dr. Sheila?” Maya asked, sliding off the table to pull on her jeans and button them. “What is it? Is something wrong?”

Turning, the woman looked at her. “We’re going to need to confirm this with the blood work, Maya...but, um...according to this...you’re pregnant.”

Maya stopped moving. She was standing there with a paper gown on top and a pair of jeans on the bottom, in her sock feet, and this woman was saying something in a foreign language. It made no sense. It did not translate. It was not comprehensible.

Dr. Sheila came forward and gripped Maya's arms. Gently she led her to a chair and eased her into it. "Are you okay?"

Blinking against the shock, Maya tried to talk, but all that came out was a whisper, and it wasn't what she'd planned to say at all.

"I want my mother," she rasped.

"I'll get her."



Caleb spent several tense days at his father's bedside, racked with guilt over having been out of town when his dad needed him most. But he was back home now. And if this episode had taught him anything, it was that you couldn't run away from your duty. Your heritage. Your responsibilities. He was expected to play a certain role in life, and he damn well would.

Running away in search of something simpler, something better, had only brought on disaster. And the pipe dreams he'd been indulging in that night? About settling down, about setting up a law office in a little one-horse town. About living there in a farmhouse with vines up one side, and a big dog, and maybe a duck pond in back. About marrying a daisy-fresh wife who had freckles on the bridge of her nose and looked great in blue jeans. They were just that—pipe dreams.

It was just as well this had happened when it had, if it had to happen at all. Before he did something foolish. Before he forgot who he was.

Still, every now and then he would find himself staring out at a rainy night sky and remembering...thinking again about that incredible woman he'd met and the night they'd spent together. Maya Brand. Even her name was one of a kind.

Had she been disappointed to find him gone the next morning? Or just angry? He wondered if he'd hurt her, and hoped he hadn't. A little voice told him he knew damn well he'd hurt her. It had been her first time. Women took things like that to heart. Still, she would be fine, a woman like that.

Smart, capable. Surrounded by family. She would be just fine. And sooner or later she would find a man far better for her than he was. Far better.

It was good he'd had to come home, before things got too complicated between them. As it turned out, it had been just a brief interlude. One night of....

What?

That was what bugged him. Try as he might, he couldn't quite think of that time with Maya as a one-night stand or a meaningless sexual encounter between two consenting adults. He couldn't.

Maybe someday he would go back there and....

But no. No. It wasn't meant to be. He had to be here, taking care of his father's interests. Setting his own future into motion. She had to be there, in that little town, with her sisters and her mom. He would probably forget her soon. She would forget him, too.

It was for the best.

Damn, why did that sound like such a lie?



Maya spent the next five weeks just trying to absorb the unavoidable facts. First, that she was pregnant, unmarried and destined to become the most scandalous member of her notorious family. All she'd worked for—the image she'd tried so hard to cultivate as the respectable one, the responsible one, the sane one—all of that was gone—or would be the second word got around town about her condition.

The second fact staring her in the face became cruelly obvious when Mel insisted on trying to locate Caleb Cain of Tulsa to tell him that he was going to be a father. There was no such person. He'd lied to her.

So there it was. And she wallowed in it for those first five weeks, and even for a while after that. She stopped going out,

stopped helping at the saloon. She stopped dressing, for the most part. Spent her days in sweats or her nightgown. In the mornings she was too ill to feel like dressing, and in the afternoon, she figured, why bother? She did all her usual domestic tasks, which gave her some comfort. Baking cookies and bread. Eating cookies and bread. Sewing and quilting and knitting. But, for the most part, she moped.

Until one bright, sunny morning on the first day of June, when Vidalia marched through Maya's bedroom door, flicked on the bright overhead light and said, "Time's up, daughter. Now get out of that rocking chair, get a smile on that face and put some clothes on."

Looking up, her knitting in her hand, Maya blinked in the light. She liked it dim. Dark. It was easier to dwell on her ruined life that way. "Leave me alone, Mom."

"I will not leave you alone." Vidalia went to the closet, flipped hangers until she found a sunny yellow dress, then tossed it onto the bed. "I've left you alone for long enough already. Thought I'd give you time to absorb this. And I have. But like I said, time's up."

She walked to the rocking chair, took the knitting from Maya's hands and placed it in the basket on the floor. "No more feeling sorry for yourself, girl."

"What would you suggest I do instead?"

"Get up on your feet and act like the daughter I raised instead of some watercolor wimp. You're a Brand, Maya. And you've been given a gift more precious than any other you'll ever know. A child. You should be down on your knees giving thanks, not pouting as if you've been cursed. You want my granddaughter to think she's unwanted? Hmm?"

"How do you know it's a girl?" Maya asked.

Her mother drew her brows together tight and tipped her head to one side, giving Maya the look that said she'd asked a foolish question. Then she gripped Maya's arms and drew her to her feet. "Come on. Into the shower. If I can handle five of

you all by myself, you can certainly deal with one when you've got all of us to help you."

"I know that."

"Then act like it. You don't need any man to get through life, daughter. If anyone knows that, it's me, and if anyone *ought to* know it, it's any daughter of mine. *You're* all you need. *You.*" She poked Maya's chest. "And her," she said, laying a gentle hand on Maya's belly. "That's all. Your sisters and I are an added bonus. Now march in there and shower, then dress and get your tail down to the saloon. Wound-lickin' time is over."

Her mother was right, Maya realized. She had been wallowing in a nice thick mire of self-pity. She'd been lied to, used and left behind. She was pregnant and alone and scared to death, and everything she'd ever wanted out of life suddenly seemed impossible.

But it wasn't. Not really. She could bounce back from this. Somehow. After all, her mom had, and in a time when things had been much harder on single mothers than they were today.

She pressed her palms to her belly. There was the baby to think about now. What kind of a mother would she be? Depressed, moody, sullen all the time? Or alive and loving and happy?

Sighing, she looked down. "Your grandma's right, little one. Mamma's all through sulking now. Promise."

Vidalia nodded in approval. "Good girl." She left Maya to get her act together.

So Maya showered, and she dressed. She was glad her mother had chosen the sunny yellow dress, rather than something snug fitting, because she felt as if her belly was already beginning to swell just a bit. Her mother insisted that was all in her imagination, but she felt it all the same.

There was a tap at the door, and Maya turned, yellow dress in place, hair still bundled in a towel. Selene stepped in, grabbed her hand and pulled her into the hall. "You've gotta see this!" she said.

“Slow down. Selene! What’s going on?”

But Selene ran, tugging Maya behind her, down the hall, into her own room. Then she stopped and pointed at the little table in the corner. It was covered in odd items, that table. Shells, rocks, candles. And, right now, those tarot cards Selene was always playing with. Two of them lay face up on the table.

Maya eyed the cards, because Selene seemed so excited about something, but they made little sense to her. One looked like a clown juggling, and the other was a nude woman with some sort of baton in each hand.

“So?” Maya asked, looking at Selene.

“Maya! You’re having twins!”

Maya tried not to laugh, she really did. But it escaped her anyway, in a big gust, when she couldn’t hold it in any longer. She held her belly, and snorted and roared so hard her sides hurt. So hard her eyes watered. It felt good to laugh. Thank God she had an insane kid sister to keep her amused.

“This isn’t funny!” Selene said. “I’m telling you, it’s twins, Maya. Look at the cards!”

Maya glanced at them again, still trembling with laughter, but neither card had any babies on it, much less two of them. She got her laughter under control, gave her sister a gentle hug and said, “I love you, you flaky little weirdo. *Twins.*” And, laughing some more, she went back to her own room; then, grabbing her shoes, she headed downstairs.

It was good to have a family, even an oddball crew like this—or especially an oddball crew like this. She’d needed a good laugh to snap her out of her well of misery. It was time to take charge of her life again.

She needed things. Baby furniture and clothes, a bigger vehicle, just for starters. She needed to get a nursery ready in this old house. There was so much to be done. So many plans to make.

For the first time she began to allow herself to get a little bit excited about the notion of being a mother. And the image

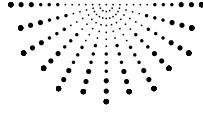
her mother had painted for her, of another little girl in the family, warmed her inside. She missed having little girls running around this old house. She'd been a second mom to her sisters, being the oldest of them.

And now maybe she would have a little girl of her own.

One thing was for sure, this baby would be the most spoiled child in seven counties if Maya's sisters and mother had anything to say about things. The most protected, too. And the most loved.

She smiled, shaking her head yet again at Selene and her silly notions. But between the two of them, Vidalia and Selene had managed to snap her out of her state of melancholia. There was so much to be done! She'd wasted far too much time already.

CHAPTER FIVE



EIGHT AND A HALF MONTHS LATER...

Sighing, Maya walked, belly first, to the kitchen window, parted the red-checked curtains and stared out at the snowdrifts and blinding white sky. It was crispy cold outside. In here it was warm and fragrant. She had molasses cookies baking in the oven, a nice stew in the slow cooker. No husband to cook for—not that she needed one. No children. Yet. She really was going to be a fantastic mother, she thought, pressing her palms to her expanded belly. And as long as she lived, she would never, ever do anything to embarrass her children. Not ever. And eventually she would prove to this town that a woman could be a single mother *and* an upstanding citizen. They would accept her into that exclusive club of the respectable and socially acceptable. They would. The back door opened, admitting a rush of frigid wind and bundled bodies. Vidalia stomped the snow off her boots, and whipped off her red-and-white striped scarf and matching hat, an act that set the mass of jet black curls free. She was far too old, Maya thought, to keep her hair so long. Much less dress the way she did. Then again, her mother wasn't old. Not even fifty yet. Vidalia's coat came off, revealing skintight designer jeans and a black spandex top. She kept herself in great shape for a woman her age. She had every right to be proud of her looks. If only she wasn't so determined to be loyal to the memory of her long-dead husband, she might even find love again. God knew the lying, cheating, jerk didn't deserve her loyalty.

And if she said that out loud, her mother would probably smack her.

“Mmm, molasses cookies, Maya?” Vidalia asked, sniffing the air. “They smell better than a strong man on a hot day.”

“Mother.”

Vidalia shrugged and sent her a wink, her black eyes sparkling. “Still miserable, I see. Just checking.”

“I’m not miserable. I’m tired, and my back is killing me, and I keep getting horrible leg cramps that make me want to claw the flowers off the wallpaper, but I am not the least bit miserable.” Maya went to the oven, opened it and bent to check the cookies, but couldn’t bend very far. Sighing, she gave up and reached for a pot holder.

“Let me get them,” Kara said, hurrying off with her coat and coming forward. Towering over them all, except for Edie, of course, she snatched the pot holders from Maya in spite of Maya’s protests. Kara was too tall for her own good, and her feet were too big, and she was always tripping over them. Kara the Klutz was the nickname bandied around town, but never in front of her sisters—at least, not since the time Mel had overheard it and left the unfortunate speaker with a bloody nose and a split lip.

“Really, Kara, I can manage,” Maya said.

“You should be sitting down with your feet up,” her sister argued.

“Kara’s right, hon.” Vidalia took Maya’s arm and urged her toward a chair. And Maya could only look grimly back at the damp coats hanging on the peg near the door, snowy boots dripping all over the mat underneath them, and then at Kara and whatever mess would come next. With a sigh of resignation, she sat down as her mother instructed, even as Kara got the tray of cookies out, burned her finger, tripped over her foot and sent cookies flying everywhere.

Vidalia pressed her lips together to keep from saying a word, as poor Kara stared helplessly at the cookies falling to the floor. Then she tossed the cookie sheet toward the sink, turned and ran out of the room. Maya heard her feet pounding up the stairs.

She looked at the mess, then at her mother. “What’s wrong with her? She usually laughs it off when she does stuff like that.”

“Kara had a bad day, hon. Or...her latest beau did anyway.” She clicked her tongue. “Poor Billy.”

“Oh, no.” Maya closed her eyes. “What happened to this one?”

“Bus hit him when he was crossing the street.” Vidalia bent to begin picking up the fallen cookies. Her jeans were so tight Maya was amazed the woman could bend at all, but that was her mother. She was nothing if not flexible. “Billy was blaming it on the snowy roads until one of those damned nurses over at General started telling him about Peter and Mike. By the time Kara got to the hospital to see him, he was showing distinct signs of cooling toward her.”

Maya started to get up, but her mother held up a hand to stop her, so she settled back in the chair. “So you think he’s going to dump her?”

“He dumped her before they even finished his CT scan.”

Maya’s lips thinned. “Coward.”

“Darn straight.”

“How bad did he get hurt?” Maya asked.

Vidalia shrugged. “No worse than he deserved. And not nearly as bad as Peter or Mike did. Couple of busted ribs and a few stitches where his head hit the pavement. But it’s Kara I’m worried about.” Dumping the cookies into the wastebasket she brushed off her hands, set the cookie sheet down and turned off the oven. Then, turning, she leaned back against the counter, folded her arms over her chest. “But she’ll be all right. She’s a Brand, and my daughter. Now, how about you, Maya? Any twinges today? Any signs?”

She might be notorious and outrageous and tactless, but Vidalia Brand loved her daughters, Maya thought smiling inwardly. “Not a one,” she said. “These babies seem determined to stay right where they are.”

“Well, hon, you’re gonna have to stop letting them hear the weather reports out here! I don’t blame them for wanting to stay put!” As she spoke, Vidalia came away from the counter. She pulled a chair into position, then lifted Maya’s feet onto it. “And speakin’ of babies, where’s mine?”

“Selene is upstairs in her bedroom doing... whatever it is she does up there. I smelled some god-awful incense burning, and she was playing that drum of hers, so I didn’t bother her. But tell her when she comes down that those cookies are completely vegan-friendly.” Her mother looked at the wastebasket and cocked her brows.

“Not those cookies, Mom. The ones in the cookie jar. I’ve been baking all afternoon.”

“Oh.” Then her mother looked at her. “Why?”

Maya shrugged. “Resting all the time makes me tired.”

Vidalia grinned. “You sure do look tired now.”

“I am. I’m bushed.”

“Well, you go on now and have a nap. I’ll get dinner, and Mel will be along any time now to help me. Go on. You know I won’t take no for an answer.”

“I wasn’t going to give you no for an answer.” Maya put her feet down and got out of the chair, belly leading the way. One hand immediately went to the small of her back, but she took it away to give her notorious mother a hug. “Thanks, Mom. And as for dinner, it’s already made. In the slow cooker.”

Her mother released her and hurried to the pot to remove the lid and sniff the steam. “Girl, you ought to be cooking in *Paree*.”

“Yeah. I hear they love stew and biscuits in Paris, Mom.” She sent her mother a wink and a smile, then headed through the large living room and on up the stairs. In the hallway she passed her youngest sister’s room and smelled the familiar herbal scents coming from beyond the door. The door itself had Selene’s idea of a Do Not Disturb sign hanging from it. It read *Out Of Body, Back In Five Minutes*.

She walked slowly down the hall, past the next door, which bore a sign that used to be funny but today seemed to sting: “Enter at your own risk.” Maya heard Kara’s voice coming from inside her room. She was speaking to someone, probably on the telephone, so she didn’t bother her, either. She secretly hoped the injured Billy had changed his mind about breaking things off.

Shaking her head slowly, Maya finished the trek to her own bedroom and went inside. It was actually a two-room suite, the largest in the house. It was the master bedroom and had been her mother’s, but Vidalia had insisted Maya take it so there would be room for the babies.

Already, there were two cribs flanking her own bed. They were in the process of finishing up the adjoining room, which would serve as a nursery. Wallpaper with baby ducks and chicks already lined the walls, but the linoleum floor wasn’t quite finished. Carpeting, in a baby’s room, Vidalia had decreed, would have been about as practical as whitewash in a chicken coop. Tiles could be washed daily if needed—and it would be, she promised. So Maya had reluctantly agreed.

Maya ran a hand over the smooth rail of one of the old cribs. Both of them had been in storage in the attic. Vidalia’s five girls had been born little more than a year apart, one from the other, so she’d needed more than one crib at a time. And she’d kept everything. Growing up, Maya’s mother had been very poor. The daughter of migrant workers from Mexico, she’d been named for the crop they were harvesting on the day she was born. And it was a name that suited her, because she had the thick, tough skin and sharp bite of an onion when she needed it, softened by the sweetness that only the vidalia strain possessed. Damn good thing, too. It hadn’t been easy, raising five daughters alone.

It was not a path Maya had ever thought she would follow. But as it turned out....

Hell. She’d never meant for it to turn out like this. Sighing, she lay down on her bed, pulled a cozy fleece blanket around her and rested her head on the pillows.

Maya opened her eyes when something tickled her face some time later. A stuffed bunny with yarn eyes stared at her. She looked past it and saw dark, impish Mel, curled up on the other side of the bed, also staring at her. “You okay?” she asked.

“Why does everyone keep asking me that?” Maya sat up in the bed, picked up the pink terry cloth bunny and squeezed it. It was so soft you couldn’t help but squeeze it.

Mel sat up, too, her short, black hair not even messed from the pillows. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because you’re eight and a half months pregnant with twins.” She reached behind her, and pulled out another terry bunny, this one blue. “I picked these up in town today. Couldn’t resist.”

Maya smiled. She couldn’t help but smile. She’d told Dr. Sheila she didn’t want to know the genders of her babies, but her youngest sister had made her own decree. “I should assume you’re backing Selene’s prediction that the newest Brands are a girl and a boy?”

Mel shrugged. “Have you ever known Selene to be wrong about anything?”

Thinking of that long ago night, when her spooky kid sister had told her that Caleb was her soul mate, Maya said, “Yes, actually. I have.”

“Well, not often enough so you’d notice it,” Mel said. She frowned down at her sister. “This isn’t working out the way you had it planned, is it, Maya?”

She only shrugged.

“Hell, if I ever see that no-account phony cowboy again, I’ll break his arms off and use ‘em to cave his head in.”

“Don’t worry, sis. You aren’t very likely to see him again.”

Mel averted her eyes. And Maya knew—she just knew—that Mel had learned something. “What is it?”

“Nothing.”

Sitting up, Maya held her sister’s gaze. “Don’t you know better than to test the patience of a woman as pregnant as I

am?”

Licking her lips, Mel finally looked down, and sighed. “You have a right to know. I just...didn’t want to have to be the one to tell you.”

“To tell me what?”

Mel got up off the bed and reached into her sweater pocket, pulling out a folded-up newspaper. She opened it, turned it and laid it on the bed facing Maya.

Maya looked, and the babies kicked her so hard she gasped. A grainy black-and-white photo of Caleb Cain stared back at her from the page. And the caption read Will He, Or Won’t He?

Blinking back tears of surprise at seeing that face again... at seeing it on the body of a man dressed in an expensive designer suit and tie, with his hair all slicked back, and no battered hat in sight, Maya read the words underneath out loud.

“Cain Caleb Montgomery III, former mayor of Springville, is still refusing to say whether or not he plans to enter the race for the U.S. Senate, though political insiders say it’s only a matter of time before Montgomery makes the formal announcement declaring his candidacy. If that’s true, he’ll be following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather before him. There is no doubt, that should he enter the race, campaign finances will be the least of his worries. Montgomery is ranked the third richest man in the United States. But just where does he stand on the issues?”

Mel took the newspaper out of Maya’s hands. “Come on, Maya. Do you really care where he stands on the issues?”

Maya closed her eyes. “I can’t believe this. He let me think he was a penniless drifter.”

“Well, of course he did. He didn’t want you coming back to haunt him later. Now that we know who he is, however, he’s got some explaining to do. When I see him, I—”

“God, no! Mel, you wouldn’t. You won’t, I won’t let you!”

Mel went silent and blinked down at Maya. “Well, gosh, sis, you have to tell him....”

“No, I don’t. I’m a daughter of Vidalia Brand. I don’t have to do a damned thing I don’t want to. And I don’t want to tell him about these babies.”

Frowning until her brows touched, Mel said, “But why?”

“My God, Mel, can’t you see what would happen? I’d be the biggest tabloid target since Monica Lewinsky, for God’s sake! The man’s going to run for the Senate! No. No, if I thought the scandal of being an unwed mother was bad, it’s nothing compared to the scandal of being at the center of a sex-and-politics story. Forget about it...and for God’s sake, don’t tell Mom.”

“Don’t tell Mom what?”

They both turned to see Vidalia stepping into the bedroom. She had a newspaper in her hand. “You wouldn’t mean this, by any chance, would you?” she asked, holding it up.

Maya sighed. “Mom, I don’t want to be dragged out and flogged by the press. I don’t want my babies born in a flurry of political scandal and tabloid gossip. I won’t have it.”

“I don’t blame you.”

Maya met her mother’s eyes. “Then you...you agree with me?”

“Oh, sure, hon. But that doesn’t mean the man doesn’t have a right to know he’s going to be a father.”

Pressing her lips tight, Maya shook her head. “I...kind of thought he gave up that right when he lied about his name and skipped town without a word,” she said. She met her mother’s eyes. “These are *my* babies. Not his.”

Her mother held her gaze for a long moment, and Maya knew she didn’t approve. She might make a lot of tacky, off-color remarks and come off as an irreverent, outrageous woman old enough to know better—but the truth was, her mother’s moral code ran deep.

“Maya, darlin’ I’ve made some giant mistakes in my life. I’ve got no right to tell you the right thing to do when I’ve so often done just the opposite. But honey, it’s that experience of getting it wrong that makes me know what’s right.”

She frowned, having no real idea what her mother was referring to. Her own father had known about all his daughters, he just hadn’t particularly cared. “I have a right to make my own mistakes, though. Don’t I mom?”

Vidalia heaved a sigh and said, “You’re an adult. Soon to be a mamma yourself. I think you’re making a mistake, daughter, but that’s your right. So we’ll do this your way.”

Maya sighed in relief. “Thank you.”

Vidalia nodded and glanced at Mel. “Agreed?” she asked.

“No. Someone ought to contact that man and make him face his responsibility.”

“Mel, it’s not your place—”

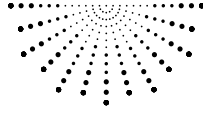
“I’m the babies’ aunt,” she said. “Anyone who wants to hurt them or slight them is gonna have to go through me to do it. Why should they be sleeping in...in twenty-year-old cribs or riding in that used minivan Maya bought, while their father sleeps in a mansion and drives around in a limo or something! It’s not fair to the babies.”

Maya eyed her sister. “We got by just fine without mansions or limousines, Mel. My babies will, too.”

Mel pitched the newspaper onto the floor and stomped out of the room. And while Maya looked after her worriedly, Vidalia only sighed. “Give her some time. She’s always seen herself as the protector of the family. She’ll cool down in a day or two.”

“I hope so,” Maya said. But deep down, she wasn’t so sure.

CHAPTER SIX



Caleb sat in his father's office, in his father's chair, trying to keep the most prestigious law firm in Oklahoma up and running while his dad slowly made his peace with retirement. But despite the weight of the job, not to mention the decision hanging over his head, or the nip of winter in the air outside, his mind was far away....

It was in a little town in springtime. By a waterfall. With a girl named Maya Brand.

Hell, it had been more than eight months. He should have forgotten about her, about that night, long before now. She certainly must have forgotten about him. Then again, he wouldn't know if she hadn't. He'd lied about his name that night. She had no clue who he was. Hell, she'd been worried about him having enough cash for the boarding house, as he recalled.

He sighed deeply. That had been real, that night with Maya. He hadn't spent a real, genuine night with a woman since. He'd been trying, with his frequent jaunts to political functions and state events. But mostly, the women who were on his arm were after something. Prestige, standing, power. Money. Usually money. They were phony, done up, made up, cinched up, dressed up, surgically enhanced, and polished to the point where the genuine parts were too well hidden to detect.

Maya hadn't wanted anything from him. She didn't think he had anything to offer. But she'd liked him anyway. She'd

liked him enough to want to spend the night in his arms. It had been so honest, and so simple, and so incredible with her....

Hell, he had to stop thinking about that woman.

He glanced at the stack of memos and unopened mail on the desk, and began flipping through it to distract himself. The sight of a manila envelope with a Big Falls, Oklahoma, postmark caught his attention.

Odd.

He grabbed the envelope, tore it open and reached inside. Then he pulled out an 8 x 10 glossy photo of a woman who looked to be about eleven or twelve months pregnant. He smiled a bit at the sight of her belly, stretched to the size of a beach ball. His gaze moved slowly upward over the figure in the photo. She stood with one hand on the small of her back, a strand of mink brown hair hanging in her face, her eyes....

And then he froze. That face. Those eyes.

An expletive burst from him without warning.

His office door flew open, and Bobby McAllister, his ambitious right-hand man and future press secretary, should he decide he needed one, burst in, looking around with wide eyes. "What's wrong!"

Blinking slowly, licking his lips, his head spinning with disbelief, Caleb turned the photo over. There was one word on the back. Congratulations.

Caleb's throat went just as dry as desert sand. All this time...my God, she'd been alone, all this time....

"C.C., what is it?" Bobby asked again.

Caleb bit his lips. "Exactly how long has it been since April first?" he asked.

"April Fools' Day?"

Caleb almost moaned, but instead only nodded.

Bobby thought for three seconds, then said, "About...eight or nine months. Why?"

“*About* eight or nine months? I need to know exactly.”

Blinking, Bobby whipped out his pocket calendar, flipped pages and said, “Thirty-seven weeks and two days.”

“And how long does it take a woman to give birth?”

“Nine mo—”

“*Exactly* how long?” Caleb said, stopping Bobby before he finished speaking.

Swallowing hard, Bobby tapped his smartphone. “Forty weeks is full term. Boss, why are you asking such odd questions? What’s going on?”

He looked at Bobby. Bobby read the look, turned, closed the office door. When he turned back again, Caleb held up the photo. “Thirty-seven weeks and two days ago, I spent the night with this woman.”

Bobby’s eyes widened to the size of saucers. He strode forward, snatched the photo from Caleb’s hand. “According to the date, this was taken the day before yesterday.”

“I know.”

Flipping it over, Bobby read the back. “This is...this is extortion! Blackmail. They can’t get away with this!”

Frowning, Caleb said, “Who can’t?”

“Jacobson, of course. Your only real opponent for the senatorial race.”

“I haven’t even declared my candidacy yet.”

“He knows the game. He knows that’s just a formality. This is a preemptive strike. Who else would want to get this kind of dirt on you, C.C.?”

Caleb shrugged. Silently, he thought perhaps Bobby was taking his candidacy a bit too much for granted—especially now. But he didn’t say that out loud. No sense sending the ambitious young genius into panic mode. “I don’t think it’s blackmail, because they don’t ask for anything. And if it was Jacobson this envelope would have been delivered to the press, not to me. Don’t you think?”

“Well then...who is it? You think it’s the woman?”

He shrugged. “Could be. I didn’t think she knew who I was, but I suppose she could have found out.” He sighed, lowering his head. It hurt deeply, to think that Maya might have seen through his facade of being an unknown drifter. It had been so special to have someone be attracted to him for him, not for his name or his legacy. He gave himself a shake and went on. “Now she probably figures I owe her. And I suppose she’s right, at that.”

“Oh, for crying out—are you saying you think this bull is true? You think you fathered this woman’s child in one night? For God’s sake, she was probably pregnant before you ever met her. She was probably looking for some rich scapegoat to pin it on.”

He drew a deep breath, sighed. “I don’t think so.”

“Why the hell not?” Bobby was so upset his voice squeaked on the question. He tossed the photo down and awaited an answer.

“First, because she didn’t have a clue who I was—”

“Or so she made you believe,” Bobby interjected.

“And secondly, because she was...not that kind of girl.”

Bobby stared at him as if he’d grown a second head. “Not that kind of girl. She was not that kind of girl? C.C., have you gone out of your mind here or what?”

“She was a virgin.”

Bobby just blinked at him. Then he looked at the photo and blinked again. “But...she’s...my age.”

“I’ve got to go out there, Bobby.”

Bobby’s head came up, eyes wide. “Oh, no. No way. That’s the worst thing you can possibly do right now.”

“I’m going. Make something up. Cover for me. Say I’m sick with the flu and taking a few days off. Or better yet, say I needed some private time for the holidays. There’s only a

week until Christmas, so that sounds reasonable. Say anything you want, Bobby, but I have to go out there. I have to see her.”

Bobby closed his eyes, shook his head. “If this leaks—”

“It won’t.”

Bobby groaned softly, his hand going to his forehead as if to ward off a headache as he paced the office three times. Then, finally, he sighed and faced Caleb again. “Where will I be able to reach you?”

“On my cell, where there’s a signal. It’s a town called Big Falls,” he said. “I’ll call you when I get there.”

He tucked the photo back into its envelope, tucked it under his arm and started for the door.

“Boss?”

“Yeah?” he asked, turning.

“Don’t let this woman play you for a fool.”

He felt his lips pull into a bitter smile. “Don’t you worry, Bobby. I’m a grown-up.” But he didn’t feel like one. He felt sick and queasy and lightheaded.

He left the office, taking the elevator to the basement parking garage and then driving back to the mansion. But the symptoms didn’t ease up. His hands were shaking, for crying out loud! His palms were damp. He didn’t know what the hell to think. He was so distracted that he drove the Lexus right through two stop signs on the way home, and at the second one, he nearly got hit. He skidded to a stop in the driveway, ran straight upstairs and tugged a suitcase from underneath his bed. He whipped open the closet and stared in at the rows of expensive suits, the drawers full of designer shirts.

And then he thought to himself, what if she wasn’t the one who sent that photo? What if she still didn’t know who he was?

Okay, so it was wishful thinking. But it could happen, right? And if there was even a chance....

He thought about her eyes, the honesty in them. And how sincere she'd seemed when she'd talked about trying to be respectable, to get the town's elite to accept her. He'd believed her.

He still believed her. Damn, what must this pregnancy have done to all her efforts? He winced at the thought.

Slowly he reached for the bottom drawer and pulled out his entire collection of worn-out jeans—all three pairs. He put two in his suitcase and put one pair on. He dug for sweatshirts, found an old fleece-lined denim coat way in the back of his closet, and dug out that stupid battered cowboy hat, as well, for good measure. He wanted to see her as a man—not as a billionaire.

He finished his packing hastily, then carried the suitcase, coat and hat downstairs and set them on the floor near the back door, before forcibly slowing himself down, taking a few calming breaths.

He couldn't just walk out on his father without a word.

Look at what had happened last time. Stiffening his spine, he went to his father's study.

The wheelchair turned slowly when he entered the room. Cain didn't use it all the time—only when he was tired or stubborn. He could walk, though his uneven gait required the use of a cane. His stern face was more disturbing now, since the stroke. One side reflected his feelings—that side was looking decidedly pissed off just now—while the other side remained lax and limp.

His father lifted his good hand, and Caleb saw the photograph he was holding. He glanced quickly around the room, half expecting to see Bobby lurking in a corner somewhere, but there was no sign of him.

“No, it wasn't Bobby,” Cain said, speaking from one side of his mouth, his words still slightly slurred. “But I did call him. Whoever sent this to you at the office wanted to be sure you got it. Sent a copy here, as well. And I'm glad they did. This is something I ought to know about, don't you think?”

“No. You don’t need the stress of this—and I can deal with it. I’m about to deal with it.”

“Sit down, son.”

“Father, I’ve made my decision. I have to go out there, see for myself what’s going on.”

His father glared at him, and Caleb finally sat down. He didn’t like upsetting the old man. He didn’t want to set off another stroke, or worse. Mean as hell he might be, but he was also in a fragile state right now, though he would rather die than admit it.

“You were a twin, you know.”

Caleb sighed, closing his eyes, wishing to God his father would deliver any other long practiced speech than this one. He hated this one.

“Your mother carried two of you. Two boys. One bigger, stronger, and the other small and weak. Only one of them born alive.” He knuckled a button, moving his wheelchair closer. “The doctors said it was just as well. One strong child was much better off than two weak ones. As it was, the stronger of the two survived. And that one was you.”

“Right.” Caleb had never accepted this, and it was largely why he refused to go by the name Cain. But though he rejected it, hearing it dug deep. “I’ve heard this story a hundred times, Father, and it has no more merit now than it ever did. Fetuses do not think or plot or conspire. I didn’t kill off my weaker brother so I could survive, and the fact that I lived and he didn’t is nothing more than genetics.”

“Garbage!” his father said in a burst. “You’re my son. Your mother died giving birth to you. You carry my name. So you’ll always do what you must to survive. You understand?”

He opened his mouth to argue, closed it again, and said nothing, getting up to leave.

“I was a twin, too, you know.”

Caleb, frowning, turned to stare at his father. “No. I didn’t know that. You never told me.”

“It never came up. My birth was just like yours, Caleb. The stronger twin survived, the weaker one didn’t make it.” He shook his head. “It’s genetics, yes, but it’s also a marker, Caleb. A reminder that the strong survive, and that we, you and I, were destined for something more than ordinary men. And that sometimes sacrifice is necessary to keep the dream alive.”

“It was a quirk of fate. Not a sign from God,” Caleb told him gently. “Dad, you and your destiny had nothing to do with your twin dying. No more than I did with mine.”

Cain shook his head stubbornly. “Nothing can ruin a political career faster than a woman and a sex scandal, Caleb. Nothing. Now you take my advice. You pay this woman enough to keep her quiet, and then, later on, you get a DNA test done very quietly. If it’s yours, you pay her some more. All it takes. Send her and the child away somewhere. But do it all through third parties. Send Bobby out there, or Martin and Jacob Levitz. They’re your lawyers, that’s what they’re paid for. Just don’t get personally involved in this.”

Slowly, Caleb went to his father. Keeping his tone low, he said, “I’m already personally involved, Dad. It doesn’t get much more personal than this. And I may be your son, but I’m my mother’s son, too, God rest her soul. And I think she’d want me to do the right thing here.”

His father’s head came up, one eye snapping with anger, the other dull and glazed over. “She died so you could be born to carry on this family’s proud tradition! She would want you to protect that legacy at any cost!”

Caleb smiled, leaned in and clasped his father’s hand once, firmly. “If I have a child, won’t he be a part of that legacy?” He sighed when his father didn’t waver in the least. “I have to do what I think is right, Dad. I’ll only be gone for a few days. You’ve got your nurse and the household staff, and if you need anything they can’t handle, call Bobby.”

Straightening, he turned and walked out of the room, even though his father’s voice shouted after him all the way. He

only stopped long enough to pick up his suitcase, and then he headed out.

Two hours later, tired and wary, Caleb pulled into the parking lot of the OK Corral, that saloon he remembered so well, in the middle of Big Falls, Oklahoma. He hadn't been here in the winter before. It was nothing like the city, and he couldn't help feel a little stirring of the senses as José's truck rolled over the narrow roads and in between hillsides that looked wild and ominous. They were almost bare of leaves, some of those trees, and the ground was brown and barren.

He wondered why there were no cars in the lot at the Saloon. Then he realized he had arrived in the middle of a Monday afternoon. The Corral probably didn't even open until nightfall. He'd driven Maya home, past a boarding house as he recalled but it had been dark as pitch and he barely remembered which way he'd taken her.

He looked up and down the road. Saw a few men in red-and-black flannel, and some in camouflage from head to toe, hurrying to their pickups with gun racks in the back windows and shotguns in the racks.

Hunting season. This was not the city. Here, if you were a man, you owned a gun and knew how to use it. And hunting season was the be all and end all of your holiday experience.

Swallowing hard, he got out of the truck and started on a path designed to intercept one burly hunter before he reached the front door of the ammo shop. He paused briefly to snap up his fleece and denim coat and wondered if the thing looked rural enough to get him by.

"Excuse me," he said, and he managed to draw the big guy's attention. Jowls and whiskers was the impression he got when the man faced him.

"You lost?" the stranger asked.

"Actually, I, uh...I'm looking for a place to get a room. I didn't see a hotel in town anywhere, so I thought...."

"We ain't got no hotel," the fellow said, putting the accent on the first syllable.

“That’s what I thought when I didn’t see one,” he said. “I seem to recall there was a boarding house last time I was here, but I’ve forgotten where, exactly.”

The fellow shrugged. “Yep. There’s a boardin’ house, all right. You might could get a room there. But I don’t know for sure.”

“Er...right. I might...could. If I knew where it was.” The man just stared at him, chewing. “Can you tell me how to get to the boarding house?” he asked, figuring direct was the way to go here.

“End of the road, on yer left. ‘Bout a mile up.” He pointed.

“Thanks. Good luck with the hunting. I, uh, hope you catch a big one.”

“Catch?” The guy grinned almost ear to ear and strode away, shaking his head. “He hopes I catch a big one,” he muttered, chuckling to himself all the way into the shop.

Caleb stared after him, saw him speaking to the fellow at the counter, and then they both looked his way and laughed some more.

Hell. He was fitting in here like a duck would fit in at a henhouse. He was going to have to do better.

He turned to go back toward the pickup and came face to face with a young woman with short black hair and dark eyes. For a moment they stared at each other as recognition clawed at his mind. And then it seemed to hit them both at once. She was one of Maya’s sisters—he’d met her at the saloon that night.

Even as his mind grasped who she was, hers seemed to identify him. Because her eyes went narrow and her lips thinned.

He thrust out a hand in greeting. She thrust out a fist in a right hook that caught him in the jaw and made lightning flash in his brain.

When he shook his brains back into order, he found himself on his butt on the ground and she was revving the

motor of a well-worn minivan and speeding away.

He rubbed his jaw. Hell, he hadn't expected a warm welcome, but he hadn't expected an ambush, either.

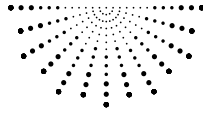
The question was, would Maya be as glad to see him as her sister had obviously been? Suddenly he was having second thoughts about finding out. Maybe he'd better try to get the lay of the land just a bit first—rather than waltzing right out to that cozy little farmhouse with the red shutters, right away. Even if he could remember where it was. Maybe it would be wise to make sure there wouldn't be armed infantrymen, or maybe just sisters, lining the driveway, with the intent to blow his head off first and ask questions later.

Swallowing hard, he nodded. To the boarding house...then he'd see.

Getting to his feet, he got back into his gardener's pickup truck and twisted the rearview mirror to get a look at his jaw.

Shoot. It was already starting to bruise.

CHAPTER SEVEN



“Nothing yet?” Mel asked, occasionally rubbing her knuckles as the five of them sat down around the dinner table. Four sat in ordinary ladderback chairs. One had been prodded into the giant recliner someone had hauled in from the living room. Maya sat there, feet up, tray positioned to one side. It would have been in her lap, she supposed, if she still had a lap.

“No,” Maya said with a scowl. “Nothing yet.”

“That’s okay, hon. Christmas is coming.” Kara grinned, and there was a knowing twinkle in her eye. “Things are bound to get better.”

“How are you feeling, Maya?” Selene asked.

“Like a beached whale. Why do you ask?”

Selene shrugged and smiled a secretive smile. “You’ll feel better soon.”

“I’ll feel better when I have these babies,” she snapped.

“Oh, come on, don’t be so grouchy,” Kara said. “This should be a cheerful time for you.”

“She can be grouchy if she’s of a mind to,” Vidalia put in. “It’s allowed the first few weeks and the last few weeks. And you have to admit, she’s been a real trooper in between.” Her mother smiled indulgently at her.

“You all just try carrying a couple bags of feed tied around your middle for a few months and tell me how cheerful you are.”

Everyone went silent, and for a moment they just ate while the tension built. Maya's three sisters kept looking at their mother sort of...expectantly. Finally Maya picked up on those looks, and, narrowing her eyes, she said, "What's going on that I don't know about?"

Vidalia licked her lips. "Well, I don't suppose there's any point in waiting for you to be in a better mood to tell you this, is there?"

"Not unless it can wait until these kids are tucked in their cradles, there isn't," Maya said.

Vidalia lifted her dark, perfectly shaped brows. "Fine. Then I'll just tell you flat out. That man is back in town."

Her sizable stomach clenched—no small task. "What man?"

Her mother let her gaze slide down to Maya's belly and with a nod said, "That man. Ida-May Peabody called. She said he showed up this afternoon, got himself a room at her boarding house."

"Holy Chri—."

"Watch your mouth, young lady," Vidalia scolded.

"Mother, really," Selene said. "You say more off-color things than anyone."

"But I do not take the Lord's name in vain, nor will I tolerate anyone else doing so."

Maya was pushing her tray away and struggling uselessly to get out of the chair. And Selene, the silver sister said, "Hon, it was inevitable, him coming back here. And besides, it's for the best. He has a right to know that he's going to be a father, don't you think?"

"Right? What right? Geez, Selene, he didn't even give me his real name!" She pulled herself partway up, then fell back again. "Will someone get me the hell out of this chair!"

"Your language, Maya," Vidalia scolded.

Kara shot to her feet and hurried to her sister's aid, gripping her arms and tugging. She was really leaning into it, too, Maya thought.

“Well, I couldn't care less about his rights,” Mel put in, rubbing her knuckles again. “But he does have some responsibilities here, and if you're smart, you'll make sure he lives up to them. You'll feel much better with someone else shouldering part of the financial burden, if nothing else.”

Kara tugged harder.

“I don't need any help from any man. You leave him alone, Mel!” The moment she said it there was a knock at the front door, about ten feet away from the dining room.

Kara gave one last yank, and the chair sort of thudded into its upright position, launching Maya out of it like a rocket. Kara screamed bloody murder, falling backward to the floor. Maya landed right on top of her like a sack of feed, and poor Kara's scream turned into a burst of air, driven from her lungs by the impact. The others flew to their feet and swarmed, and whoever had been at the front door flung it open and ran inside, no doubt alarmed by Kara's bloodcurdling scream.

“Good God, are you all right?” a man's voice said.

“Watch your mouth, young man,” Vidalia scolded.

But Maya barely heard her mother's disapproving tone. Not when that voice had sounded so familiar. Not when she focused her vision to see those scuffed up and battered boots a foot away. And certainly not when two very strong hands closed on her shoulders and gently eased her off her sister, rolling her carefully until she was sitting on the floor, bent knees up and in front of her as if she was getting ready to give birth. Then he crouched in front of her, gripped her underneath her arms and easily got her up to her feet.

She looked up—right into those blue eyes that had melted her resolve nine months ago, minus a couple of weeks. And in spite of herself, the blood rushed to her cheeks and heated them.

“Hello again, Maya Brand,” he said.

“Um...hi.” Self-consciously, she reached up to straighten her hair. Then she realized what a wasted effort that was. He was not going to notice what her *hair* looked like.

“You okay?”

Her lips thinned. “Fine.” She glanced down at Kara. “The more pertinent concern here is, have I flattened my poor sister?”

Kara was already picking her gangly self up off the floor. “It’s my fault,” she said. “I’m such a klutz.”

“I’m sure that’s an exaggeration,” Caleb said, finally letting go of Maya long enough to reach out, giving Kara a hand up. “A pretty girl like you could never be referred to as a klutz. You look more like a swan.”

Kara smiled and lowered her head, blushing furiously.

Selene launched into her “your body believes what your mind thinks” speech. But Maya ignored her. Because Caleb was turning back to her now, and his hands were curling around her shoulders, and his eyes were staring into hers. For a few seconds, anyway. But then they moved, skimming down her body, reaching her belly and widening just slightly. He didn’t say “Holy cow,” but she heard it anyway.

“Guess I’ve put on a little weight since you saw me last,” she said.

“Uh...yeah, a little bit.” He couldn’t seem to take his eyes off her belly. So she put a finger under his chin and tipped his head upward until he met her eyes again, at which point he said, “We’ve got some talking to do, don’t you think?”

Drawing a breath, she sighed and looked away. “You don’t need to look like that, Caleb. I don’t want anything from you.”

He lifted his brows even as Mel’s hand came down on his shoulder from behind. He turned at her tug, facing her. “Well, hello again,” he said. “Mel, isn’t it? Sorry we didn’t get more time to talk this morning.”

“This morning?” Maya asked. She saw Caleb rub his jaw, saw the slightly bruised skin there, saw Mel’s knuckles all red,

and said, “Mel, what did you do to him?”

Mel ignored her, her narrowed eyes on Caleb. “Maya may not want any help with this, mister, but you can bet your—”

“Melusine,” Vidalia said, cutting her off. “This is between your sister and this fellow! You stay out of it until I tell you otherwise.” Then she moved forward, walked up to Caleb, who turned again, facing her this time. And she smiled and said, “But believe me, mister, if I think you’re not treating my daughter right, I will tell her otherwise.”

Kara cleared her throat. “You really don’t want to mess with Mom and Mel,” she said.

“You all sound like a gang of thugs,” Selene said, getting to her feet. “Whatever is meant to happen between these two is going to happen, no matter what you all do or say or threaten. So why don’t you just get out of the way and let it?”

Blinking, giving his head a shake, Caleb drew a breath as if about to respond to one or all of them. Then, instead, he just closed his mouth, turned and faced Maya. “Can we please talk? Alone?”

She nodded. “We can go—”

“To dinner,” he said. “I, um...made reservations.”

Lowering her head, Maya said, “I’d really just as soon not be seen with you in public, Caleb. You have no idea how efficiently the rumor mill works around here.”

He nodded. “I can guess. That’s why I made the reservation in Tucker Lake.”

Tucker Lake, the next town over. He had thought this through, then, hadn’t he? Maya licked her lips. “Haggerty House?”

“How’d you know?”

She shrugged. “It’s the best restaurant around, and one of the few in Tucker Lake that takes reservations.” Then she shrugged. “Okay. Sure. I never touched a bite of dinner, and the food it incredible there.”

“Are you sure you should be riding that far, hon? You’re carrying—”

“I’ll be fine, Mom.”

Her mother frowned, but nodded. “Guess you know best, not having ever given birth before. I wouldn’t presume to advise you, just because I’ve been through it five times over.”

Selene met Kara’s eyes, and they both shook their heads. Mel stood beside her mother as if in full support of her opinion on the matter.

Maya glanced down at her clothes. She wore a pair of pseudo-jeans, big enough for all four of her sisters, held up with a drawstring, and a smock top that looked, in her opinion, like a Christmas tree skirt.

“I was going to say I’d change first, but I basically look the same in any of the assortment of tents in my closet, so it would be pretty much useless. Let’s just go, shall we?”

“I’ll get your coat,” Selene said with a wink. “It’s cold outside.” She did so, not handing the heavy woolen coat to Maya, but to Caleb.

“Gee, you’re so subtle it’s scary,” Maya said.

Selene sent her an innocent, wide-eyed look, while Caleb held her coat for her. She slid her arms in and didn’t bother trying to button it. She could, but even this super-sized coat was getting snug around the middle.

Taking her arm, Caleb drew her outside, down the steps. She glanced up at his pickup truck, made a face and said, “Listen, I don’t know how much you know about pregnant women but—”

“Nothing,” he said. “Nothing at all.”

She nodded. “Bumpy rides have been known to induce labor. And your truck there doesn’t look all that...gentle.” Turning, she looked up at him. “I don’t want to offend you here, but would you mind terribly if we took my van instead?”

“Hey, no offense taken.”

She nodded and led him across to the old barn, some fifty yards away from the house, which served as a garage. He held her arm the whole way. She reached for the sliding door, but he stopped her with a shake of his head, opened it himself and stood looking at the three Brand family vehicles.

“It looks excessive, to someone like you, us having three vehicles.” She watched him as she spoke, knowing to him three junkers like this probably seemed like living at poverty level and waiting for him to admit it. He didn’t, damn him. So she just went on. “But even now, we’re often short a vehicle. The pickup there is essential out here. And the Bronco is for rough terrain. Mom traded in her old station wagon for it over the summer. And then there’s the minivan. I just bought it. Used, of course, but it’s not in bad shape for what I paid. Figured I’d need a reliable vehicle of my own with these... er...with the baby coming.”

He nodded. “Good thinking.” He escorted her to the passenger door and held out a hand. “Keys?”

“Oh, it’s not locked. And the keys are in the ignition.”

He lifted his brows but made no comment as he helped her into the van, then went around and got in behind the wheel. He adjusted the seat and mirror, started the engine and drove it out, then got out and went back to close the barn door.

As he drove out the driveway, he said, “You may have to help me find this place. I made the reservations over the phone and got the recommendation from Ida-May at the boarding house. Do you know the way?”

She lifted her brows and looked at him. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather just stop at a diner? I mean—looking at you, I would hardly think you could afford a highbrow place as nice as Haggerty House. There’s Polly’s Kitchen just off the highway. You can get a whole chicken dinner there for six ninety-five.”

He watched her face carefully as she spoke, so much so that she wondered what he was looking for. Had he detected the edge of sarcasm in her tone? But then he sighed, almost in

relief. “I’ve been working pretty steadily since we...I mean, well, you know. I’ve got some money set aside.”

So he was still lying to her. Still willing to let her believe he was some poor drifter, rather than one of the wealthiest men in the state. Why? To protect his millions from his own children?

Drawing a breath, she sighed. It had been stupid to let that hopeful little light flare up in her heart at the sight of him. Served her right.



So she still thought he was a penniless drifter.

Either that or she was a very good actress. Good. He would let her think it a bit longer. That way he could be sure her reactions to him were based on him, and nothing else.

He was pleasantly surprised when they got to the restaurant, a giant-sized Victorian place with twelve foot ceilings and full-length windows. The place was beautifully decorated and staffed by beautiful women who looked related.

God, Maya looked so different. So...big. He didn't think he'd ever seen a pregnant woman this large before. But the changes went further than that. Her eyes looked tired. Not as sparkling or full of life as they had been before. Her face seemed drawn and tight, and he imagined her goal of trying to become accepted by the good folk of Big Falls had blown up in her face, as well. The conservative residents of small towns were not known for being big on unwed mothers.

A waitress greeted them, wearing a tiny black dress with a white apron. “Oh!” she exclaimed upon seeing Maya's condition. “Your first?”

Maya nodded. “You're new here, aren't you?” She was relieved it wasn't one of the Haggerty sisters, because she knew them all, and didn't feel like explaining who Caleb was. She hadn't seen them since her infamous one-night stand, but she was sure they would have heard about it by now.

The pretty thing nodded hard. “Just helping out during the holiday rush.” She smiled ear to ear and glanced up at Caleb. “You must be so excited! And you,” she said, looking at Maya again. “You look as if you’re due any day now.”

“Yes,” Maya said, at the same time that Caleb said, “Almost three more weeks.”

Maya looked at him and frowned. The waitress only laughed. “Sure, I understand! I’ve had three myself, and I always spent the last few weeks wishing it would happen and get over with.”

Maya slowly drew her suddenly suspicious gaze away from Caleb’s to look at the waitress. “You’ve had three? And you got your figure back?”

“Oh, honey, sure I did. You will, too, don’t you worry. Now, come on, let’s get you off your feet.” She led them to a nice table with plenty of room on either side, in a rear corner, with huge windows on both walls.

Caleb took Maya’s coat, held her chair, braced her arm as she eased herself into it. God, it must be hard carrying so much extra weight around. She wasn’t a big woman to begin with.

“My goodness, he’s good,” the waitress said. “Does he give you backrubs at night, too, hon?” She sent Caleb a wink. “Believe me, her back has to be screaming by now.”

“I believe it.”

She took their drink orders at last and promised to hurry back with their menus. But the second she left the table, Maya speared him with those gem green eyes of hers, and said, “How did you know my due date? I didn’t even think you knew I was pregnant.”

He blinked, searched his mind. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you just told that waitress I was due in just under three weeks.”

“You told her any day now.” He leaned forward on his elbows. “So which is it, Maya?”

She narrowed her eyes on him. “Both. Full term would be January sixth—just under three weeks from now. However, my doctor has no doubt I’m going to go early.”

He blinked and felt a little bolt of alarm. “You mean...the baby’s going to be premature? Isn’t that dangerous?”

The waitress came back with their drinks. Milk for Maya. Mineral water for Caleb. She handed them their menus, smiled brightly and hurried on her way.

Maya was still staring at him. “It’s not early enough to be any cause for alarm, Caleb. Actually, early deliveries are common in cases like mine.”

He frowned at her. “And what kind of cases are those?”

“We’re getting off the subject here. You knew my due date right to the day. Now how did you find that out?”

He lowered his eyes. “Forty weeks...from the night we spent together. I was just guessing.” Lifting his gaze to hers again, he stared hard at her, watched her face. “It is my child you’re carrying. Isn’t it, Maya?”

It was her turn to look away. “No.”

“No?” Shock washed through him like a splash of ice water in the face.

“No,” she said. “It’s my child I’m carrying. Not yours. Not anyone’s. Just mine. Do you understand that, Caleb?”

He felt that ice water come to a slow simmer. “Hell, no, I don’t understand that.”

“Well then, let me see if I can explain it. You were a stranger, passing through town. We were a one-night stand. There was no relationship. No commitment. I got pregnant, Caleb. My problem. My situation. Not yours. You’re still just a drifter passing through. There’s nothing for you here.”

There was, he thought slowly, one hell of a lot more going on with this woman than met the eye. He resisted the urge to lose his temper. Not only because she was in a tender state, but because he sensed it would do him no good. “Maybe I need to rephrase my question?”

She shrugged.

“You were a virgin the night we made love,” he said, keeping his voice low, leaning over the table.

Her cheeks went pinker, and she looked away from him, focused on the view outside. Rolling meadows, lined now in dying grasses, and woodlands beyond.

“And according to the town gossips, you haven’t so much as had lunch with a man since. Most of them are going out of their minds trying to figure out how you got pregnant, according to the very talkative Ida-May at the boarding house. Even though a few may have seen us that night, the idea of the untouchable Maya Brand indulging in a one-night stand with a stranger seems to be beyond the realm of possibility.”

“It’s really none of their damned business, though, is it?”

He let his smile come, even though he sensed she wouldn’t like it. He liked her spunk. “One busybody I met in the general store even put forth the theory that you visited a sperm bank and were artificially inseminated.”

“Oh, for the love of—”

He covered one of her hands with his own. “Please tell me the truth, Maya. Did I father this child you’re carrying?”

Staring down at his hand on top of hers, she said, “Yes.” Then, lifting her head slowly, “Now you tell me the truth about something. For once.”

He frowned, wondering what the hell that implied. But he said only, “Okay.”

“Why did you come back here?”

Ouch. That was not one he wanted to answer. But he’d promised her the truth, and she was damned well going to hear it. “I received a photograph of you taken just a couple of days ago. On the back there was one word. ‘Congratulations.’”

She only stared at him steadily. No expression on her face. As if she was waiting for him to finish the story, or to deliver the punchline or something. But when he said nothing, she lifted her brows. “But...who? How...?” Then she drew a

breath, and her eyes widened even further. “You thought *I* sent it, didn’t you?”

He sighed deeply. “Hell, I didn’t know what to think. But yeah, it did enter my mind that you might have sent it.”

“Well. I guess we know where we stand, then, don’t we?”

“No, frankly, I don’t have a clue where we stand, Maya.”

“Caleb, if I’d had any idea how to find you to tell you I was pregnant, I would have called or shown up in person. I wouldn’t have sent some cryptic photo with a note on the back. God, what would be the point?”

Good question, he thought. What was the point?

“Listen...it doesn’t matter who sent the photo—”

“Oh, it matters. Believe me, it matters. And I have my theories on that. But the point is, I didn’t know how to find you. I tried, but there was no such person as Caleb Cain in Tulsa.”

He licked his lips. “I...move around a lot.”

“You lie a lot.”

“Regardless, I’m here now.”

“So what?”

He licked his lips. “Well, hell, Maya, I don’t know. You’re going to be the mother of my child. I guess I’d like to get to know you a little bit. And if you think I’m the kind of man who’s going to let you take full responsibility for this all alone, you’d better think again. I’m going to take an equal share of the financial responsibility for this baby.”

She leaned a bit forward—not a lot, because there wasn’t room between her belly and the table for a lot—and she said, “In exchange for what? Partial custody? Or the whole enchilada? What do you *want*, Caleb?”

He held up both hands. “Hey, hey, hold on now. Is that why you’re so hostile? You think I came out here to try to take your baby away from you? To fight you for custody or something?”

She blinked rapidly. “You’d have to kill me to do that, Caleb. Just so you know in advance. You’d have to kill me. And I don’t care who your father is, or how many millions you have.” Tears pooled in her eyes.

He was stunned into silence for a long moment. And then he drew a breath, sighed deeply. “So you do know who I am.”

She nodded. “I found out yesterday, when I saw your picture in the paper.”

Twenty-four hours before that photo arrived on my doorstep, he thought.

He shook himself. A tear managed to escape her glittering eye, and it rolled down her cheek. And all of the sudden, not only did he doubt she would try to blackmail him—he didn’t care. Moreover, if she did, he wouldn’t blame her. “Dammit, I didn’t come out here to upset you.” Reaching across the table, he covered both her hands with his. “Please don’t cry.”

Too late. The tears were streaming. She snatched up a napkin and wiped angrily at them, even as the waitress came back to take their orders. He hoped to God this entire discussion hadn’t ruined Maya’s appetite.

Slamming the napkin down on the table, Maya sniffled and said, “I want the T-bone. The big one. Rare.”

“Mashed or fries?” the waitress asked.

“Both.”

Smiling, the waitress scribbled and said, “Gravy or sour cream, hon?”

“Both.”

“Anything on the side?”

“Yeah. The fried chicken.” She closed her menu with a snap and handed it back to the waitress, who turned to Caleb, pen poised.

“Um...the salmon?” he ventured.

“Sure thing.” She scribbled and turned to leave; then, turning back, she eyed Maya’s half-empty glass. “More milk?”

Maya nodded. Her tears were gone now, and as soon as the waitress was gone, she faced Caleb squarely. “I did not send you that photograph.”

“That is becoming painfully obvious,” he said. “Frankly, I don’t even care who sent me the photo, Maya. If this baby is mine, I want to take responsibility. That’s all.”

“Then why did you lie about who you were?”

He lowered his head, shook it. “I...had my reasons. What difference does it make, Maya? You know the truth now.”

She pressed her lips together. “Not that I trust anything that comes out of your mouth at this point, Caleb, but if you want to spend one more minute with me, I want you to swear you won’t try to take my babies away from me. Swear on all you hold dear, Caleb, or leave right now.”

“I swear. I’ll put it in writing if you want me to. I can have my...wait a minute.” He frowned then. “Wait just a minute. What did you just say?”

She bit her lower lip, averted her face.

“Maya, did you just say ‘babies’?”

Slowly, she faced him. Then she drew a breath, blew it out again. “Hell, Caleb, you might as well know. I’m carrying two babies, not one.”

“Two? Twins?”

She nodded. “That’s why the doctor expects me to go early. Twins hardly ever go to term.”

He just sat there, stunned to the bone. A deep tremor worked through him, and his gaze fell to her swollen belly. “Are they both...all right?” he said softly.

“If the way they kick is any indication, they’re fine.”

Those words only made his stomach clench up tighter as his father’s words replayed in his mind. The strong survive, the weak don’t. It’s our legacy, Caleb. And it’s a reminder....

“What...what does your doctor say? Do they have any way of knowing for sure that they’re both...?”

He saw her face then, clouding with worry. And he decided to shut up. She was going through enough without him saying things that would scare her to death. There was no reason to think.... Hell, twins were born healthy every day. They were!

“I go in every week for a checkup,” she told him. “They listen to the heartbeats, and we’ve done ultra-sounds. These kids are huge, for twins. Over five pounds each already. And they’re fine. They’re Brands. They can’t be anything less than fine.”

“They’re not just Brands, they’re Montgomerys, too.”

She shrugged. “So I suppose they’ll have politics in their DNA?”

He smiled at her, liking her slightly lighter tone. “Maybe we should ask them to check for it when they do the blood tests.”

Her expression changed. Lightness fled. Her eyes became...thunderous. He’d never used that term to describe a facial expression before. But it described hers now.

“A blood test? You...mean a paternity test, don’t you? You want my babies to have a paternity test.”

He blinked fast. “Well...isn’t that pretty standard...I mean, in cases where the parents aren’t married?”

“It’s standard, all right. In cases where the mother is being called a liar.” She glared at him. “Help me up.”

“Oh, come on, Maya. I wasn’t calling you a liar. I...you’re...I...”

“Help me up now.” She gripped the table and started to rise.

He jumped to her aid but found himself awkwardly unsure where to put his hands. He finally settled on gripping her forearms and pulling, even as he tried to fast-talk his way out of the slam he’d inadvertently delivered. “Please don’t leave. Have dinner, come on. You’re overreacting to everything I say here.”

“I’m not overreacting. And I’m not leaving,” she said, once she was upright.

He frowned. “Then...where are you going?”

Tilting her head to one side, she said, “Caleb, there are two hefty babies writhing around on top of my bladder right now. Where do you *think* I’m going?”

“Oh. Uh. Sorry.”

She tossed her head and headed across the restaurant to the rest room in the rear. And despite her proud stance, she sort of...waddled when she walked away, which took all the indignant outrage out of her exit.

He sat back down, feeling like he’d just been through Round One of a fight with no rules and no reason. The woman was obviously an emotional basket case right now.

And no wonder. Twins. And she was alone.

But why the hell did she seem so determined to see him as the enemy?

The waitress brought the food—Maya’s order took up two plates—and a whole pitcher of milk. He waited for Maya to return, and then got up and met her halfway to escort her back to the table. She sat down, looking a bit calmer.

“I did some thinking,” she said, “and I’ve decided that you should go home.”

“I should?”

“Uh-huh. First thing in the morning. Leave an address, phone number, something like that. I’ll call you when the kids arrive. We’ll work out a time for you to come visit them. And I promise I’ll be generous about that, so long as you don’t try to take them away from me.” She shrugged. “And if you want to pitch in on expenses, fine. I won’t fight it.” She spoke as if it was all decided.

“I see.”

She dug into her food as if she was starved. And as Caleb watched her, he thought she looked very smug and superior.

As if she made the rules and he had no choice but to obey. He was a freaking Montgomery, for crying out loud. He was the third richest man in the country, a former mayor, and the predicted winner of the senatorial race even though he had yet to declare himself a candidate. And her attitude chafed, big time.

He picked at his food, while she finished hers. Finally she looked up at him, dabbing her face with a napkin. She'd barely left a crumb on her plate.

"So, are we agreed?" she asked him.

He pursed his lips, crossed his arms over his chest, looked her in the eye and shook his head. "Not on your life."

Blinking in surprise, she stared at him. "Why not?"

"Because you're acting like a little dictator, and I don't like it. So, no, Maya. I think maybe I'd better look into things just a bit more thoroughly before I agree to anything regarding our children."

Her brows rose. "Jumping the gun, aren't you? You don't have your precious paternity tests yet."

"No. But I will."

"Oooh, yes. You never know, I might be conspiring to take you for everything you have. Now that I've figured out that would amount to slightly more than a pair of scuffed boots and a rusted-out pickup truck, that is."

"Why are you so determined to treat me like the enemy here?"

"As far as I'm concerned, you are the enemy!"

"Fine," he said, and he got to his feet. "Then this conversation is over."

"It is *not* over," she retorted in a calm tone, "until after dessert."

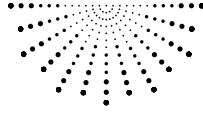
His anger seemed to wash away, and something warm and fuzzy rose up to take its place. Only for a moment. But it was there. He lowered his head to hide his amusement from her

and tried very hard to regain his anger and indignation. He kept trying, right through the cheesecake and coffee. But the way she tasted the chocolate syrup on the tip of her finger weakened his resolve. And the whipped cream that stuck to her upper lip annihilated it altogether.

She was angry. Okay, he figured she had a right to be angry. He'd lied to her. And now he was back, and she was afraid. Protecting her babies the way a mother bear might protect her cubs from anything she perceived to be a threat to them. That wasn't a bad thing. In fact, if anything, he ought to appreciate it. It meant she cared deeply about her babies. His babies. It meant she would be a great mother to them, protect them with everything in her.

He just wished she didn't feel they needed protecting from him.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Error was an ice-cold feeling that made him shiver more than the freakishly chilly wind. Twins. God, twins. Just like he'd been. The cruel joke of the name he'd inherited from his father still twisted in his gut like a blade. And the old man's words echoed like a curse. About how he'd been the stronger, and how he must always do whatever he must to survive.

Hell, he knew, with the rational part of his mind, that a child in the womb couldn't cause premeditated harm. Couldn't even harbor an ill thought. But it dug at him, ate at him. Always had.

And now he was the father, and dammit, there were two babies. Twins. He was scared to death. What if something happened to one of them? What if only one survived?

Standing stock-still in the cold, damp night, outside the boarding house. There were white candle bulbs burning in every window and a huge festive wreath on the front door. He blinked at the unfamiliar burning sensation in his eyes, the odd tightening of his throat, the hitch in his breathing.

He still didn't know who the hell had sent the photograph. It suddenly seemed like the least important thing in the world. What he did know was that he had to stay here until his children were born. And he had to do everything in his power to make sure they were both strong and healthy. Protected and safe. Cared for, provided for. And those jobs didn't belong solely to Maya Brand. They belonged to him. Because he was...their father. The idea made him stand a little straighter,

square his shoulders, lift his chin. All of a sudden he felt... omnipotent.

“Going to stand outside all night or go on in?” a small voice said from behind him.

Caleb turned to see the youngest Brand sister standing there staring up at him. Silvery Selene, with her huge mystical silver-blue eyes and her elfin features. She wore a red hood with a scarf attached and a black wool coat.

“I’m going in,” he said. “You?”

She nodded at him. “Me too. I want to talk to you.”

He shrugged and led the way up the front steps and onto the glass enclosed porch that stretched the entire breadth of the house. On the large mat in front of the door he heeled off his boots, then shrugged out of his coat and hung it on a nearby hook. Selene did likewise and looked around.

“This is nice, what Ida-May’s done out here,” she observed.

“It’s cozy.” Despite the early darkness and chilly temperature, it was pleasant. And private. Moonlight spilled down over the quiet little town, and he thought it had an almost enchantingly picturesque appeal. He went to the small round table in the corner, pulled out a chair. “Is this good for our...talk?”

“It’s fine. At least it’s warm in here. It never gets this cold for this long here. It’s bizarre. We had record rainfall this summer. I could never have imagined what winter would bring.” She came to where he was, sat down in the chair he held.

Caleb took his own seat across from her. “So,” he said.

She drew a breath, licked her lips. “I’m not sure how to begin.”

“Well, maybe I can help. You’re about to ask me what my intentions are toward your sister.”

She lowered her gaze. “That’s...not what I came for...but since you brought it up...are you at least going to stick around

a while?”

“At least.”

Her gaze rose slowly, locked with his. “I have a confession to make, Caleb. I...I’m the one who made you come back here.”

That shocked him into silence faster than almost anything could have. Not only that this innocent-looking baby of the family would resort to sending photographs that could destroy his career in unmarked envelopes, but that she would then come to him to admit it.

“I think you would have come anyway. In fact, I’m almost sure of it, but I couldn’t take the chance I might be wrong. It was wrong to make you come back, I know that...and yet...I’d do it again. I’m sorry, though, if it messed up your life.”

He closed his eyes, drew a breath, then opened them slowly. “That photograph could have ruined me, Selene. You could have just called me, you know. Anything a bit more discreet than—”

“What photograph?”

He frowned. Huge silvery eyes blinked innocently at him. “What do you mean, ‘what photograph?’ The photograph that landed on my desk yesterday—the one of your sister, her belly out to here, with the word ‘congratulations’ scrawled across the back.”

Her eyes grew even wider, if that was possible. “Caleb...I don’t know anything about any photograph. I just...gosh, I mean, I didn’t think it would manifest like *that!* I’m sorry.”

Caleb frowned, because she made no sense. He gave his head a little shake, but that didn’t help. “Selene, if you didn’t send the photo, then what did you mean when you said that you were the one who made me come back here?”

She looked so guilty that he almost felt sorry for her. Chin lowering, she said, “I...performed a little...rite.”

“A rite?”

“A...spell.”

He blinked at her.

“Magic,” she said. “You know. You burn some herbs, light some candles, chant some words....”

Light finally dawned. This was the tarot card sister, the New Age guru. The Aquarian of the family.

“You’re not supposed to mess with people’s free will,” she went on quickly. “But I messed with yours. I just wanted to own up to it. I’ll deal with the karma. It’ll be worth it if... well...I mean...if things work out the way I’m hoping they will.”

Caleb smiled. She seemed really upset about all of this. Her hands were fisted together and kneading on the table, and her teeth were worrying her lower lip every little while. He covered her hands with his. “You didn’t mess with my free will, hon. If I had known about the babies...I’d have been here long before now.”

“You would?”

“Of course I would. Why does that surprise you?”

She blinked and seemed thoughtful for a moment. “Well... I guess because you used a false name and everything... you know, when you came here before. I assumed that was a precaution you used anytime you went out catting around, you know, to keep the women from tracking you down if there are consequences.”

He sat very still for a long moment. Then he said, “And is that what your sister thinks, too, Selene?”

She only shrugged. “I don’t know what she thinks. But I think she needs you, Caleb. She’s doing just fine at playing the fearless firstborn of Vidalia Brand, but deep down, she’s scared to death. About carrying those kids, about delivering them, and even more about raising them afterward.”

He nodded. “She should be. But to be honest, she doesn’t seem too eager to let me be a part of any of it.”

Selene’s eyes speared him, deadly serious and intense, she said, “That’s got nothing to do with *you*, Caleb. It’s got to do

with the past, and our father, and stuff that I don't even remember. I just know it's in her, you know? Like a deep sliver she hasn't been able to dig out." She shook her head slowly. "Maybe she thought it was all healed over, but this thing with you just jammed it in deeper and started it hurting all over again."

For a moment he thought he was going to learn something real, something meaningful, about the mother of his children. He knew the story of her father. She'd told him, and he'd heard about it again from the local gossips ever since he'd come back this time. But he didn't know how Maya felt about it—how she'd felt then, how she felt now.

And it didn't look like he would know any time soon, either. Selene bit her lip, shook her head. "That's for Maya to talk to you about, not me. Like I said, I don't even remember. But I do know this much. If Maya's unwilling to let you be a part of this, you're going to have to make her let you. You have every right to be involved in the birth of your own kids, Caleb, and you need to say so. Don't take no for an answer."

"She might hate me for it," he said softly.

Selene shook her head. "Maybe for a while. But she needs you. Trust me." Her hand touched his. "I *know* things." Drawing a breath, straightening, she gave a nod. "And know that whatever happens will be real and that it will come from the two of you. I'm not going to interfere again."

He lifted his brows. "What, no love potions?"

"You're teasing me, aren't you?"

"No, Selene. I might, but there's something about you that makes me wonder."

She smiled, seeming to take that as a compliment. "Well, that's it. That's what I came here to tell you. Good night, Caleb."

"Night," he murmured. But he barely saw her leave. He was too busy wondering if there were secret wounds festering in Maya Brand's heart...and how he could possibly hope to get close enough to find out.

From his room that night he called Bobby, spoke to him briefly, only to learn that no further word had come in about Caleb's impending fatherhood. No threats, no demands, no one even hinting that they knew. So if Selene hadn't sent that photo, and Maya obviously hadn't, then the question remained...who had? One of the other sisters? Mel or Kara? Perhaps Vidalia Brand herself? He hoped so. Because if it wasn't one of them, then that meant someone else must know about all of this. And if someone else knew, they were holding the fuse to Caleb's personal political powder keg.



Her back ached. Her head ached. Her stretch marks itched. Her feet were swollen. Her bladder was about to burst, and, oh, hell, she had a leg cramp. "Ow, ow, ow, ow, OW!"

The cramp eased. The knotted muscles in her calf relaxed. She stopped yelling and managed to get through her morning routine without serious damage. The babies were kicking so hard it actually hurt now and then, and she was so big she had to use the long-handled back brush to wash her feet, even though she'd put a waterproof stool in the shower stall.

Ugh!

Finally she chose one of her colorful tent-sized outfits from the selection in her closet and pulled it on over her industrial-strength bra and super-support panties. A pretty kaftan and a pair of stretchy leggings. But she just didn't feel pretty in them.

She sat at her dressing table, brushing her hair, when there was a tap on her bedroom door.

"Come in," she called, not even looking up from her brushing.

The door opened, footsteps came in, falling too heavily to belong to any of the Brand women. And she glanced into the mirror to see Caleb, of all people, standing there with a tray in his hands.

“What in the world are you doing here?” she asked his reflection.

“Good morning, Maya. How are you feeling this morning, hm?”

She eyed the tray, not answering, because she was so sick and tired of answering that same question every single day a dozen times. “What are you doing here? What is this?”

“Breakfast in bed. Or...it was intended to be. Only, you’re not in bed, so I guess I’m late.”

Maya set the hairbrush down and turned slowly. “Who let you in?”

“Your mother. I brought enough fresh pastries for everyone, and Vidalia was kind enough to supply the coffee to go with them.” He nodded at the cup on the tray. “Decaf for you, of course.”

He carried the tray in, right to the chest at the foot of her bed, and set it down. “I found this great bakery in town this morning, just a stone’s throw from the boarding house.”

“Sunny’s Place. I know it.”

Picking up a platter heaped with doughnuts, Danishes and muffins, he brought it to where she sat and held it under her nose.

God, they smelled good.

Hell, he smelled better. There was a hint of something... not cologne, it was too subtle for that. Maybe it was the soap he used. Sort of a wind and water scent. It tickled a deep part of her that hadn’t been tickled in...well, in nine months, give or take a couple of weeks.

“Pretty low trick, bribing your way in here with pastries, don’t you think? Why are you doing this, anyway?” she asked him suspiciously.

“Because I want to. Hey, you’ve been lugging those twins around for nine months now. I figure the least I can do is help you through the last couple of weeks.”

“Don’t say that!”

He blinked. “Don’t say what? That I want to help you out?”

“No. That ‘couple of weeks’ part. If it’s more than a couple of days, I’ll die. My belly will explode, and I will just simply die.” She sighed, grabbed a yummy-looking Danish and a napkin, took a heavenly bite and closed her eyes in ecstasy as she chewed. “Oh, this is sooo good.”

“I know. I ate two myself.” He smiled at her.

And he was so damned charming she couldn’t help but smile back. But then she thought about what he’d said a moment ago, about helping her through the last couple of weeks, and she tilted her head. “So does that mean you plan to hang around town until the babies come?”

Licking his lips, he seemed to think very carefully about his words before he spoke. “Maya, I’d really like to. I’ve never been a father before. This is all...well, it’s special to me. Scary as hell, totally out of line with my plans...but special. I’m... I’m not the kind of guy who can just walk away from something like this...and I know you probably don’t believe that, but I think you will. If you give me a chance. Get to know me...just a little bit.” He swallowed hard. “I’d really like you to agree with me on this, but I want you to know that I’m staying, even if you don’t. I mean...I’m their father.” He looked at her belly. “I’m their father.”

The second time he said it, he got a shaky, crooked little smile on his face, and his voice cracked just the slightest bit. She couldn’t argue with him when he looked like that. And he was right, she knew that. She’d been feeling guilty about her attitude toward him all night long. It wasn’t his fault she didn’t want a man in her life.

“I was crabby with you last night,” she told him. “I get that way a lot lately. But it’s not my normal attitude, you know.”

“I know.”

She nodded. “I will not exclude you from the babies’ lives. I want to make that clear, Caleb. You’re right. You are their

father, and you can be just as involved with them as you want or need to be. I promise.”

He smiled broadly and blew a sigh of relief. “I’m glad to hear it.” Then he glanced down at her belly. “Still nervous as hell and reeling from all this...but glad.”

The babies were kicking like crazy. She had a thought, bit her lower lip, and finally gave in to it. “Give me your hand,” she said, setting her Danish down.

He did. She took his hand in hers and laid his palm on her belly, sliding it around to the spot where some little foot had been repeatedly thumping her. He met her eyes, his expectant, excited. It took a moment. But finally there was a succession of rapid and rather forceful kicks.

She never looked away from his eyes when it happened. And she was glad she hadn’t because they widened; then his gaze slid down to where his hand rested, and she swore she saw moisture gather in his eyes. “My God. Oh my God,” he whispered.

“You look like you’re going to faint Caleb. It’s okay. Babies are supposed to kick. It means they’re healthy.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded.

Caleb laughed nervously, gave his head a shake, met her eyes again. “I...it’s like it wasn’t quite real until just then.” Then he frowned. “Does it hurt when they do that?”

“Oh, they give me a good jab once in a while. Enough to make me suck in a breath, maybe, but nothing drastic.”

He stared at her for a long moment as if a little awed by her. But then he shook himself and went back to the tray, brought her cup of coffee. “Better drink this while it’s still warm.”

“You didn’t need to do all this, Caleb.”

“I wanted to, I told you.”

She sipped the coffee. Finished the Danish. Grabbed a doughnut.

“Your mother says you, um...have a doctor’s appointment today,” he said, speaking slowly.

“Yeah. In an hour actually.”

He looked at her, his blue eyes conveying a clear message. She rolled hers and sighed. “Don’t tell me you want to come along.”

He nodded hard. “Only if it won’t make you too uncomfortable,” he said quickly.

“When the stirrups come out, pal, you leave the room. Got it?”

He shuddered. “I...think I can safely promise that much.” Turning, he went to the two cribs, checked them out, nodding in approval. “Why the mesh on the inside?” he asked.

“The slats were a bit too far apart on the older models. Of course, the five of us survived them, but you can’t be too careful.”

Nodding, he reached in to touch the soft blankets. “I’ve never seen a baby quilt like this before.”

“That’s because I made it.”

He turned toward her, his brows arched, then lifted the quilt out of the crib for a closer examination. Building blocks with letters on them, and bunnies and teddy bears, all hand stitched, in various textures and colors, littered the piece. “Wow. This is some intricate work, Maya.” Then, grinning at her, he said, “I guess my plan is working.”

“What?” she asked.

“To get to know you better,” he explained. “Already I’ve learned something about you. You quilt.”

The sound of a throat being cleared made them both look toward the door, where Kara stood looking in at them. Her head was only a few inches below the door-frame.

“She quilts, she sews, she cooks—the woman makes Martha Stewart look like an amateur.”

“Oh, cut it out, Kara. I’m not auditioning for anything here.”

Kara only shrugged. “Caleb,” she said, “I have a favor to ask you.”

He said, “Anything at all, Kara. What do you need?”

“Well, with all that’s been going on, we haven’t even got a Christmas tree up yet.”

He tipped his head to one side. “Hell, I can’t even remember the last time I had a tree for Christmas.”

“Really?” Kara asked. “Why not?”

“I don’t know. It’s just me and my father, and I guess we....” He shook his head. “I don’t know. So, what do you need? Help getting a tree?”

“Yeah. Not that we can’t do it ourselves. I mean, we do every year, but the pickup seems to be acting up this morning. It doesn’t want to start. So I thought maybe you’d volunteer yours.”

“Sure. When?”

“Sooner the better,” Kara said with a smile. “How about right after you two get back from the doc?”

“No problem.” Caleb smiled. “Actually, I’m kind of looking forward to it.”

Kara’s smile had enough wattage to light the entire town of Big Falls, Maya thought.

“Hey, we should probably be going pretty soon,” Caleb said. “I’m going to go out and start the car, let it warm up.” He glanced at Maya. “I’m assuming you want to take the van, right?”

“It’s the most comfortable for me.”

He nodded and headed out of the room. Maya heard his feet running down the stairs. Her sister sent her an innocent

look, and then turned to go.

“Kara, hold it right there.”

Stopping, but not turning, Kara said, “What?” in a squeaky voice.

“What did you do to our pickup?”

Now she did turn. She must have thought those fluttering lashes would help her cause. “What do you mean?”

“You did something so it wouldn’t run, so that you could con Caleb into coming with us to get the tree. Didn’t you?”

Her brows came down fast. “You have a suspicious mind!”

“And you haven’t denied a thing.”

Kara crossed her arms over her chest. “I like him.” Then she tipped her head to one side. “Besides, did you see his eyes light up? Did you hear what he said about not remembering the last time he bothered to celebrate Christmas with his father?”

“That’s not what he said—he said he couldn’t remember the last time he got a tree,” Maya corrected.

“So how do you celebrate Christmas without a tree?” Kara shook her head. “He’s lonely, Maya. I can see it.”

“Yeah, well...maybe.”

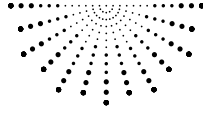
“Aren’t you even curious?”

Behind her, Caleb said, “Curious about what?” Kara gasped and whirled on him. He only grinned, gave her a mischievous wink, and looked past her to Maya. “Your chariot awaits. But you can finish your coffee first. Give it time to warm up.”

“I’ll take the coffee with me,” she said. “The sooner we get this over with, the better.” She drew a breath, preparing herself for the inevitable awkward moment when she was forced to get her bulk up out of a chair. But before she could even begin, Caleb was there. He slid one arm behind the small of her back, steadied her with the other and helped her up so easily anyone

would have thought she must be tiny. She liked it and that scared her.

CHAPTER NINE



Caleb caught himself sliding into a mire of sentimentality more than once on that drive to the small redbrick prenatal clinic in Tucker Lake, fifteen miles the other side of Big Falls. It was a dangerous game he was playing out here. Getting emotionally involved with the babies...insinuating himself into the family and into Maya's life before he even knew for sure that he was the father, but hell, they were twins. He was a twin. His own father had been a twin, too. But, like Caleb's own twin, his uncle had been stillborn. It terrified him to think of that. It also verified that these children were his. Maybe not totally, and not legally, but it was all the proof he needed. He couldn't leave. That was obvious. He didn't want to. Exactly what he did want was as elusive as the meaning of life on Earth. What to do next was a question he couldn't begin to figure out. It seemed all he could do was stumble through, one step at a time. If it turned out that Maya was lying to him, then he was setting himself up for a big fall. The problem was, she wasn't lying to him. He might be a gullible idiot, but he just...believed her. Maybe because he wanted to believe her, an even scarier thought.

That worried him.

They didn't have to wait long. He was glad, because being in the waiting room surrounded by swollen-bellied women and nervous-looking men made him feel like a fraud. As if he didn't belong. As if they could take one look at him and tell he was an outsider, not a real partner to the mother of his kid. Kids.

“Come on in, Maya,” a nurse said, only moments after they had taken seats in the waiting room.

Caleb helped Maya to her feet and held her arm as they were led to a small exam room.

Maya seemed to know the drill by heart. She walked in, stepped on the scale, then used a small stepping stool to get up onto the exam table. She lay back, and the nurse whipped out a tape measure and peeled Maya’s blouse back and leggings downward to measure her belly. “Any problems?” the nurse asked cheerfully.

Caleb stared at the swollen mound of pink flesh underneath Maya’s blouse. Her belly button was turned inside out.

“None,” Maya said. “Stop staring, Caleb.”

Grinning, the nurse jotted a note and proceeded to take Maya’s blood pressure, then her pulse, simultaneously shooting glances at Caleb every once in a while. Curious, pointed glances, but she didn’t ask.

He didn’t know how much to say, so he said nothing at all.

When she finished, she said, “The doctor will be in soon,” and headed out the door.

Maya remained lying down on the exam table, although she did rearrange her blouse. He assumed it was probably too much effort to get up. Caleb paced and looked around the room. Baby scales, baby pictures on the wall. A chart denoting the phases of labor, which he found himself studying intently.

“Sit down,” Maya said. “You’re making me nervous.”

He sent her a sheepish grin and sat down, but the moment his buttocks touched the chair, the door opened, so he shot back up again. The doctor came in. Fortyish, red-headed and female. There were silver frames on her oval glasses and a ready smile on her lips.

“Maya! How are those babies doing this week, hmm?”

“Kicking up a storm, Dr. Sheila,” Maya said.

“That’s the way we like ‘em.” She turned to Caleb, offered a hand. “I’m Sheila Stone, Maya’s ob-gyn,” she said.

“Good to meet you, Doctor. I’m Caleb...er....Cain.” Maya shot him a look he couldn’t read. “I’m...uh...I’m the...”

“Father?” she asked.

He nodded, not waiting for Maya’s permission.

“Well, congratulations. I’m glad to see you’re here for the blessed event.” She pulled her stethoscope to her ears, leaned over and moved it around until she found the spots she wanted.

“Doctor, is it normal for the babies to kick so much? I mean, they’re really...active in there.” He saw Maya’s curious gaze on his when he asked the question. She had eyes that could hold a thousand emotions, he thought, and he wished he could read every one of them. But they tended to bubble up and swirl and sink again in such rapid succession and unlikely combinations that he thought he never would. He would glimpse something, some glimmer, but it would be replaced by another before he could get a handle on it

“It’s perfectly normal, Caleb,” the doctor was saying as he plumbed the depths of Maya Brand’s eyes. “It means they’re strong and healthy.”

Again she leaned over, listening to Maya’s belly, and he dragged his eyes away from the depths of the mother to observe the doctor for signs of dishonesty or worry or anything telling at all.

“But...is it safe for them to be so active? I mean...with two babies...it is possible they could...you know, hurt each other?”

“Oh...they may poke each other a bit now and then,” Dr. Stone said. “But they’re very well protected, Caleb. Completely surrounded and cushioned by amniotic fluid. And while those kicks may seem pretty solid to us out here, the babies aren’t strong enough to seriously harm each other. Really, with the quality of prenatal care we have today, twins are barely any more concern to us than single birth babies.”

She might be lying to him, he thought. Perhaps because Maya was in the room. Oh, he wanted to believe her. But he knew better, didn't he? He'd been told all his life how the stronger twins in his bloodline managed to survive at the expense of their weaker siblings.

"You look worried, Dad," Dr. Stone said. "Come here, let me reassure you." She motioned at Caleb to come closer. When he did, she snagged a second stethoscope from her pocket and handed it to him.

He took it, his hand shaking, and put it on. Then the doctor guided the other end to the right spot. And he heard it. Rapid as the beat of a hummingbird's wings—a tiny, powerful patter.

"Holy...my God, is that the baby's heart?"

"It sure is. Here, here's the other one," she said, moving the business end of the thing yet again.

Caleb closed his eyes as he heard the second beat, every bit as strong and steady as the first. "Are they supposed to be that fast?" he asked, eyes closed as he listened.

"They're just right," Dr. Stone assured him.

When he opened his eyes again, they were slightly blurry, and Maya's were staring right into them. Probing and seeking and surprised and a dozen other things. "It's amazing," he said. "I...I don't even know what to say."

"So are you planning to be in the delivery room, Caleb?"

He blinked and felt his eyes widen as they shot to the doctor's.

Maya smiled. "Don't panic, Caleb. No one expects you to do that."

"But...but..."

"Well, you've got time to think about that. But for now, it's time for the internal, and you need to wait outside."

"Okay. Okay, sure." He reached up and gave Maya's hand a squeeze before he left. Then he met her eyes, held them for a long moment, and without even knowing he was going to, he

leaned down and kissed her very softly. Then he straightened, realized what he'd done and wondered why. It had just seemed...like the thing to do. "I'll...be right out there...if you need me."

She stared at him as if too stunned to speak, and he turned and fled.

In the waiting room, he paced. Hell, he didn't like this. He didn't like believing her without question, and he liked even less that he knew right to his toes that he was right to believe her. She wouldn't lie to him. She wasn't up to anything. She didn't even want him around, much less want his money, and even if she did, she wouldn't have to resort to scamming to get her hands on it. She could just ask. He would give it to her. All of it. He would give her everything he had, if she wanted it.

She was carrying two babies, and they were both his. His children. His babies. He wanted to be there when they were born. In the delivery room, right there. She was incredible... that she could do this thing, perform this miracle, give life to his offspring. It was mind-boggling to him.

Minutes ticked by. He spent the time pawing through the pamphlets, of which there seemed to be hundreds. He flipped through all of them, took several. Then added a couple of parenting and natural childbirth magazines to his collection. Finally the door opened, and the doctor called him back in. "It's not going to be long," she said. "I don't think you'll go another week, Maya."

"Thank God. I don't think I can take another week." Maya grimaced at the doctor as she got herself up into a sitting position on the table. "We're going to want a paternity test done as soon as they're born. Dr. Sheila," Maya said.

The doctor lifted her brows. "Sure. But I can already tell you their blood types. Not that it would prove you are the father, Caleb, but it could eliminate you."

Caleb shook his head. "I don't need that. I don't need—"

"I want it settled," Maya told him.

“I believe you, Maya. You don’t have to prove anything to me.”

She lowered her head, keeping her gaze from his. He couldn’t even try to read her eyes. She said, “That...means a lot to me, that you’d say that, Caleb. Thank you.”

“No. Thank *you*.”

Lifting her head, meeting his eyes, she drew a breath. “Caleb, you’re...who you are. The question of paternity is going to come up, sooner or later—someone’s going to want proof. Maybe it won’t be you. But it’s going to happen. So I’d just as soon we get this done right away.”

He thought about what she’d said, realized she was right. It would come up eventually. “All right. Okay, you’re probably right.”

The doctor flipped open the charts without so much as shooting Caleb a curious glance. He liked her. She was a pro. “Well, according to the amnio, the babies are both type O-negative. That doesn’t match Maya, so it has to match the father. Do you know your blood type, Caleb?”

He lifted his head slowly. “Yeah. It’s O-negative. And it’s not a common blood type.” He turned to face Maya. “I’d like...very much...to be in that delivery room with you, Maya. If you think you wouldn’t mind too much.”

Frowning until her brows touched, she sighed. “I...don’t know.”

Dr. Stone eyed them both. “When you make a decision, let us know, okay? The hospital needs to be forewarned.”

“Thanks, we will.” Caleb watched the doctor go and turned back to Maya. “I didn’t mean to put any pressure on you. I mean...if it would make you uncomfortable, then—”

“We have a tree to cut down,” Maya said. She started to slide off the table.

Caleb reached for her, picked her up and gently lowered her to the floor. Their eyes locked as he did, and Maya’s

cheeks went pink. Then he grabbed her coat and held it for her. But she shook her head slowly and glanced down.

He looked, too, and saw that she was standing there in her socks. Her warm suede shoes stood nearby. She, too, looked at the shoes. Then at him. Then at the shoes again. She kicked them closer to the chair where he'd been sitting earlier, then sat down and, biting her lip as if preparing to face some great challenge, bent to reach for the shoes.

Caleb got there first. "Let me do that."

"I can put on my own shoes."

"Lean back in the chair, Maya. You bend over any further and my kids are going to be born with no necks. You're squishing them."

"I am not." But she did lean back.

Caleb knelt down. He grabbed a shoe, then slid it gently onto a socked foot. He pulled the laces snugly and tied them up. "Just like Cinderella," he quipped, picking up the other shoe.

"Yeah, but those aren't exactly delicate glass slippers."

He shrugged. "Yeah, well, Cindy didn't have to carry her coach-sized pumpkin around with her. It carried her, as I recall." He slid the other shoe on, tied it and got to his feet.

"Last week I could reach," she said.

"Maybe next week you'll be able to reach again."

She closed her eyes fast, turning her head slightly. But not before he saw what flashed through her expression. "Hey," he said. "It's okay to be nervous about this. Hell, I'm nervous and I don't have to do anything." She didn't say anything. He caught her chin, tipped it up. "Are you? Nervous?"

For a long moment she stared into his eyes, and then she said, "I'm scared to death, Caleb." Her hands went to her belly. "I mean, what if I can't do it? One baby is hard enough. I went to the hospital one day just to check out the maternity ward. And I heard some woman screaming in the delivery

room. It sounded like a Halloween horror movie on high volume. I thought she was being murdered in there.”

He swallowed hard. “Did you talk to your mother about it? I mean, she’s been through it so many times.”

Maya lowered her head. “I don’t want her to know how scared I am. Mom’s...she’s the strongest woman I’ve ever met. She thinks I’m like her.”

“I think you are, too.”

She shook her head. “I can’t tell her I’m terrified of something as natural as giving birth. She’d be....”

“Disappointed?”

Maya nodded.

“Don’t you think she was afraid the first time? Hell, I’ll bet she was afraid every time, Maya. But your dad was there with her, right? And maybe that made it easier.”

Maya sighed. “No. Dad wasn’t there for her at all. Not for any of us. Mom...she gave birth five times, all by herself. Daddy...well, his job kept him traveling a lot. Or...that’s what we all thought at the time.”

Frowning as he helped her to her feet, Caleb asked, “But... it wasn’t really his job that kept him away, was it, Maya? It was...his other family.”

“Yeah,” she said, smoothing her blouse, turning her back to him and shrugging into her coat with his help.

He waited, but she said no more.

“Will you tell me about it sometime?” he finally asked.

She shrugged. “I already told you about it, that night at the bar.”

“You told me the facts. Not how it affected you or your mother or your sisters. I’d like to hear how you felt about it, when it all came out. How you feel about it now.”

She shook her head. “It’s irrelevant. It’s in the past.”

“Then will you tell me?”

She gave a shrug. “Maybe.”

He nodded slowly, taking her elbow, steering her out the door, through the waiting room and into the parking lot where her van waited. He opened her door for her, helped her get in, then went to the driver’s side.

After he started the engine he sat there for a minute. Then he said, “Tell me this much. What happened between your dad and your mom—is that why you don’t trust men very much?”

“Who said I didn’t trust men?”

He shrugged. “No one. No one had to, Maya. You’ve been suspicious of my every move, word and deed since I showed up here.”

“Well, who wouldn’t be?” She shook her head. “But for the record, it’s not that I don’t trust men. It’s that I don’t want to get hurt like my mother did—but, uh, by the looks of things, I didn’t miss it by much. I mean, you didn’t break my heart, but I sure as hell did end up with a pair of babies and no husband around.”

He licked his lips and told himself not to blurt the words he blurted next. “That could be remedied, Maya.”

Her eyes got wider than the rings around Saturn, and she stared at him as if he’d lost his mind. “You’ve *got* to be kidding me.”

“No. No, I wasn’t, as a matter of fact.” Starting the van, he drove it into the road, and carefully back toward Big Falls.

She was still staring at him. He could feel her eyes on him, huge and probing. “You’re out of your mind, Caleb. My God, I wouldn’t even *consider* marrying you!”

The barb sank deep. He felt it clear to his bones. “Why not? I mean it’s not like I’m the flat-busted drifter you thought I was before. I could give you anything, Maya. Everything.”

Not one word came from her lips, and when he turned to ask why, the look in her eyes almost toasted him to a nice golden brown hue.

“How dare you?” she whispered.

He shrugged. “How dare I what?”

“Try to buy me! My God, do you really think I give a damn how much money you have or don’t have? I wouldn’t consider marrying you for one reason, and one reason only, Caleb Montgomery! I don’t love you. I don’t even *know* you.”

“And what if you did?”

Her brows bent low, and her eyes burned him. “What if I did what? Know you? Or love you?”

“Both. What then?”

She lowered her head, her cheeks burning red. “This is ridiculous. It’s a ridiculous conversation, Caleb. Because it’s irrelevant. But the fact of the matter is, if I was in love with a man—any man—it wouldn’t matter to me how much money he had, or what kind of truck he drove, or what he did for a living.”

He searched her face, looking for the lie, but seeing no sign of it.

“The only thing that would matter,” she went on, so earnestly it was difficult to imagine she might be making it up as she went along, “would be how he treated me and the babies, and whether he...felt the same way. I’ll never be one of those women tied to a man who doesn’t love her. I’ve seen them—the political wives, the trophy wives, the ones who married because they fit the profile their husbands were looking for, and vice-versa.”

He stared at her for so long he almost veered off the road. Then he looked straight ahead again. Snowflakes, huge and soft as balls of cotton fluff, came floating a few at a time from the sky. Snowflakes, in Oklahoma.

“You’re right,” he said finally.

“I know I am.”

He glanced sideways at her. “I had a profile, you know. Just before I left that night when we first met, my father and his advisers had been filling me in on the woman I was going

to have to find and marry. Or should, if I wanted to win the senate race.”

Blinking slowly, she turned to look back at him. “And I’ll bet I missed on every point,” she said. “Go on, tell me the kind of woman you were looking for. Let’s see, I imagine she should have at least been college educated, which I’m not. Probably her mother should not own a saloon, and I daresay her father being a bigamist wasn’t on the list. I don’t imagine being pregnant and unmarried showed up anywhere, either.”

He tilted his head to one side. “I left that night because I didn’t want to be tied to the woman who would fit their profile. And you’re right—you would have missed it by a mile on one point in particular.”

“What’s that? ‘Must have class and breeding’?”

“No. It was item number seven, if I recall correctly. ‘She must be pretty, but not too pretty.’” He tried a charming smile on her. “You’re way too pretty.”

She averted her face quickly, stared outside, but her cheeks went pink. “I’d have missed on a dozen points,” Maya said softly, her voice raspy. Then she shrugged. “But you already know I’m not up to your family standards, don’t you? Isn’t that why you lied about your name to Dr. Stone?”

He stepped on the brake, stopping the van dead center in the middle of the deserted, snowy road. “Is that what you think?”

She didn’t look at him, so he gripped her shoulders and turned her until she did. “Maya, I lied about my name to protect you and the babies and the rest of your family.”

This time the message in her eyes was clear. Doubt. Skepticism. She didn’t believe a word he said. “Protect us from what?”

“From public humiliation. Scandal. The press. A story like this gets out, Maya, and this town will become a circus. You wouldn’t have a moment’s peace, and what’s left of your reputation would be in shambles.”

She tilted her head to one side. “And so would yours.”

With a sigh, he nodded. “Yes. So would mine. But that’s not what I was thinking about when I gave the doctor a false name.”

“And what about the last time—when you lied about your name to me? Was that to protect me, too?”

He swallowed hard, looking away. “I had reasons. They had nothing to do with you, Maya, I just...I was running away from who I was that night.”

“That’s convenient.”

He lowered his chin, shook his head and put the van back into gear again. “I’m telling the truth,” he said as he drove. “You’re the one who’s lying now.”

“Me?” She shot him a surprised look. “What have I lied about?”

“When you said you don’t have any problem trusting men.”

She looked away. She needn’t have bothered. It wasn’t as if he had a snowball’s chance in hell of reading whatever flashed into her eyes.

An hour later they pulled in at the house, and Maya reached over to blow the horn. Within minutes several bundled-up women came scrambling out the front door. One was carrying a small chainsaw. Mel, of course. She tossed it in the back of Caleb’s pickup, then came to the driver’s door of the van, tapped on the window. Caleb rolled it down.

“Where do you think you are, Caleb? New York City?” she asked him.

“Huh?”

“Keys,” Mel told him, holding out a hand, palm up. “You’ve got that thing locked up tighter than Fort Knox.”

“Oh. Right.” He dug in his pocket, fished out the pickup keys and handed them to her. “It’s not that I think anyone’s going to steal that heap,” he told her. “Just habit.”

“Oh, yeah? I suppose it would be, for a guy used to tooling around in a Mercedes.” Mel wore a blue knit hat with a fuzzy ball on top over her short dark hair. Her bangs stuck out from under it and a couple of snowflakes had landed in them and clung like glittering ornaments.

“Lexus coupe,” he told her. “It’s less pretentious.”

“Oh, yeah, right. That’s downright slumming.” But she said it with a smile. “So you may as well drive the van over. I’ll take Mom with me in your truck; That is, if you trust me with your wheels.”

Already the side door of the van was sliding open, and Selene and Kara were clambering into their seats, snapping their belts. “Sure I trust you,” he told her.

“You should,” Mel said. “I figure any collisions I might have can only improve the looks of that thing, anyway.” She sent him a wink and turned away.

“Hey, I saw yours in the barn, Mel. Makes mine look like a luxury car,” he called.

Mel stopped, turned and eyed him.

“And, I might add, mine runs.”

She grinned and sent him a mock salute, then walked away. As he rolled his window up, he heard Vidalia say, “I told you he’d loosen up once he got to know us.”

In the back seat, Kara and Selene were still laughing at his exchange with Mel. As he put the van into motion, Kara said, “Can you believe it’s snowing! It’s perfect that it’s snowing on tree day, don’t you think?”

“Oh, yes,” Selene said, sobering. “Snow is a great backdrop for murdering a tree.”

“Oh, gee, here we go....” Maya muttered.

“Oh, come on, Selene!” Kara cried. “Don’t spoil it for us!”

“I can’t help the way I feel! I just don’t think it’s nice to chop down millions of living trees every year just for our own selfish pleasure. Hell, we only throw it out a few weeks later!”

“It’s not like we’re chopping down wild trees, Selene,” Kara argued. “These trees wouldn’t exist without the custom! For Pete’s sake, they are planted and raised just for this purpose! Selling them helps farmers make ends meet. You’re so narrow-minded!”

“I am not. Life is life. Trees have spirit, and I don’t see the sense in murdering them.”

“Dammit, you two, enough!” Maya shouted. They went silent as she glared at them over the seat. “We are going to be joyful and filled with Christmas spirit while we choose our tree, do you understand?” She practically growled the words through clenched teeth. “Now stop fighting and be joyful, or I’ll come back there and make you sorry!”

Caleb looked at the two pouting faces in the rearview mirror, then at Maya’s angry one beside him. He cleared his throat and very softly said, “Can I...make a suggestion?”

All three sets of eyes turned on him. He swallowed hard. “The ground’s not frozen yet. It wouldn’t be all that hard to dig the tree up, instead of cutting it down. We could wrap the roots in burlap and soil, put it into a big tub of dirt, feed and water it all winter. Then, come spring, we can take it out and plant it again.”

Selene’s pout eased into a smile so soft and genuine that Caleb thought she might lean up and kiss him. She looked at Kara, and Kara smiled back and nodded.

Then he looked at Maya. But she wasn’t reacting at all to his suggestion. Instead she said, “What do you mean ‘we’?”

“Huh?”

“You said we could take the tree out and plant it in the spring. I want to know what you meant by that.”

“I...well, hell, I don’t know.”

“Do you plan to be here in the spring, Caleb?”

She said it as if she were issuing a challenge. He decided to rise to it. “Are you and my children going to be here in the spring?” he asked her.

“Well, of course we are.”

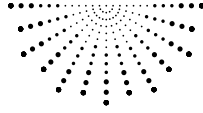
“Then...then so am I.” He didn’t know what the hell made him blurt those words. Had he lost his freaking mind?

“Hot damn,” Kara said from the back seat. “You go, Caleb!”

“Shut up, Kara,” Maya growled. Caleb glanced at Kara in the mirror and sent her a wink. She smiled, and her eyes sparkled. He shifted his gaze to Selene, whose eyes were knowing, wise beyond their years. She gave him a very slight nod of approval, but the look she sent him said she had known it all along.

Caleb was worried. He’d said something he had no intention of saying. He had no idea if he could be around here in the spring. He would visit, of course, but that wasn’t the way his statement had sounded. And now it was said. It was out there. And he couldn’t take it back.

CHAPTER TEN



The truck and the van were parked side by side in the tree farm's driveway, and Maya was following the farmer up a hill, surrounded by her sisters, her mother and Caleb Montgomery. She didn't know why he'd said what he had. That he would be here in the spring. He couldn't have meant it. He couldn't have. She wouldn't believe him. After all, he'd told her one night, eight and a half months ago, that he would still be here in the morning. But in the morning, he'd been gone. He hadn't so much as mentioned that to her or offered an apology, much less an explanation. And she would be damned if she would stoop low enough to ask for either of those things. Far be it from Maya Brand to let a man think his presence or absence mattered that much to her.

It didn't. And it wouldn't. Not now, not ever.

She remembered the nights of her childhood...the soft sounds of her beautiful mother crying alone in her room. She'd felt her mother's heartache as if it were her own, no matter how Vidalia had tried to hide it from her.

No. She wasn't going to let any man hurt her like that. And she would die before she'd subject her children to that kind of pain.

Besides, he couldn't very well run for the U.S. Senate from Big Falls, Oklahoma. He couldn't serve from here if he won. He was lying. Just plain lying. And all this concern for her, for the babies, all this pampering and coddling and chivalry—putting on her shoes, for God's sake—it was just an act. Joking with her sisters, respecting her mother. It was false. She didn't

know what the hell he wanted from her—maybe just to win her over so he could then convince her to keep quiet about his illegitimate babies. Whatever it was, it didn't matter. She wasn't falling for it. He wouldn't be here when the chips were down, when she really needed him. He wouldn't, because in her experience, men never were.

A twinge of pressure tightened around her belly and made her lower back howl in protest. She stopped walking, her hiking shoes ankle deep in the snow. Beside her, sharp as a tack and twice as irritating, Caleb grabbed her arm. "Maya? You okay?"

She blinked slowly, took a breath, and took stock. Nothing. "Fine," she said. "Just a twinge. Not the least bit uncommon."

They were twenty feet from the van, and there were twenty more to go, up the side of a steep little hillock, to the field of perfectly shaped little trees. And in spite of herself, Maya sniffed the Christmassy scent of them, and felt her spirits rise.

"Smells good, doesn't it?" Caleb asked.

"Smells like a memory in the making," she said, not knowing why. Her mother was always saying things like that. But not her. It was a sappy, sentimental thing to say. She turned to look at Caleb, at the wisps of snow falling on his shoulders and dusting his hair. He was staring into her eyes and looking confused, maybe a little emotional. Hell, it was that time of year. Everyone was emotional.

"A memory in the making," he repeated. "I've never heard that before."

She gave her head a shake. "Maybe I'll go back to the truck. Sit this one out."

"Now what kind of a memory would that be?" He moved closer, brushed the snow from her hair. "Come on, before they pick a tree without us."

Without warning, he scooped her into his arms, right off her feet, and started up the hill with her.

"Caleb! You're out of your mind! Put me down!"

“No way.”

“I weigh a ton! You’ll kill yourself.”

“Hey, there are three of you here! And you’ve been carrying these two kids of ours around for nine months. I think I can handle it for a minute or two.”

Ours. She didn’t like the way the word sounded on his lips, or on the air, and she liked even less the way her tummy tightened in response to the sound of it.

They reached the top of the hill and the tree lot. Caleb stopped trudging, but he didn’t put her down. She was looking ahead at her sisters, running around like excited children from tree to tree, examining them from all angles. But now she drew her gaze in, turned it upward and focused it instead on the man who held her as if she was not the size of a small hippo. He wasn’t even out of breath. And he was looking at her like... like...

“You’re beautiful, you know that?” he said.

She lowered her lashes. “Stop.”

“You are. Snowflakes on your lashes. Cheeks all pink and glowing. But it’s more than that. I’ve been trying to put my finger on what’s different...but it’s not something I can name. It’s something from inside.”

“It’s a pair of somethings from inside,” she told him.

He smiled at her. Then he leaned down and he kissed her. Long, slowly, tenderly. His mouth was warm, and he tasted so good she wanted to kiss him forever. Yet the kiss terrified her, partly because she wanted it so very badly. And then he lifted his head away.

She blinked rapidly, because there was moisture in her eyes, and she stared at him. “Put me down.”

“What do you want for Christmas, Maya?”

She looked away fast when he said that. Because images of her childish wishes and dreams popped into her mind. A rambling log cabin. A dog to lie by the fireplace. A cat to sit in the window. Her own kitchen to fill with the smells of baking

bread and Christmas cookies. Her children's wide sparkling eyes as they watched for Santa's reindeer on magical Christmas Eves. And a loving, devoted husband coming through the front door, his arms filled with presents for the kids. His eyes filled with love for them—for her.

“Maya?” he asked.

She cleared her throat. “Let's go get a tree before we start worrying about what to put underneath it.”

He set her down on her feet, and she trudged forward.

An hour later, a huge tree with roots enough to fill the entire back of Caleb's pickup was on its way to the Brand place. It was wrapped in burlap, and a half acre of the tree farm seemed to be coming with it. It had taken all that time for Caleb, Mel and Ben Kellogg, the farmer, to dig it up. And once they removed it, they had to fill in the hole and smooth things out as best they could. The farmer charged extra for the privilege of digging up a living tree. Caleb insisted on paying, since it was his idea.

It took a giant washtub to hold the thing. But Maya watched Selene's eyes light up when they finally got the tree home and standing upright in the living room. Her small hands were black with soil and her hair full of pine needles. She'd been underneath the tree, smoothing the soil they'd added to the tub, pouring in water and tree food, holding the base as they straightened it and tied it off to keep it in place. And talking to it as if speaking to a puppy. The tree's lush branches completely hid the baling twine they'd used to support it, thank goodness.

Maya stood back and looked at it, shook her head at the dirt all over Mel and Caleb and the living room floor.

“My, my, but that's the nicest tree we've ever had,” Vidalia said, shaking her head in awe.

“You say that every year, Mom,” Maya told her.

“And every year it's the truth. We just keep topping ourselves.” She smiled. “Well go on, now, Caleb, Mel, Selene, get washed up. Dinner's in an hour, and there's plenty to do

before that. We'll need all hands on deck for hauling out the decorations. Lord knows we're already late getting them up." She clapped her hands twice.

Maya looked at Caleb, closed her eyes. "That's my mother's way of inviting you to stay for dinner."

He smiled at her. "I figured that out. But I'd feel better if you were the one issuing the invitation."

"Would you really?"

He nodded. And he looked at her with those big eyes of his, like a puppy dog. She felt something soften inside her. In spite of herself, she heard herself asking, "Would you like to stay for dinner, Caleb?"

His smile was fast and blinding. "Oh, yeah."

She rolled her eyes as he raced off to the bathroom to scrub his hands like an excited youngster. Vidalia came close to her, slid a protective arm around her shoulders. "He seems like a decent man," she said.

"Yes. He does, doesn't he?"

"He's your soul mate, Maya," Selene whispered from nearby.

"Hell, Selene, you just like him because he didn't support the annual tree slaughter."

Selene shook her head slowly, coming closer, slipping her arm around Maya on the other side. "I *do* like that about him. But, if you recall, I told you he was your soul mate that night a long time ago, in the saloon, when you first met him."

Maya frowned and turned to the side.

"She did," Kara said, coming from the kitchen. "I remember she told me the same thing." She sidled up to her mother, slung an arm around her. So there were four now in the link.

"What made you think it?" Maya asked.

"Something in his eyes...and in yours. Plus I pulled a tarot card from my deck when I first noticed the sparks between you

two. The Lovers.”

“You know I don’t approve of those cards, Selene,” Vidalia said.

“Not now, Mom, please. Come on, it’s Christmas.”

Vidalia looked sideways at her, and her frown eased. She smiled and began to hum a carol, and in a few bars she began to sing the words, and they all joined in. At some point Caleb and Mel reappeared, and Mel slung an arm around Caleb’s shoulders, dragged him to the tree and linked with the others. They both joined in the singing.

The timer bell from the oven pinged, and Vidalia stepped out of the arms of her children, dabbed at her eyes, and turned to hurry into the kitchen, muttering, “Lord, it’s almost perfect.”

When she was out of sight, Caleb sent Maya a questioning glance. “Almost?” he asked.

She nodded. “There’s one more of us,” she said. “I told you about her before, didn’t I? Edie. Mom misses her most around the holidays.”

“We all do,” Selene said, eyelids lowered.

“She doesn’t come home for Christmas?” Caleb asked.

Maya shook her head. “She and Mom aren’t on...the best of terms.”

“Not even speaking, you mean,” Mel filled in.

They had broken ranks and were drifting toward chairs, the sofa. Kara bent to paw through a box of ornaments Vidalia had brought down from the attic.

“But why?” Caleb asked.

Maya had settled into the corner of the sofa, and she noticed that he didn’t hesitate to take the spot beside her. Awfully sure of himself, wasn’t he?

Mel said, “Edie ran off to the West Coast with stars in her eyes, Caleb. But when she got there, she found a thousand other girls just as pretty and just as bright with the same

dreams. Her biggest break to date was landing a gig as a model for Vanessa's Whisper."

His eyes widened just a bit. "Vanessa's Whisper?" he asked. And when Mel nodded, he said, "Wow, I had no idea. Maya told me she modeled lingerie, but I didn't realize she was *that* famous. Why didn't anyone say anything sooner?"

Maya blinked at him. "You think we go around advertising it?"

"Hell, if it was my sister I'd erect a monument in the middle of town to her success."

"Success, Caleb? My sister poses in her underwear. And the closest thing to a monument to her in this town is Wade Armstrong's body shop, where my sister's photos, clipped from the pages of the catalogue, are the basic wallpaper pattern."

Caleb's brows came together. "Vanessa's Whisper is big time, Maya. Your sister had to have competed against hundreds of models to land a contract with them. Do you know how many actresses got their starts as models? This is a big deal."

"That's what I keep trying to tell them," Selene said. "Edie's gorgeous, and the beauty of the female form is nothing to be ashamed of."

"Nor is it something to spread naked on the walls of body shops for dirty minded men to drool over," Maya said primly.

"She doesn't pose nude, Maya, and you know it," Mel put in.

Kara looked up. "I don't care what she does. I think you and Mom have been too hard on her, and I just want her to come home."

Maya lifted her brows in disbelief, then slid a glance toward Caleb. "And you agree with her?"

"Well...yeah, frankly, I do. I think you ought to be congratulating your sister, not condemning her."

Maya thinned her lips. “And how would you feel if it was your daughter posing in an eye patch and a rubber band, airbrushed, glossed over and sent to thousands of pairs of horny eyes all over the country?”

He blinked, and she knew she had nailed him on that score. “I...hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“Well, maybe you should.”

“Shssh! Mom’s coming,” Kara said.

“Dinner in a half hour,” Vidalia said, smiling. “Then we’ll decorate this tree.”

Maya lifted her brows and parted her lips to protest. It was bad enough her family had conspired to get Caleb to escort her to the doctor, then dragged him into their family tree expedition. And invited him to dinner. But to invite him to actually help decorate the tree was going just a bit too far.

“I’d be intruding, Vidalia. That’s...that’s a family thing. I’ve already been hanging around here too long.”

He looked almost sad to have to say so.

“Bullcookies!” Vidalia said. “Are you the father of my grandbabies or aren’t you?”

“He’s not gonna answer that one until after the DNA tests, Mom,” Maya said softly.

That earned her a sidelong scowl from Caleb. “I am,” he said to Vidalia. “Though the idea of you being a grandmother is almost as stunning to me as that of me being a father.”

Vidalia smiled and sent him a wink. “That makes you family. Period.” Then she leaned closer to him and said, “That doesn’t mean you need to ease up on the efforts to flatter your way into my good graces, however.”

“I wasn’t planning to.” His smile came slowly. First one side of his mouth pulled upward, and then the other. “It’s been a long time since anyone’s called me family, Vidalia,” he said. All humble and sweet looking. The big phony. “Thank you.”

Vidalia looked as if she was going to melt right into a puddle of pudding at his feet. And as Maya glanced around at her sisters, she saw that he'd wrapped them all around his fingers, as well. Even Mel looked at him without snarling.

Hell.

"You okay?"

She frowned and saw that the man of the hour was addressing her, still sitting beside her on the sofa. "My feet are swollen and my back aches and I have cramps in my calves that would down a bull moose."

He smiled softly and lifted her feet up off the floor, draping her legs across his lap and proceeding to rub her calves with his big hands. As he massaged the cramps away, she released a breath.

"Go on, relax. You know you want to," he said. "Lean back. Breathe, for crying out loud."

"I am breathing."

But she did lean back and let go. Hell, it felt great, what he was doing. She was only human.

"Sheesh, when did that start?" Kara asked from across the room. She stood with curtains parted, staring out the window. The snow was falling harder than before. The gently floating fluff of earlier in the day was now slanting downward at an alarming rate.

"I'd heard we might actually get an inch or two tonight," Vidalia called from the kitchen. "Certainly is gonna be a holiday to remember around here. Come on, Kara, Mel, Selene, you three get upstairs and start bringing down the ornaments and lights, while I set the table." She glanced in at Maya, then Caleb. "You two stay right where you are," she added with a wink. "I've been trying to get that girl to lie down and relax for days but she's been just like a jitterbug on a hot plate lately...." Her brows rose, and she tipped her head to one side. "They used to say it was a sign the time was near, when a woman takes to acting all nervous and jittery like that."

“We can only hope,” Maya groaned, letting her eyes fall closed.



It was nine o'clock by the time he headed back to the boarding house. In a small town like Big Falls, that seemed like midnight. The town only had a handful of streetlights, and those were dim. But it was enchanting, all the same: the moon straining to shine through the thick night clouds, giant snowflakes falling like an invasion of tiny paratroopers. A rarity, snow in Oklahoma.

He stomped the white stuff off his boots, then crossed the closed-in porch area and heeled them off. He carried them inside—then stood still as the man in the living room rose from the chair where he'd been sitting, apparently having tea with Mrs. Peabody, and turned to smile at him.

Caleb almost cursed aloud. Jace Chapin was grinning like a Cheshire cat. “Well now,” Caleb said slowly, wishing to God he could make the man disappear. “What’s the world’s sleaziest tabloid reporter doing way out here in Big Falls?”

“Came to find out what the richest candidate for the U.S. Senate is doing way out here in Big Falls,” Jace replied.

“I haven’t declared my candidacy, Chapin. But getting the facts straight has never been your strong suit.”

The man shrugged and pursed his lips. “Oh, but the facts this time are too good to resist,” he said. “I mean, the background on this unmarried pregnant woman you’ve been running around with is better than anything I could have invented, I gotta tell you.”

Caleb tried to look unconcerned, but he kept his eyes averted as he walked past the man, stood near the fireplace, set his boots down. “You’re going to have to explain to me why the background story on a friend of mine would be of any interest to your readers, Jace. Because, frankly, I’m clueless.”

“Oh, come on, Montgomery. It’s your kid. I have photos of you escorting this woman into the clinic in the next town. Having dinner with her. Carrying her up a snowy hill to pick a Christmas tree.”

“That’s quite a leap of the imagination, even for you. From dinner to fatherhood.”

He shrugged. “I’ve got more. Just wanted to give you a chance to comment before the story runs in tomorrow’s edition.”

“Run this story, Jace, and I promise, I’ll bury you.”

Jace’s brows lifted. “And what will you do for me if I don’t run it, Montgomery?”

Caleb narrowed his eyes on the man, finally reading him. “You’re slime, you know that, Jace? How much do you want?”

He shrugged. “Five hundred grand...for now.”

“Fine.”

“Fine? You mean you’ll pay it?”

Caleb had his hand on his cell phone already. “Just tell me where to transfer the funds and I’ll call—”

A click made him stop speaking. Jace had one hand in his pocket, and he pulled out a minirecorder. “That’s all I need, Montgomery. If this wasn’t your kid, you wouldn’t be so desperate to keep it quiet. I can name my price for this story.”

Caleb reached for the little weasel, but he ducked and ran for the door. Caleb ran after him, only to stop at the porch, sock feet already damp, as he saw the man slam his car door, and lurch into the narrow street.

“Son of a—”

“Oh, my. Oh, dear. Oh, my, what are you going to do? Poor Maya! Poor, poor Maya. That dear girl...” Ida-May Peabody wrung her hands and paced behind him. “I had no idea! I should never have let that man in here. Oh, my.”

“Now, Ms. Peabody, you know this isn’t your fault. You had no way of knowing,” Caleb assured her.

She didn't look too relieved.

He had to get to his room, call Bobby, see what could be done about damage control. And then...then he had to warn Maya.

Damn, as if she didn't already dislike him enough.



“He'd make a real nice addition to this family, you know,” Vidalia Brand said softly. She and Maya were sitting in front of the fireplace. Maya had her feet up. Her backache had been growing steadily worse all day, and now it was really hurting. The dishes were done, and her sisters had all gone to bed. The tree twinkled magically.

“He will be a part of the family,” she told her mother. “As the babies' father, he'll be as much a part of it as he wants to be.”

“Looks to me like he wants to be even more than that.”

“Mom, please....”

Vidalia shrugged, sighed a surrender. “Not easy, you know. Raising a family alone.”

Looking up, Maya saw her mother's eyes. The lines at the corners, the hard-worn contours. “You are a hell of a woman, Mamma. Did I ever tell you how much I admire you? No, really. I mean it. You did fine by us. No man could have done better. And I know it was hard. Probably the hardest thing you ever did in your life, raising us alone.”

“No, child. The hardest thing I ever did was saying goodbye to the man I loved.”

Maya closed her eyes, lowered her head. Her father had been a two-timing slime bag. But damn, her mother's loyalty ran deep.

“I think that man could love you, girl.”

Lifting her head, she met her mother's eyes. "I don't want him to. I don't want to—"

"To believe in him? I know. You're afraid he'll let you down, break your heart, the way your father did to me."

"I don't want to talk about it," she corrected.

"It was worth it, Maya. Being with him meant having all you girls. And that was worth the hurting. Worth anything. And just because you admire me for having survived the raising of a family without the help of a man, doesn't mean you should wish it for yourself, because it's no kind of rose garden."

Reaching out, Maya covered her mother's hand with her own. "There's a difference, Mamma. You had nobody. I have you. And Kara and Selene and Mel."

"And Caleb," her mother insisted stubbornly.

"No. The babies will have Caleb. I won't."

"But, Maya—"

"Mom, that's enough. I'm not going to discuss this. There is no way I'll let myself get tangled up with any man I can't depend on."

"But...but how do you know you can't depend on Caleb?" she asked, seemingly dumbfounded.

"He already left me once. Just walked out, without a word. And eight and a half months later, he waltzes back in again like nothing's happened. Just like...." She bit her lip.

"Just like your father," Vidalia finished for her.

"Oh, Mom, I didn't mean—"

"Yes, you did." She got to her feet and walked away, up the stairs, and Maya heard the bedroom door close softly.

Damn. She hadn't meant to hurt her mother's feelings. What was wrong with her, anyway?

She strained to her feet and waddled through the house, checking locks, shutting off lights. She paused at the window

to glance outside. Then she let the curtain fall back into place and sent a sidelong glance at the telephone. She told herself that she was not hoping he would call to say good-night.

One hand on her aching back, she turned to go upstairs. And then the telephone rang, and she knew it was him before she even picked it up.

“Hello?”

“Maya?” Caleb asked. “Why aren’t you sound asleep by now?”

She pursed her lips. “How do you know I wasn’t?”

He hesitated. Then, “Oh, God, I’m sorry. Did I wake you?”

Her lips pulled into a smile in spite of herself. “No. I was just on my way up.”

“Well...well good. You, um...you need your rest.”

“You sound like my mother. Why are you calling, Caleb? Is something wrong?”

“No. I mean...yes.” He sighed.

She heard it and frowned. “You’re leaving, aren’t you?”

“What?”

“It’s all right. I’ve been expecting it. I never asked you to stay, Caleb. Hell, at least you’re calling to let me know...this time.”

“Maya...I’m not going anywhere. I’m calling because... Wait a minute, what do you mean, ‘this time’?”

She closed her eyes. “Nothing. Just tell me why you’re calling.”

It took him a moment. She wondered why. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am about this, Maya, but there’s been a leak. The story’s out. There was a tabloid scumbag waiting here when I got back to the boarding house tonight.

Apparently he’s been following us around, snapping pictures. God only knows how much dirt he thinks he’s dug up on us.”

Maya closed her eyes in relief, which was so odd that she felt like smacking herself in the head for feeling it. But she felt it all the same. A wave of relief that he hadn't called to say goodbye. And while the actual news should seem far more serious than the latter would have been, it felt small in comparison.

She must be losing her mind. Maybe it was hormonal.

"Maya?"

"Yes. I'm here. I'm just...well, I'm just not sure why you're telling me this. What can I do about it?"

There was a long pause. "I just wanted you to be warned. It'll hit the tabloids tomorrow, and the press will be stampeding into town in droves."

"Well...then you'll be able to tell your side of the story, won't you?"

"I'm afraid my side of the story isn't exactly going to help matters."

She sighed. "This is liable to ruin your chances for the Senate, isn't it, Caleb?"

"I don't know. It might."

"It will. If they go digging for dirt in my background, they won't have to dig far, Caleb. My family is...rolling in it." She licked her lips nervously.

"It's not me I'm worried about here, Maya. It's you, your family. I don't want this upsetting you—you're in no condition to—"

"Everything upsets me in this condition," she said. "But I'm getting used to it."

"I'm going to fix this, Maya. I'm going to find a way to make it all right again. I promise."

"Don't make promises, Caleb. I don't like when they get broken."

"I promise," he said again. "Try to rest, Maya. I'll be there first thing in the morning."

“You will?”

“Yeah. I will.”

She pursed her lips, bit them to keep from making some remark about the last time he’d promised to be around in the morning, and whispered good-night. Then she hung up the phone and went up to bed. But she didn’t sleep for a very long time, and when she did, the dreams that plagued her were odd and frightening.

She wore white and walked into the church on a fine summer Sunday, with two gorgeous toddlers clinging to her hands. But she found the church doors blocked by a crowd of her neighbors, all of them pointing at her and whispering words that blended together. Trash. Sinner. Harlot. And then they aimed those fingers at her children, and the whispers grew louder. Bastards. Fatherless. Illegitimate. Bastards.

Beyond them all she saw Caleb, his suit impeccable, turning away and sneaking out the church’s back door.

She looked down at her pristine children, but they wore rags now, and their faces were coated in tear-streaked dirt. And her own white dress had turned to scarlet.

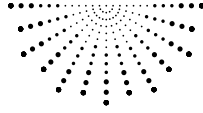
She sat up in bed with a gasp and a sharp pain in her middle. But then it eased, and she lay back again. “Just a dream,” she said. “This is the twenty-first century, for God’s sake. They don’t tar and feather fallen women anymore.”

Maybe not literally, a little voice inside her whispered. No, the ways of making people feel less than worthy were far more subtle these days. The whispered remarks, the constant slights. The invitations that didn’t arrive, and the distasteful looks of those who considered themselves better.

She’d grown up with all of those things. They had hurt her, because she’d been too smart a child to not be aware of them. She did not want her children to feel the sting of nasty people and their nasty attitudes.

And yet she didn’t know how she could prevent it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



The telephone rang at 7:00 a.m. Maya had finally fallen into a fitful sleep, but the sound woke her instantly, and even as she rolled over, covered her head and decided to ignore it, she heard her mother's voice from downstairs as she answered the call. But when she spoke again, Vidalia's tone made Maya's eyes blink wider, and all thoughts of sleep vanished.

"Exactly where do you get the nerve to call my home and ask me something like that, mister? Don't you dare call here again!" There was a bang, no doubt the sound of the phone being slammed back into its cradle.

Maya got up, tugged on her industrial-sized bathrobe and went into the hall barefoot. She was halfway down the stairs when the phone rang again. And by the time she got to the bottom her mother was slamming it down just like before.

"What is it, Mom? Who was that?"

Her mother looked at her as Maya crossed the living room. The angry look on her face immediately eased, and she replaced it with a false smile. "Nothing for you to worry about, hon. Just some kid playing pranks on us, is all."

Her mother was lying, trying to protect her. She knew that. Maya reached the kitchen, eyed the filled coffeepot and longed for some real caffeine, and the phone rang yet again.

She snatched it up before her mother could.

"Hello, is this Maya Brand?" a strange voice asked.

“Who wants to know?” She walked to the coffeepot, took a mug from the tree and filled it.

“I’m Ben Kylie, a reporter for the Herald, ma’am. Do you have any response to the story in this morning’s *Daily Exposé*?”

“I don’t read trash, Mr. Kylie, so I have no clue what story you mean.”

She eyed her mother, who was sending her a look of pure worry.

“You mean...you haven’t seen it?”

“No, I haven’t. And I’m very busy today, so if you could get to the point...”

“Sure. The point is the *Exposé* says you’re carrying the child of Cain Caleb Montgomery III, as the result of a drunken one-night stand last spring. It claims you yourself are the illegitimate progeny of a bigamist with connections to organized crime and a barmaid, and that your family’s main claim to fame is that you have a sister who poses nude for men’s magazines. Is this basically accurate?”

Her mouth had fallen open as the man spoke, and now she drew the phone away from her ear to stare at it in disbelief.

A firm, warm hand took the telephone from her, and she looked up through welling tears to see Caleb standing there. “Ms. Brand has no comment at this time. However, rest assured that her team of lawyers are even now preparing their libel suit. I would be extremely careful about what I printed if I were you.” He clicked the phone down, held it two seconds, gently unplugged it from the wall jack. His eyes met Maya’s. “I’m sorry. My God, Maya, I’m so sorry.”

She held his gaze, even though hers was swimming now. “Did the *Daily Exposé* print what that man said it did?”

“I...what did he say?”

“Don’t avoid the question, Caleb. You know what he said. Have you seen the story or not?”

He licked his lips. “Yes.”

“And do you have a copy with you?”

He shook his head side to side, hard. Too hard.

She held out her hand.

“No.”

“Fine. I’ll go to the general store and buy my own copy.”
She reached for the door.

“Maya, for crying out loud, you’re barefoot and in your pajamas!” her mother said, reaching past her to press a palm to the door.

“So what, Mom? You afraid the neighbors will talk?” Her voice broke just a little with the irony.

“Look, it doesn’t matter what that rag sheet said or didn’t say, Maya. All that matters is how we respond to it.”

Maya sank into a chair at the kitchen table, lowered her head onto her arms. “If it doesn’t matter, then why won’t you let me see it?”

Her voice sounded muffled, even to her. But he could hear her. She knew he could.

“Maya...try to understand.” He sat down in the chair beside her, and his hands closed on her shoulders. “You’re carrying my babies. I want to protect you from this kind of garbage. I want to stand between all that ugliness and my family.”

Very slowly, she lifted her head. She knew her eyes were probably wet and red, and her hair was likely sticking up all over. She hadn’t even showered yet this morning. And yet he looked at her with kindness, tenderness, and caring, in his eyes.

“Isn’t that what a father is supposed to do?” he asked her.

“It’s what a mother is supposed to do, too, Caleb.” She sat up a little straighter. “Thanks for reminding me of that.”

“Well, hallelujah,” Vidalia said, smiling. “I wondered where my daughter was hiding for a minute there.”

“She’s back, Mom.” Maya sent her mother a loving smile. Then turned to face Caleb again. “I’m Vidalia Brand’s eldest daughter. I need to see the newspaper, and I promise you, I’m not going to fall apart when I do. No matter what it says.”

Caleb lifted his brows and turned to glance at Vidalia. She gave him a nod. Looking as if he thought better of it, he reached inside his jacket and pulled out a folded-up tabloid newspaper. On the front page was a photo of Maya and Caleb walking into the clinic, obviously taken the day before. The headline said *Front-Running Candidate’s Dirty Little Secret*.

She lifted her chin, folded the paper back up. “I’m going to shower and put on some decent clothes. I’ll take this with me.”

“Maya, don’t worry. We’re going to fix this. I promise.”

She looked at Caleb, so strong, confident, sure of himself. “You really do care about these babies, don’t you?” she asked. Because it was suddenly so crystal clear to her that he did.

He held her gaze. “I didn’t know it was even possible to care this much, Maya.”

She smiled a bit unsteadily. “I know the feeling.”

“Do you need help...with anything?”

She shook her head. “My sisters are still upstairs. I’ll, um...call them if I need them.” Then she frowned as a thought occurred to her. “Mom, if Mel catches any reporters snooping around, there’s going to be trouble.”

Her mother looked worried, then looked at Caleb. Good Lord, why was everyone suddenly turning to him for answers? They’d got along just fine without a man forever!

“No reporters will be near the place. I was on the phone half the night getting things set up. We’ve got security men stationed out front. No one’s going to get past them. My top aide is on his way here with my legal team. They’ll help us formulate our response. And by the time you get out of the shower, Maya, you’ll have a new private telephone number.”

She tilted her head. “You work fast.”

“I’ve been in this game a while.”

She got to her feet, but before she turned to go, he stopped her, placing his hands tenderly on her swollen belly. “I’ll make it all right...for all of you. I promise.”

She laid her hands over his. “I honestly believe you’ll try, Caleb.”

He was looking very deeply into her eyes just then, and there was something else. “All this...all that’s been happening...there hasn’t been time to talk about...anything else.”

She lowered her head. “What else is there?” And before he could answer, she turned and hurried away.

By the time she came back downstairs, dressed in her prettiest maternity clothes, back throbbing and clenching in protest, Maya’s home was crawling with strangers. Men with radios and headsets sipped coffee and munched on crumb cake in the kitchen, and the dining room table was surrounded. Mel, Selene, Kara and Vidalia lined one side of the long oak table, while three men in dark blue suits lined the other. Caleb sat at the head, and the chair to his right was empty.

“I’m telling you, Caleb,” one animated man in his late twenties was saying. “I can spin this thing into solid gold, for both you and Ms. Brand.”

“She’s not going to like it, Bobby,” Caleb said.

“What won’t I like?”

Everyone looked up to see her. The men rose, and Caleb pulled out the empty chair for her. “Gentlemen,” Caleb said, “meet Maya Elouisa Brand, the mother of the heirs to the Montgomery fortune.”

She blinked in surprise. “That’s a far cry from my former title—’the slut who destroyed the Montgomery-legacy.’”

“Thank you,” the impeccably dressed, almost boyishly good-looking Bobby said.

She frowned at him. “Why are you thanking me?”

“For the compliment on my work. ‘Mother of the heirs to the Montgomery fortune.’ That’s mine. It’s what I do,” he

explained. “Your status is soon going to be the American equivalent of royalty, Ms. Brand. I’m the best spin doctor in the business. And you...well....” Shaking his head, holding his palm up toward her, he smiled. “Hell, with you to work with, this is going to be a cake-walk.”

She frowned. “I’m afraid I don’t follow.” She went to her chair, took it, and the men sat down.

“Well, look at you. You’re gorgeous. And you have that clean, natural, healthy look about you.”

“I’m not sure whether to thank you or offer to let you check my teeth,” she said.

Bobby smiled even harder. “Perfect. Wit, too. You’re perfect.”

“Perfect for what, Mr....um...?”

“Bobby McAllister. Just consider me your new right-hand man.”

She glanced at Caleb, who looked uncomfortable, and then at her mother and sisters, who sat there wide-eyed and uneasy. “So what is this plan I’m not going to like?” She looked to Caleb.

He reached out, took her hands and drew a deep breath. “Believe me, this is not the way I would have...gone about this, given the choice, Maya. But...” He paused, looked at the men around the table, then at Vidalia. “Maybe it would be better if I could speak to Maya alone.”

“Good thinking, son,” Vidalia said with a smile of encouragement. “The family room is empty.”

Caleb drew a breath so deep it made his chest expand. Then he blew it out again, got to his feet and reached for Maya’s hand. Frowning, she took it and let him help her up. “This better be good, Caleb,” she told him. “Getting up out of a chair is no small effort, you know.”

He shot her a look and a slight smile. A nervous one, though. And he kept hold of her hand as he led her through the doorway to the left, into what they called the family room. It

held a wall of bookshelves, a sewing machine and several baskets full of half-finished projects, a writing desk, and an air hockey table. A smaller table in the corner held a propane burner and a double boiler. Strings tacked to the walls like miniature clotheslines had hand-dipped candles suspended from them to dry. And in yet another small alcove, a TV/VCR combination sat near a rocking chair.

Caleb stood in the center of the room, looking around at the odd collection and smiling.

“It’s...” Maya began.

“No, no...let me. The sewing stuff is yours. My crafty, talented baby-quilt maker. The candle making setup has to be Selene’s. Actually, I’m surprised it’s not a Ouija board or something.”

“Mom makes her keep that in her room.”

He smiled. “The air hockey has to be for Mel. And the books and television must be Kara’s.”

“She lives for fantasy,” Maya said.

“The desk is your mother’s.”

She nodded. “Getting to know this family fast, aren’t you?”

“I hope so.” He walked to the most comfortable chair in the room, turned it slightly and nodded at her to sit on it.

She did. “What’s Bobby’s brilliant plan, Caleb?”

He stood in front of her for a minute. Then, finally, he took her hands in his and dropped down to one knee. “Maya...”

“Oh, come on—” She tugged her hand against the grip of his and wished he wouldn’t say what she thought he was going to say.

He held on tighter and said it anyway. “Let’s get married.”

She closed her eyes. “That’s got to be the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard in my life.”

He licked his lips, lowered his head. “Not exactly the reaction I was hoping for, Maya.”

“Caleb, we barely know each other!”

“Maya, you’re having my kids. Two of them. And...and, hell, if I had to choose a wife today, I can’t think of anyone I’d rather marry than you.”

“If you had to. The point is, you don’t have to.”

“No. I don’t have to. And neither do you. But if you’ll just listen to my argument here, I think you’ll see that it’s the logical thing to do.”

“The logical thing to do would be to get up off the floor, Caleb.”

He frowned at her, but got up. Pushing a hand through his hair, he turned and paced away, then paced back again.

“So, present your case, already. I can’t wait to hear this.”

“Okay. Here it is. Marrying me will be the difference between you being seen the way Bobby described you out there and the way that tabloid rag did. It is the difference between you being the most notorious member of your family or the envy of every woman in town. It’s the difference between those babies you’re carrying being legitimate or illegitimate. Between them being snubbed or respected as... practically as princes. And it will be the difference between our story being a dirty little scandal or a classic American fairy tale.”

She pursed her lips. “And it will make the difference between you winning or losing the senate race.”

He gaped at her. “My God, I don’t even know if I’m going to run! Maya, that is the last thing on my mind, I swear to you.”

She narrowed her eyes on him, not sure she believed that. But she did know he cared for the babies. Deeply.

“I...I don’t know, Caleb. This is...this is very sudden and I...well, I don’t—”

“Is there someone else?”

He asked the question so suddenly she almost hurt her neck snapping her head up. “Someone else?” she asked. “Are you out of your mind? Have you looked at me lately?”

He muttered something that sounded like, “In my sleep,” but she couldn’t be sure. “You’re beautiful, smart, sexy as hell.”

“I’m a heffalump.”

He smiled then, broadly, widely, and came back to her. He ran a hand over her hair, cupped her cheek. “You’re beautiful. Tell me there’s no one else.”

She rolled her eyes. “There’s no one else.”

“Then why not me? Maya, I can give you everything.”

“I don’t want everything.” She bit her lip, sighed heavily. “I want to live here, not in Tulsa or D.C. or wherever you’ll end up if you win this thing.”

“You’ll be able to do that. I promise.”

“Yes, I imagine I will.” But where would *he* be? She didn’t voice the question. “I don’t want my kids getting their hearts broken, Caleb. I don’t want them giving their whole hearts to a father who’s going to walk out on them and leave them bleeding. I can’t do that to my babies.”

His eyes widened, and they seemed wounded, way down deep. “That’s what your father did to you, didn’t he, Maya?”

She closed her eyes, nodded. “I really did love him. And Mom...God, she still feels some kind of misplaced loyalty to the man. But he was cheating on her, cheating on all of us, and it hurt me, Caleb. It tore my mother apart, and it broke my heart. He was never around when we needed him, and we never knew why until he was dead and gone.” She lifted her eyes to his, knowing they were tearing up again. “I know it almost killed my mother. But she was a strong woman. I was just a little girl, and I can’t even begin to tell you how the truth ravaged my whole world. Everything I knew, believed, had been a lie. Now I’m the mother. And I’m strong, and I can take

anything this world can dish out. But I won't subject my kids to that kind of heartache, Caleb. I won't let you hurt my children the way my father hurt me."

He stood there for a moment. Then he sank to the floor again, just sitting down in front of her chair. He drew a deep breath and sighed heavily. "I've been meaning to explain some things to you. So much has happened that it just keeps getting pushed aside, but I can see now that it's important."

He looked up at her. "When I came out here that night last spring, I was running away from who and what I was. I told you that but I didn't explain it to you. Not really. I was running from what was expected of me. When I saw you in the bar that night all I could think was whether a woman like you would give a guy like me a second look—without the name, without the legacy. And then...you didn't recognize me. You didn't know who I was. And you...you liked me anyway."

She tilted her head to one side, studying him, seeing sincerity in his eyes. "Yeah, well...what's not to like?"

"I'd never had that before, Maya. Everyone in my life wanted something from me. No one just wanted me...for me. And I needed that so badly that night. So I didn't tell you my real name. It was stupid, and I've regretted it ever since."

She lowered her head. "And yet...you left that night. You said you'd stay...and then you left."

"Just like your father did," he said softly. He lifted a hand to her cheek, and she closed her eyes at his touch. "I got a call that night. My father had a stroke."

Her eyes flew open, met his, saw the truth there.

"You can check it out. Hospital records—hell there was even a piece in the paper about it. I rushed home...and I decided to stop running from my destiny and live it. I didn't contact you again...because I was afraid of what you'd think of me. Running out on you, lying about who I was. I figured I'd already blown any chance I might have had with you. I figured you were better off without me, anyway."

She sighed, shook her head. “You’re such an idiot, you know that?” But she said it softly. “If only you’d called.”

“I know. I know. I screwed it up...badly. But there was something between us that night. I know there was.” He put a hand gently on her belly. “I think...there’s something between us now. Something more than just the babies. And I think we owe it to them, and to each other, to find out what.”

“Finding out what is a far cry from getting married, Caleb.”

He nodded. “I know. But...marriage is just the legal part of this. The paperwork part of it. It’s got nothing to do with what’s really happening here.”

She averted her eyes, felt her cheeks heat all the same as she asked, “Then... you’re talking about a... a marriage in name only. Just for the sake of the babies.”

“No,” he said. “Not necessarily. Unless...that’s what you want.”

She couldn’t look at him, couldn’t answer him.

“Listen, let’s do this. Let’s get married, officially, on paper, for the record. For the kids and the press and the public. But between you and me, Maya...let’s just take this one day at a time. See where it leads.” He took both her hands in his. “I can promise you this, Maya. I’d walk through fire before I’d hurt these babies. I swear it on my mother’s grave.”

A tear finally fell onto her cheek and rolled slowly down. She wanted to believe him more than she had ever wanted anything. But she was so afraid he would let her down. All the same, she knew his solution made perfect sense. “Okay, then,” she said. “Okay.”

“Yes!” someone shouted.

Maya and Caleb both turned their heads sharply. The door was opened just a crack, and Selene smiled sheepishly at them and, backing away, pulled it closed.

A second later it burst open again, but this time it was Bobby, in his extremely expensive suit, who appeared, smiling

and rubbing his hands together. Maya could almost see his mind clicking away behind his eyes like some high-tech piece of equipment.

“It’s agreed, then?” he asked. “That’s great. Listen, neither of you talks to the press. Not yet. We’ll go the righteously indignant route for today. Of course, I’ll arrange a couple of leaks. Get people wondering. Then we’ll grant some lucky reporter an exclusive. Meanwhile, we need to get our story in place. So...” He paused there, probably because Caleb was frowning at him, and finally Bobby glanced at Maya. “I’m sorry. Um...congratulations, Ms. Brand. I don’t mean to come on like a steamroller here.”

She wasn’t sure what he meant to come on like, but she was thinking more bulldozer than steamroller. “I’d just as soon leave the plotting to the two of you, if that’s okay,” she said. “Maybe you could just fill me in later?”

Getting to his feet, Caleb nodded and gave her a nervous, encouraging smile. “We’ll handle everything. Just don’t worry. It’s not good for the babies.”

She nodded, and hurried—as much as a woman her size and shape could hurry—out of the room. Her sisters and her mother were waiting in the dining room, all of them on their feet, all of them grinning ear to ear, and only her mother’s eyes shadowed by a hint of worry.

“I guess you already know the big news,” she said.

Vidalia came forward then, pulled her close and hugged her tight. “My baby. Are you sure this is what you want to do, hon?”

Forcing a brave expression, she pulled away just enough to look her mother in the eye. “I think it’s...I think it’s the right thing, Mom.” And then she waited for the reassurance she needed to hear right then.

“No you don’t, girl,” her mother said. “You’re scared to death. But, honey, I think you’re doing the right thing. I do, Maya. I honestly do.”

“Oh, yes, of course you are!” Selene chimed in, coming closer. “You wait and see. It might not seem perfect right now, but...oh, it will be.”

“It better be,” Mel said, eyeing the closed family room door. “He hurts you or those babies, and I’ll personally kick him in the—”

“Melusine!”

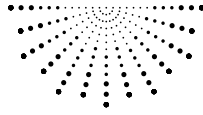
Mel frowned at her mother, then sent Maya a wink. “But don’t worry. I think he might be an okay guy.”

“I think this is the most romantic thing in the world!” Kara said, wiping at her eyes.

“There’s nothing romantic about it, Kara. We’re doing what’s best for the babies. That’s all.”

“Landsakes,” Vidalia said, slapping her hand to her forehead. “Do you have any idea how much there is to be done? Why, there’s the dress, the church, flowers and food—and here we are standing around! Do we even have time for invitations? These babies could come at any moment!”

CHAPTER TWELVE



Her mother, her sisters and Bobby seemed to have bought every newspaper in print the next morning. It was the day before Christmas Eve. A time when she should be bustling around in excited holiday preparations. Not worrying about the press. At first Maya was almost afraid to look at the newspapers scattered across the table. The ones she'd seen the day before had been horrible. Mean-spirited, and filled with attacks on her character and personal life. Some went so far as to suggest she'd deliberately sought Caleb out and gotten pregnant with his child, all as a means to get her hands on the coveted Montgomery fortune.

Hesitantly she picked up one paper, glancing at the headline.

More Than Meets the Eye?

Her gaze skimmed to the lines someone had highlighted.

“Sources close to Montgomery suggest there is far more to this story than meets the eye, and that it is, in fact, more a tale of star-crossed lovers than a political scandal.”

Frowning, she set that paper aside and glanced at the one beneath it, which also had lines highlighted in yellow.

“The Reverend Jackson of the Big Falls Christian Church, claims that despite what the press has had to say about Miss Brand, her character is beyond reproach. In fact, all the residents of the small town seem to have positive opinions about Maya Brand. Far from the party girl some sources have depicted, residents claim she has rarely even been seen in the

company of a man, much less dated one. She goes to church every Sunday and is good to her mother and sisters. Doesn't drink, doesn't smoke, doesn't swear. So what is the real story here? At the moment, Montgomery remains stoically silent on the issue, refusing any comment at all."

She set the paper down atop the rest of the stack on the kitchen table when she heard the now familiar pattern of Caleb's footsteps. Heavy steps, trying hard to be light. Measured, but not hesitant. Pausing, always, when he got a certain distance from her. She wondered about that.

"Morning," he said softly.

She looked up. He was whiskery this morning. His hair was tousled, his eyes sleepy. He'd been up half the night plotting with Bobby and the two lawyers her mother insisted on calling Oompah and Loompah. Not to their faces, of course. The lawyers and Bobby had taken up residence at the boarding house. Caleb had spent the night here, in Edie's old room.

"Morning," she replied. Then she held up her coffee mug. "You want some?"

"I'd love some, thanks." He took her mug, took a sip, licked his lips and handed it back to her with a smile that told her he knew full well that wasn't what she'd meant. "That's so good I think I'll get a cup for myself."

"That was the whole idea," she said.

He crossed the room, poured his mug full, sipped again and said, "Caffeinated?"

She turned to look at him. "Half. I swear it won't hurt the babies. But I might have collapsed without it."

He frowned at her. "Not sleeping well?"

"No."

He lowered his head fast. "It's all this stress. I knew it would be bad for you—"

"It's only partly because of the stress, Caleb. Mostly, it's these kids of yours, wriggling around. I swear they're line-

dancing in there.”

Smiling at her, Caleb returned to the table, set his mug down and moved behind her chair. “It won’t be much longer, Maya.” His hands closed on her shoulders, squeezed, pulled, released. “Lean forward, hm?”

She sighed deeply and, folding her arms on the table, laid her head on them. “You don’t have to do that,” she said, and didn’t mean a damn word of it.

He rubbed between her shoulder blades, then down her spine, and finally made small, delicious circles right at the small of her back where it seemed all the tension of the past eight and a half months was centered.

“Oooh, yesss,” she moaned very softly.

His hands stilled, but only for a moment. Then he went right back to rubbing again. “We, um...we’ve got an interview scheduled with Dirk Atwater, today at noon. He’s with the Oklahoma Times. They’re putting out an evening edition, and we’re the lead story.”

She lifted her head a little. “Do I have to be there? I mean, you’re the celebrity here. Can’t you do the interview?”

He stopped rubbing. “I can. Sure I can, if you want.”

“Keep rubbing.”

She almost heard him smile, but he started massaging her again.

“It would be better if I was there, though, wouldn’t it?” she asked.

“It’ll be fine either way.”

“Is that what Bobby would tell me if I asked him?”

He hesitated. His hands stopped moving on her back. So she sat up and turned to look over her shoulder at him. “You don’t have to protect me, you know. If it’s better for me to be there, I can be there. It’s not my dream come true, but it won’t kill me, either.”

“I just...don’t want you doing anything you’d rather not be doing right now.”

She smiled. “Tell me that when I’m in labor. Speaking of which—I’ll make a deal with you.”

His brows went up. “A deal?”

“Yes. I made a little appointment of my own for us today. You come to mine, and I’ll come to yours. Okay?”

He narrowed his eyes on her. “Do I dare to ask what I’m agreeing to here?”

“You said you wanted to be in the delivery room, didn’t you?”

Very slowly, he nodded.

“Well, then you should come with me today.”



He didn’t realize what he was agreeing to. And he didn’t regret it, exactly, he just hadn’t been prepared. He drove. And he pretended not to notice the number of vehicles that fell in behind the rather weather-beaten van as he left the Brand family home behind.

“We’re going to have to get a new van,” he commented.

She swung her head toward him. “What’s wrong with this one?”

“Nothing!” he answered quickly, because she sounded slightly defensive. “I mean, it’s just odd, the wife-to-be of a multimillionaire, driving around in...uh...an older... vehicle.”

She pursed her lips, crossed her arms over her belly. “I worked hard for this van. It’s a nice van.”

“I know you did, and I agree. It’s a very nice van.”

She pouted a little, then sighed. “I suppose a newer one would be safer. For the babies, I mean.”

“Oh, yeah. Lots safer. Side impact protection, built-in baby seats—you know, they say a lot of kids get hurt because their car seats aren’t fitted correctly for the kind of vehicle they’re in.”

She frowned at him. “Where did you hear that?”

“Read it. One of those parenting magazines I got from the clinic. See, the seats of various vehicles are shaped differently, so the baby seat that’s perfect for one car might be totally unsafe in another.”

“You actually read all those magazines you took home?” she asked him, her eyes curious.

“Sure I did. Research. I bought about a dozen books in town, too.”

He glanced at her as he pulled to a stop at a red light, the only red light in town. She was smiling. “I’m really glad you believe in doing your homework, Caleb.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s what we’re doing now. Turn right here. It’s at the house around the corner.”

“We’re going to someone’s house?”

“Uh-huh. Nancy Kelly. She’s the nurse who gave the natural childbirth classes I attended. I called her, and she agreed to give us a quick refresher course, since you missed the first round.”

He felt his eyes widen. “Childbirth...classes?”

“You want to be in the delivery room, don’t you?”

He nodded mutely.

“You want to know what to do while you’re in there, don’t you?”

“I kind of thought being there would be the extent of my... duties.”

“You thought wrong, then.”

She said it with such a sweet smile that he almost stopped being nervous.

Fifteen minutes later, though, the nervousness was back and then some. He was sitting on some woman's living room floor, legs stretched out in front of him, with Maya reclining in between them.

"Come on, Maya," Nurse Nancy said with a scowl. "Lean back and relax. You know how this is done."

"It was a hell of a lot different with Mom as my partner," Maya said, but she did lean back.

She reclined against Caleb's chest, and her hair was under his chin, and the scent of it reached up to tickle his nose and his memory. It smelled the same as it had that night, all those months ago. But wait a minute, he wasn't supposed to be thinking thoughts like that. Certainly not at a time like this.

"Put your hands on her belly, Caleb. No, no, like this." Nurse Nancy bent to take his hands and place them strategically on the lower part of Maya's swollen middle.

Then she paused and looked up. "My goodness, Maya, the babies certainly are riding low today."

"I thought something felt different. Does that mean anything?"

Nancy smiled. "It might mean you're getting ready to deliver."

"You think?" she asked, eyes widening.

"Well, if I were a betting woman," Nancy said, "I'd lay odds you'll go within forty-eight hours." She shrugged. "Of course, I could be wrong."

Maya looked up at Caleb, her eyes shining with a combination of nerves and excitement. Nancy replaced her hands on Caleb's, moved them slowly. "Now rub very gently, in soft, slow circles. It's going to soothe her through the contractions. See?"

He moved his hands over her. It was intimate. Almost sensual. When he glanced down at Maya, he saw that she had

closed her eyes. This was the most relaxed he'd seen her since he'd been back here. "Am I doing it right?" he asked softly.

Her lips curved into a smile. "You're a whole lot better at this than Mom was."

"Yeah?"

"You're not doing the breathing, Maya."

"I'll hyperventilate and pass out."

"Then you're in the perfect place for it," Nancy said. "Now breathe. Hee hee hee, who. Come on."

"Hee-hee-hee-who," she breathed, only she managed to do it to the tune of Beethoven's Fifth, and Caleb burst out laughing.

"Oh, sure, encourage her!" Nancy said in exasperation.

Maya opened her eyes to grin up at him, her head moving up and down with his laughter. He looked back at her, and for just a moment their eyes locked. He stopped laughing. Her smile faded. And something inside her reached out to touch something inside him. At least, that was what it felt like.

"Now, Caleb," Nancy said, "I'm going to explain to you what happens when we get to the actual pushing."

He almost grimaced in pain at that thought.

Maya said, "Don't worry. As my mamma used to say before a spanking, 'Darlin', this is gonna hurt me a whole lot more than it's gonna hurt you.'"

"I wish it wasn't."

"My mamma also used to say to stop whining and be a Brand. Don't you worry, Caleb. I'll be fine."

He hated the black fear that crept up inside him when he thought of the ordeal ahead. His mother had died, hemorrhaged to death with the doctors right there, helpless to save her no matter how they tried. And one of her children stillborn. The day of his birth had been a black day of despair and grief, rather than one of joy and celebration. He damn well didn't want the Montgomery family curse visiting itself on this

woman...on these babies. But he didn't know what to do about it.

He noticed the nurse looking at him oddly, tried to shake the dread out of his expression, and forced a smile as he continued with his lesson in how to coach the woman who would be his wife through labor and delivery.

But later, when they'd finished and Maya had gone to visit the rest room before they left for home, the woman handed him a pamphlet. "Everything we've been over is on here. So you can review things before the big day."

"Great, I was beginning to regret not taking notes."

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "So what is it you're worried about Mr. Montgomery?"

"Caleb. Please, after the things we've discussed today, I think we ought to at least be on a first-name basis."

She lifted her brows, gave a nod and waited. "You looked scared to death once or twice."

He nodded, licked his lips and glanced nervously in the direction Maya had gone. Not seeing her, he looked back at Nancy again. "I was a twin. My mother hemorrhaged—they couldn't save her."

"I'm sorry."

He held up a hand. "My twin brother was stillborn."

"I see," she said. "But, Caleb, that doesn't mean—"

"That's not all of it. My father was a twin, as well, and his brother didn't make it, either." He'd let his gaze sink slowly as he spoke, but now he lifted it again to see if there was any reaction in her eyes.

There wasn't. She was a nurse, though, and trained to hide her emotions from frightened patients, he told himself.

"Listen to me, Caleb. In the years since you were born there have been more advances in neonatal care than you can even imagine. We have babies born under three pounds today. Babies so tiny I've held them right in the palm of my hand."

She cupped her hand to demonstrate. “Babies who did just fine. Now Maya’s had ultrasound exams done. We already know that both babies are of good, solid size, and that they’re healthy. Maya’s healthy, too. And you’ve got to take her family history into account as well as your own. Her mother gave birth five times—the first two when she was only in her teens. And within a few hours, she was on her feet telling the other new moms in the ward to stop their whining.”

He smiled at that. He couldn’t help it, it was such an accurate visual he was getting of Vidalia Brand.

“Maya’s strong. The babies are strong. There’s no reason to think they won’t be just fine.” She looked at him again, smiled. “But if it will make you feel any better, I’ll give Maya’s doctor a call and bring her up to speed on your family history. Okay?”

He nodded. “That’s good. I wanted to do it myself, but I didn’t want Maya to know any of this.”

Nancy nodded. “That’s for the best. No sense getting her as terrified as you are.”

“That’s what I thought, too.”

She nodded. “I’ll keep it to myself—at least until after your kids are born safe and sound.”

“Thanks. You’re a good woman, Nurse Nancy.”

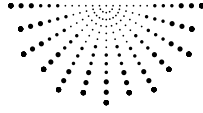
She made a face, rolled her eyes. “Gee, that’s the first time I’ve been called that.” Her tone was sarcastic but teasing. Reaching up, she tucked the pamphlet into Caleb’s shirt pocket. “See you in the delivery room, Dad,” she said with a wink.

His stomach clenched all over again. “Bring smelling salts in case I pass out, all right?”

“Oh, you wouldn’t be the first,” she assured him.

For some reason, that didn’t make him feel any better.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Maya sat beside Caleb in the dining room, which looked as if it had been polished up for a royal visit. A photographer toyed with his camera at the far end of the table. Bobby sat in a chair, tucked away in the corner, lurking in the shadows like a happy frog who would snap into action if a fly happened by. And he didn't seem the least bit concerned. He seemed as if he knew that everyone would fall easily into line with his plan and be better off for it in the long run. The guy had spunk.

She didn't particularly like spunk today, feeling almost completely devoid of the stuff herself. Although the time she'd spent with Caleb at Nancy's house had been...it had been bliss. That was not a good thing, she reminded herself. She couldn't forget that this was a game. A political game. She would be Caleb Montgomery's wife because that was the role she needed to play for the good of all concerned. It didn't mean anything, and she couldn't let herself slip into believing that it did.

Everyone else seemed to be lying low somewhere. Caleb's lawyers, the Levitz brothers, were apparently still out at the boarding house. Vidalia and the others had gone out to order a wedding cake. The house was empty, except for the five of them. Dirk Atwater, the well-known reporter, was adding cream to his coffee in the kitchen, while his photographer frowned at the overhead light, and changed his camera lens.

"If you get confused, just follow my lead, okay?" Caleb said in a low voice, leaning close, squeezing her hand.

She nodded. But she felt sick with nerves.

“And remember, the closer we stick to the truth, the better.”

“Right.”

“If you get confused about any details involving the wedding or arrangements, just make them up.”

“I’m no good at making things up on short notice, Caleb,” she said quickly.

“Well...then don’t make it up. Fall back on what you dreamed about as a girl. Okay? Every young girl dreams about her wedding day and what her married life will be like, doesn’t she?”

“Well...yes, sure, but—”

“Then use that. You’ll be fine, I promise.”

She nodded again. The reporter came in from the kitchen with his coffee, sandy blond hair styled with some kind of miracle mousse that made it look silky soft but prevented it from moving even a fraction of an inch out of place. His eyes were too blue to be real. Colored contacts, she thought. He was fairly well known in Oklahoma, did TV spots all the time in addition to his print columns. He looked like he should be an actor or a model.

He sat down with his coffee, looked from one of them to the other. “Are we ready?”

Caleb glanced at her, brows raised. She smiled and gave him a nod. “As ready as we’ll ever be, Dirk. But before we begin, I do want to make one thing clear. Maya is very close to her due date. If anything said here seems to me to be upsetting her in any way, the interview is over.”

The reporter’s brow quirked just a bit, but he nodded. “Fair enough.” He took a small tape recorder from his jacket pocket, set it on the table, clicked it on. “But, uh...I understood the baby wasn’t due for a couple of weeks yet.”

“Well, here’s where you get the first of several scoops on your competitors,” Caleb said, his gaze brushing over Maya

before returning to the reporter. “We’re having twins.”

Dirk Atwater’s eyes widened, then he grinned. “Twins!”

“Yeah. They run in my family.”

“You never told me that,” Maya said, sending Caleb a frown.

His smile faded, and he licked his lips. The reporter’s eyes sharpened, and he watched every move they made so closely that Maya felt as if she was under a microscope. “I’ve been meaning to,” Caleb said softly. “We’ve been so busy, with so much going on, there’s barely been any time.”

She nodded in agreement with that.

“At any rate,” Caleb went on, “twins normally come early, and Maya’s doctor expects them to make their entrance into the world any day now.”

“Holiday babies,” Dirk Atwater said, scribbling a note. Then he sat back in his seat. “You won’t mind my making the observation that you two seem...close. Far from the relationship that’s been depicted between you by some of the tabloids.”

Maya frowned. “I don’t know how those people could even pretend to know anything about Caleb and me. They’ve never even spoken to us.”

“That’s why we invited you here today, Dirk. We want to set the record straight,” Caleb put in.

“For the sake of your senate campaign?” Dirk asked.

Caleb frowned. “At this point, I don’t even know whether there will be a campaign.” The reporter looked skeptical. Caleb sighed. “Right. I don’t expect you to believe that. But for now, let’s keep this on the subject all right?”

“All right. Fine. This young woman is carrying your children, Mr. Montgomery. What do you intend to do about that?”

Caleb smiled then, not at the reporter, but at her. “I intend to marry her, just as soon as we can make arrangements.”

The reporter blinked in surprise, looking from one of them to the other. “You’re...getting married?”

Maya nodded at him. “On Christmas Eve, as a matter of fact.”

Dirk Atwater glanced at his photographer, who shrugged at him. Then he looked back at Maya and Caleb again. “That’s... tomorrow.” And Maya nodded. “So... let me get clear on this,” Atwater said. “You’re getting married just to make things legal...to, uh, legitimize the babies, correct? Then, Caleb, you’ll head back to the mansion in Tulsa, while you, Ms. Brand, will continue on just as before.”

Caleb started to speak, but Dirk held up a hand. “If you don’t mind, sir, I’d like to hear Ms. Brand answer this one.” Caleb nodded, and Dirk focused on Maya. “So tell me, Ms. Brand. What happens after the wedding?”

Every eye turned on her. She fumbled, searched her mind, but damned if she knew what to say. She and Caleb hadn’t talked about what would happen after the wedding. Not in any detail. But then she recalled what Caleb had told her—fall back on her dreams if she got confused. And that should be easy enough. Lord knew she’d nurtured those dreams for long enough that she knew them by heart.

She smiled at Dirk, got to her feet, belly first, and managed to accomplish the task even before Caleb leapt to his feet to help her. She walked to the window in the rear of the room, parted the curtain. “Come here, Mr. Atwater.” He did. And she pointed. “See that level spot, at the top of the hill, right back there?”

Dirk nodded.

“That’s the piece of this property that belongs to me. It’s where we’ll build our home. A big cabin, made of pine logs, with a huge cobblestone fireplace, and knotty pine window boxes, where I’ll grow pansies and geraniums. There will be a big room in the back for all my crafts and sewing. I’ll give lessons in my spare time. No one in this town is as good at crafting as I am.” She smiled, felt her cheeks heat just a little, but it was the truth.

“I didn’t know that,” Atwater said. And he looked around the room, taking in the decor—the wilderness scene handpainted on the blade of an old crosscut saw, hanging over the picture window. The embroidered samplers, the needlepoint table scarves. He glanced at her again, brows raised. “These are all yours?”

She nodded.

“You ought to see the baby quilts,” Caleb put in, and she thought she heard pride in his voice but reminded herself he was playing a part. For the reporter.

“There’s going to be a huge front porch on the cabin,” she told Atwater. “And a fenced yard in back, so the kids can’t wander too close to the woods. In the summertime, that hillside is just alive with wildflowers and song-birds...and the deer come out at twilight to nibble the tender grasses.” She sighed wistfully, visualizing it all just the way she’d always done. “And we’ll have a dog. A big, oversized, long-eared, shaggy mutt of a dog.”

She was smiling broadly as she let the curtain fall and turned to glance back at the table, at Caleb. He was sitting there very still and very quiet, his face expressionless, and she felt her smile slowly die. Maybe she’d shocked him. Maybe her dreams didn’t fit in with his plans at all.

“So this is for real, this marriage of yours? It’s not just for appearance’s sake?” Dirk Atwater turned away from the window to address Caleb.

Caleb stared at Maya, and she stared back.

Bobby got up and came over to the table. “Look at the two of them,” he said to Atwater. “Does that look to you like it’s for real?” The cameraman fired off a series of shots.

Maya felt her stomach clench and quickly averted her eyes.

But there was no stopping Bobby once he got started. “Over eight months ago, these two met by chance. Or maybe it was fate. The middle of a rainstorm, a flat tire, a man looking

to get warm and dry walks into a charming little roadhouse and meets the girl of his dreams. It was love at first sight.”

And as he spoke, Caleb never took his eyes off Maya. She wanted to look away, but found she couldn't.

“Through a series of misunderstandings and bad decisions,” Bobby went on, “they fell out of touch. Ms. Brand didn't want to be labeled a gold digger—a fear that was justified, if the tabloids are any indication. And Mr. Montgomery didn't even know about the babies. Now these two have managed to get past all of that and put things together again. Not for the sake of the press, Mr. Atwater. They've done this in spite of the press. In spite of public opinion. In spite of irresponsible journalists who see fit to drag Miss Brand's family and her character through the mud to sell papers. In spite of the whole damned world, Mr. Atwater, these two star-crossed lovers have found their way back to each other. This is not a political scandal. This is a love story, Atwater. A Christmas story. A miracle.”

Maya blinked back her senseless tears and wondered if Bobby was about to burst into a chorus of the “Star Spangled Banner” or “Silent Night.” She thought Dirk Atwater might very well shed a tear of his own at any moment.

But then he pursed his lips, met her eyes and said, “So then there won't be any prenuptial agreement?”

Bobby's jaw dropped, and Caleb said, “Don't you think that's getting a bit too personal, Atwater? That's over the line.”

Maya held up a hand. “Actually, I'm insisting on one.” She sent a gentle smile Caleb's way. She'd been watching Bobby, and she thought she got it now. This art of “spinning.” “I know you're against it, Caleb,” she said, though she had no idea if he was or not. In fact, she rather thought he would be nuts not to ask for a prenu. “I just see no other way to prove to the world that all of this isn't an elaborate conspiracy to get my hands on your family's money.”

“You don't need to prove anything to anyone, Maya,” Caleb told her.

She sighed, nodded, but from the corner of her eye she saw Bobby's slight nod of approval. Good. She'd done her job, and maybe she ought to quit while she was ahead. "I'm a little tired," she said, rubbing the small of her back.

Caleb was beside her in a flash, arms sliding easily around her as he eased her back to her chair. The camera went off. "Do you need anything? A drink? Something to eat?"

Bobby cleared his throat. "I think this is going to have to conclude the interview. Dirk, you have the exclusive on the impending marriage and the twins until tomorrow morning. Then we'll issue a press release. That's all."

Atwater clicked off the tape recorder, nodded once and gathered up his notebook. "Thank you both," he said. "I appreciate this, and I think you'll see that when my story runs tonight." He shook Caleb's hand. Gave Maya a gentle smile. "You take care, Ms. Brand."

The photographer snapped another shot and then they left.

Maya blew air through her lips and let her head fall backward in the chair. "God, I'm glad that's over."

"Oh, come on, don't tell me that was tough on you," Bobby chirped, smiling. "You sailed through it like a pro! Hell, where did you get all that stuff about the log cabin and the dog and the pansies? I couldn't have made that stuff up if I'd tried!"

She brought her head level again, saw Caleb searching her eyes. He said, "You fell back on your dreams, didn't you, Maya?"

She shrugged. "Maybe I'm just a good liar."

"I don't think so."

Looking away, she said, "So do you think he bought it?"

"We'll know in a few hours, when the evening edition hits the streets," Bobby said. "You two ought to go into town between now and then. Be seen together. Pick out some baby clothes or something. Great photo op, with all the press in Big Falls."

Maya tried not to grimace at the thought.

Caleb said, “No. I think maybe a quiet, healthy meal and then a long nap would be a better choice. Don’t you, Maya?”

“Sounds like heaven to me,” she said. “You must be reading my mind.”

“I wish. Come on, let’s get you someplace more comfy than this hard chair. Sofa or bed?”

“The easy chair will be sufficient. I can’t be dozing with a wedding to plan.”

Caleb brushed a lock of hair off her forehead. “Hey, trust your mom and sisters and Bobby and me to take care of all that, will you? You need your rest. You’ve got a pair of babies to deliver, you know.”

She smiled a little nervously. “I want it simple, Caleb. No doves or violins or...or goose liver.”

He made a silly pout. “Bobby, call the Pope and tell him we won’t need him to perform the ceremony after all, will you?”

“Very funny,” she said. But she saw the odd, speculative look Bobby sent them.

Caleb was already helping her to her feet, walking her into the living room and lowering her to the sofa. He tucked a stack of pillows behind her before ordering her to lie back, and then he stuck a few more under her feet. “I read that elevating the feet can ease the strain on the back.” Even as he said it, he pulled off her shoes, let them thud to the floor.

“When you have time to do all this reading is beyond me,” she muttered, deciding to give in to the pampering. She was achy and tired, and it felt good to be babied. That tiny voice of doubt whispered at her not to get too used to it, but she brushed it aside.

“Wait till you hear what I’ve learned about potty training.” Caleb winked at her. And she thought that it wouldn’t be so bad to live with this guy. At least...if that was what he intended.

She wondered if it was. Wished it could be. Hated herself for daring to wish such a big wish.

She fell asleep on the sofa in spite of her determination not to, and the nap was easily a couple of hours long. But the commotion in the kitchen woke her up at once. The deep booming voice belonged to some man who had no qualms about speaking at full volume. “Are you out of your mind! What are you thinking?”

“Hey, just a goddamn minute, mister fancy-suit! Who in all hades do you think you are, storming into my kitchen, yellin’ like a lunatic, anyway!” Vidalia’s tone was just as loud and twice as mean.

Maya started to get to her feet just as Kara reached the foot of the stairs. “What’s going on out there?” Kara asked.

“Damned if I know,” Maya said. “Help me!” She held out a hand. Kara took it and pulled her to her feet. The yelling was still going on when the two of them walked into the kitchen. A man in a calf-length black wool coat stood just inside the door, having apparently just come in from outside. He leaned on a gleaming brass-handled walking stick. He had a face like a mountain of solid granite, after it had been blasted through to make room for a road to pass. Chiseled and lined and hard... but only on one side. The other side seemed oddly lax. The man towered a good six feet tall, even though he was leaning over just slightly, weight on the walking stick. He was waving a newspaper around in his other hand and saying, “Get out of my way, woman! This doesn’t concern you!”

Vidalia was in his face, her forefinger poking him repeatedly in the chest to emphasize her words, “It’s my house, mister, and you’d better believe anything in it concerns me!”

Behind her, Caleb shrugged. “You gotta admit, she has a point, Dad.”

Maya gasped, and the three of them turned around, spotting her there. Caleb quickly took Kara’s spot beside her, his arm sliding protectively around her shoulders, his gaze doing a quick scan of her face. One she was getting used to.

He was always looking at her like that, as if checking to be sure she was okay. As if he could see in her eyes if she wasn't.

"Maya, I'd like you to meet my father, Cain Caleb Montgomery the Second." She looked from Caleb to the older man, who was scowling hard. "Dad, this is Maya. Soon to be your daughter-in-law and the mother of your first grandchildren."

"Over my dead body," the old man growled.

Vidalia leaned up into his face. "That can be arranged."

He glared at her, one eye narrowing slightly more than the other.

"Mom, please," Maya said, moving out of Caleb's embrace to place a calming hand on her mother's shoulder. Vidalia moved aside at Maya's urging, and Maya stood before her future father-in-law. A more intimidating presence she couldn't even begin to imagine. Even with the obvious damage the stroke had dealt him, he was an imposing man. But she lifted her chin and looked him in the eye. "I understand you being upset about this, Mr. Montgomery. But I promise you, I would never do anything to hurt your son or your family."

His brows went up. "I'm not sure if you're a good actress, woman, or if you're as clueless as you pretend to be, but trust me, the harm has already been done. And continues to be done."

"Father—" Caleb began, a deep threatening tone in his voice.

"No, Caleb, let him speak. Please. I want to hear how he thinks I've harmed your family."

"Our reputation! Our line! By God, girl, we can't have a girl of your background muddying up our family tree!" He shook the newspaper again. "Illegitimate, they say! Father was a bigamist, for landsakes! Ties to organized crime. Mother who—"

"Mother who *what*?" Vidalia asked, gripping the front of his shirt in her fists.

He stopped talking, looked down at the woman. “You? You’re the saloon-owning mother?”

“You’re damn straight I am, mister, and I’m about to forget my manners and toss your sorry carcass out into the nearest briar patch.”

He blinked down at her, his eyes wide.

“Mom,” Maya said, “at least this one didn’t call you a barmaid.” Not that she expected it to help.

“Dad,” Caleb said firmly, “your mother was a waitress at a truck stop when your father met her. Or have you forgotten that?”

“My father wasn’t running for the U.S. Senate when he met her.”

“That’s totally irrelevant.”

“That’s the only thing that is relevant! Don’t you know what this girl’s background is going to do to your campaign, son? And this,” glancing down at the newspaper he tossed it onto the table, “this fairy tale Bobby’s trying to sell the public—it’s never going to work. Voters don’t care about sappy stories, they care about their bank accounts.” He shook his head slowly, then closed his eyes and pressed a hand to them.

Vidalia gripped his arm. “Sit down, you foolish old windbag, before you fall down.” She guided him to a chair. “Kara, get some of Selene’s calmin’ tea brewing. That with the chamomile and valerian root.” As Kara shot into action, Vidalia eyed the older man. “You had a stroke last spring, didn’t you?”

He looked up, defensively. “I’m completely recovered from that.”

“Didn’t learn anything from it, though, did you?”

Maya pulled out a chair and sat down beside the old man. Caleb sat beside her and turned the newspaper around so he could examine the story. Maya watched him reading it over and saw his lips pull into a smile. Then he pushed it toward her. “It’s good,” he told her. “It’s very good.”

“Good? Bah, it’s fiction! Any fool can see through that sorry excuse for a cover story,” his father said.

Kara put a teacup down in front of the older man, and then Selene appeared with a big amethyst in one hand and a bowl of mixed herbs in the other. “I heard yelling. What’s up?” She set the amethyst in the middle of the table. The glittering purple stone winked and glimmered.

“My father arrived,” Caleb said. “You can call him Cain. Dad, this is Selene, Maya’s sister, the one you haven’t insulted yet tonight. The two you have are Kara, her other sister, and Vidalia, her mother.”

He lifted his brows. “Vidalia? Like the onion?” He stopped short of sniffing in derision.

“That’s right. They named me that because I’m so good at making arrogant jackass men cry like babies.”

“Easy, Mom,” Selene called from the range, where she was fiddling around. “The negative vibes are going to be cleared out of this room in just a few seconds.” She poured the remaining water from the tea kettle into a saucepan, lit the burner underneath it and stirred it slowly while sprinkling her herbs into the water.

“What the hell is this? You have some kind of witch doctor in the family, too?”

“Careful, or she’ll turn you into a toad,” Caleb told his father. “Drink your tea.”

His father sipped. “Bad enough about the stripper in the family! Now we have voodoo!” His brows went up, and he licked his lips; then he sipped some more of the tea.

“We do not have any strippers in this family, Mr. Montgomery,” Vidalia huffed.

“Actually, Maya’s sister is a highly successful model,” Caleb said.

His father grimaced but kept sipping his tea. “I don’t care if she’s an Oscar-award-winning actress,” he muttered. “This marriage can’t happen. I won’t let it happen.”

“You don’t have a choice in the matter, Father.”

“Son, don’t you see what’s going to happen here? You’ll lose your shot at the Senate.”

“I’d rather lose my shot at the Senate than lose my shot at being a father to these babies.”

His father’s head came up, and his eyes seemed frozen. “Babies? There are two?”

Maya saw the look Caleb sent his father. There was a message in it, one his father seemed to see and read. He said, “Yes, twins. It was in the article.”

The old man’s gaze slid toward Maya, then lower to her belly, and she could have sworn there was something new there. A hint of...could that be concern? Worry? At least it wasn’t blatant hostility.

“I got so wrought up I never finished reading the whole thing,” he said.

Steam was rolling off Selene’s brew now, and she was waving a hand at it as if to send it around the room. It gave off a pleasant, woodsy aroma. Then there was a tap on the door. Bobby came in, Mel right behind him. Both of them were smiling as they shouldered their way into the crowded kitchen.

Kara looked at them. “Where did you two meet up?”

“Just now in the driveway,” Mel quickly told her. She had a bag of groceries in her hands, which she handed off to Vidalia. “Bobby says he has good news.” She got out of the way, sniffing the air as she went to check out Selene’s concoction.

“I sure do. Dirk Atwater’s paper ran a telephone poll in the same issue as the story. Caleb, your numbers have gone through the roof since they last ran this same poll, two weeks ago. Then you were neck and neck with the other likely candidates. Now you’re leading them by more than thirty percent.”

Caleb’s brows rose. That was his only reaction. His father, on the other hand, looked stunned. “You’ve got to be kidding

me,” he said. “The voters are actually falling for this nonsense?”

“Voters have hearts, Cain,” Bobby told the older man. “I tried to tell you that years ago, but you never wanted to hear it.”

“Well the voters in this family have stomachs,” Vidalia said firmly. “And if I hope to feed them, I’m going to need the bunch of you to take your backsides out of my kitchen.”

Maya nodded and started to get to her feet, but Caleb put a hand on her shoulder and shook his head. “Stay put. Have some tea. Relax,” he told her. “I’m gonna take my father over to the boarding house, get him settled in. I think I, uh...need to have a talk with him. Get some things...straight.”

She nodded. “Don’t be hard on him, Caleb. He’s your father, no matter what.”

Caleb glanced at his father, who must have overheard that remark. Maya wondered if the man was still scowling at her but didn’t turn to look.

“Maya, we have all the arrangements in place. I don’t want you fussing or worrying about anything at all. All you have to do is wake up in the morning. We’re getting married at ten o’clock.”

She felt her brows shoot upward. “But...how did you pull everything together so fast?” She looked from Caleb to her mother and back again.

“Your mom can fill you in on the details. Okay?”

She nodded. “O-okay. I guess. Caleb, there’s so much I want to talk to you about before we...you know...do this thing.”

“I know.” He looked at her so intensely she could almost feel the touch of his eyes. “I know. I’ll come back early, I promise. We’ll have time to talk. All the time you want. Okay?”

She nodded. Then sucked in a breath of surprise when he leaned down and pressed a kiss to her mouth. It was quick,

brief, but not a peck. It was firm and moist. A kiss that... seemed to mean something. But what?

Then he was gone, Bobby and his father with him.

“See that?” Selene said, still wafting her steam with her hands. “Cleared away the negativity so well that it even chased the old grouch away!”

“He’s not as bad as he seems,” Maya said.

“No one could be as bad as he seems,” Vidalia said.

“Gee, what did I miss?” Mel asked.

Kara grinned. “It’s just as well you did miss it, Mel. Otherwise that old goat would have been carrying his walking stick in a new place.”

“Kara!” Vidalia scolded—or tried to, but it was ruined when the grin she tried to suppress broke through.

Everyone laughed. Then Maya said, “So my wedding is all planned?”

Vidalia smiled at her. “I’m under strict orders from that man of yours to get your approval on everything first. But I’m supposed to do that without giving you the slightest cause for stress or tension.” She shrugged. “Guess he’s never been around too many brides before if he thinks that’s possible.” She turned to pull her notebook from the top of the fridge and, flipping it open, sat down at the table. “It’s amazing what that man manages to do with a few phone calls. I’m telling you, hon, having all that money and clout is not a bad thing.”

Neither, Maya thought, was being so popular in the polls. For some reason, though, that news didn’t make her as happy as it should. Because it meant he would probably decide to run after all, even though he’d said repeatedly that he hadn’t made that decision yet. He would make it now. He would run, and he would win. And he would have to spend half his time, or maybe more, in Washington, D.C., and the other half in the state capital, or traveling around doing...political stuff. If she did get her dream house, she would be in it alone.

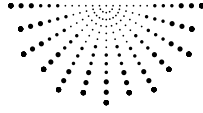
Well, she thought, a hand on her belly, not entirely alone. Just not with him. And for some reason that felt like the same thing.

Then again, he hadn't promised they would be together constantly, or even live together at all. That was one of the things they needed to talk about. Their living arrangements. Because she had no intention of moving away from her family. Especially when they might be all she and the kids had, if Caleb turned out to be the kind of man who would break his word, let her down. The kind of man who wouldn't be there when she really needed him.

More and more, she doubted Caleb was that kind of man at all.

If only she could be sure....

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



“*M*aybe...it can work after all.”

Cain Caleb Montgomery II spoke the words as if they were being forced from his lips. And he had a grimace on his face while he did it. Caleb had been sitting before the fire in the parlor of Ida-May Peabody’s boarding house, talking with his father for the better part of an hour, hearing all the same arguments and keeping his father’s teacup filled with tea steeped from the little packets Selene had handed him on his way out of the Brand house tonight. He didn’t like the gray tinge to his father’s skin. He didn’t like the dizzy spell the old man had had earlier. And he didn’t like it that his father refused to admit to feeling even slightly less than peak.

Now all those things faded to background worries as shock took precedence. He stared at his father, wondering if he’d heard him wrong. Maybe he’d fallen asleep and just dreamed it. “Did you just say you might have been wrong?”

His father glared at him. “Don’t expect to be hearing it again any time soon.”

He sipped the tea, his third cup, and for just a moment Caleb wondered what sorts of herbs Selene had put into it, and whether they were fully legal.

“That woman, the mother with the onion name...”

“Vidalia,” Caleb corrected.

“That’s right Vidalia. She’s tough. I gave her my worst and she didn’t even flinch. Most females would’ve been weeping.” He puckered his lips in thought, rubbed his chin. “I like that

about her. If your Maya has any of her mother's gumption, she might just make you a decent wife. She doesn't know how to dress or act, and that hair will have to go, but all that can be corrected. She seems bright enough to learn as she goes. I suppose she has all the raw material to be molded and shaped into—"

"I don't want her molded or shaped into anything, Father. I like the way she dresses, and I like the way she acts, and I'd fight any man who tried to get near her hair with a pair of scissors."

His father's brows went up, and he studied his son's face. "She'll never survive in our world as she is, son. She'll have to change, adapt to it."

Caleb looked away, because he didn't want to argue with his father. Not tonight. Not when that statement made so much sense, even if nothing else his father said tonight had. His world would be difficult for Maya. Maybe impossible for her.

But he wasn't even clear on things in his own mind just yet. No, there was no sense upsetting his father by arguing with him, especially when the old man wasn't feeling up to par.

"How...er...are the babies?" his father asked, his tone gruff.

For the second time tonight the old man had surprised him. Caleb got to his feet and walked to the fireplace, bent to toss a log onto the flames and stayed there, hunkered down as it began to burn. "The doctor says they're both fine and strong. No sign of any problems."

"You're worried, though."

Turning, he looked at his father over his shoulder. "Hell, yes, I'm worried. They're twins. Like I was...like you were." He felt too much showing in his eyes, so he jerked his head around, focused on the flames again.

He heard his father get up, heard his steps but didn't turn. A hot tear burned behind Caleb's eye, but he blinked against it. Then a hand fell on his shoulder. "I've been there, you know."

Caleb's brows came together. Stunned, he turned to look at his father.

"It's like a nightmare, where you can only watch what happens, but you can't move to stop it, or do a damn thing to help. You feel the dread right down deep in your gut, but you're paralyzed."

Blinking, Caleb said, "That's exactly what it feels like."

"I know." Lowering his head, shaking it, his father went on. "We knew there were problems with one of you long before the time for the birthing came, son. The doctors felt all along that one of the twins was not developing at a normal rate." He lowered his head. "It felt like a personal insult to me. Hell, man, I never failed at anything before! And when your mother didn't make it, either...Caleb, I was never the same. I felt responsible. If not me, then who? I was her husband. I was supposed to protect her, take care of her."

Caleb rose slowly. "So you blamed me for it."

Meeting his son's eyes, Cain nodded. "Maybe...maybe a part of me did, son. That's true. But that ended long, long ago. Since then it's just been...a spin."

"A spin?"

Cain nodded. "All my rubbish about the strong surviving, the weak falling by the wayside, sacrifice for the greater good. Hell it was how I dealt with the loss. By putting a spin on it. By pretending it was a sign of strength. Because if I could make myself believe that about you and the brother you never had, then maybe I could make it true about myself and my brother, as well." He clasped Caleb's shoulder hard. "But it's not true and never was. Your twin didn't survive because he didn't develop normally. As for my own, I'll probably never know. But that doesn't mean these twins of Maya's have to suffer the same fate, son. If they're both strong and healthy this late in the game, then chances are—"

"They're going to be fine. Both of them. They have to be."

His father drew a breath, sighed. "My great-grandmother had twins, and both survived. Did you know that?"

“No.”

They stood side by side now, both staring at the fire. “Maya, she’s strong. Healthy. Comes from good stock, if that harridan mother of hers is any indication,” Cain told his son.

Caleb nodded. “The woman gave birth five times without problems,” he said.

“That’s good. That bodes well.” Cain didn’t turn. He said, “Your mother used to quilt. Did I ever tell you that?”

Caleb looked at him in surprise.

“I read in that article that Maya does that sort of thing, too. Just thought you’d like to know it was something she had in common with your mother. She was talking about giving it up. Said it was too rustic a hobby for a woman in her position. She never did, though. Just kept it to herself.” Turning, he set his empty cup down. “Guess I’ll head up to bed now. Big day tomorrow, with the wedding and all.” He started toward the stairs.

“Dad.”

The old man stopped but didn’t turn around.

“Thanks.”

“Goodnight, son.”

“Night.” Caleb sat down again, alone now with his thoughts. His fears. And the new, confusing things circling his mind like sharks. He was glad his father had reached out to him tonight, tried, in his way, to mend old wrongs. But he couldn’t help but think he should have been having a long conversation with someone else tonight.

With Maya.

Because, dammit, there was so much he needed to work through where she was concerned. So much he was confused about. Mostly he wanted to know why she’d agreed to marry him. Had it been for the reasons he’d laid out? Because, frankly, he’d been making those up as he went along. It scared the hell out of him to admit it, even to himself, but he had to know. They were at zero hour. Mostly he’d just wanted to lock

on to her and the babies in some way that assured him they wouldn't just vanish from his life, fall through his tenuous grasp someday. Coming out here, he'd discovered that they were precious to him...she was precious to him. He could understand feeling that need to hold on to the babies. They were his, after all. But why that desperate need to cling to Maya?

She was the mother of his kids. That had to be stirring some kind of primal instincts to life inside him. There were probably all kinds of psychological reasons why a man would feel drawn to a woman who was about to bear his children.

Weren't there?

And why didn't it feel as if that was the answer? Why was he suddenly dreading the thought of taking her with him, into his world, watching her evolve into the perfect political wife, seeing her change...and maybe cut her hair? Or...give up quilting?

He stayed up by the fire for a long time, thinking, searching his mind. But all he kept seeing when he imagined the future was a log cabin on a hillside above a wildflower-strewn meadow. A couple of kids, and a big shaggy dog bounding through the blossoms. Maya on the front porch, in the sunshine. A doe and a pair of spotted fawns feeding out back.

He fell asleep, and the images wove into dreams. Vivid, achingly wonderful dreams.



Maya had pleaded exhaustion and gone to her room just to get out of the sight of her mother and sisters before the tears came. And once they started, they didn't seem to want to stop. She buried her face in her pillows and thumped her mattress repeatedly with her fist, but it didn't help.

After twenty minutes she forced herself to sit up, reached for a tissue and caught a glimpse of herself in the vanity mirror. Red puffy eyes, wild hair, streaks on her face and a

runny nose looked back at her. “You are a basket case, Maya Brand,” she told herself. “Why don’t you get a grip?”

“Because you’re going to become a wife and a mother of two all in the space of the next few days, darlin’.” Her mother’s voice made her jerk her head around. Vidalia sat in the chair beside the bed. In her hands she held a big bowl of vanilla ice cream, with chocolate syrup drizzled over the top, a generous dollop of whipped cream...and two spoons.

Maya sniffled. “How long have you been sitting there?”

“Long enough for the ice cream to get just soft enough. I figured I’d let you cry it out. It’s cleansing, a good cry. Sometimes you just need to let it rinse you clean.”

She held out the bowl.

Maya eyed it. “I’m not hungry,” she said.

“Since when do we eat ice cream because we’re hungry?” Vidalia asked, and set the bowl in her daughter’s lap.

Maya picked up the spoon and took three consecutive bites.

“You came upstairs before I got to tell you about the wedding plans that man of yours managed to put together.”

She sniffed, ate another bite, looked at her mother.

“He spoke to Reverend Jackson, and the reverend says he’ll personally take care of getting the church ready. He even offered to have the full choir turn out, and Mrs. Sumner is practically begging to be allowed to play the organ.” Vidalia sneaked a quick taste of the ice cream with her own spoon. “And get this, Mrs. Mackensie and the Ladies’ Auxiliary volunteered to see to it the flowers arrived and take care of the decorations. Well, you know, Mrs. Mackensie’s sister is the only florist in town, so I suppose that makes sense, but—”

“But, Mom, the church ladies don’t even like me.”

“Oh, honey, they do now.”

Maya thrust out her lower lip. “I don’t think I want them at my wedding.”

Her mother smiled. “That’s exactly what Caleb told them. He said he just wanted use of the church, thank you very much. Said he had his own florist in mind, and that he didn’t want anyone there who wasn’t specifically invited. Told the reverend his next sermon ought to be on loving thy neighbor and the dangers of false pride.” She smiled. “The reverend laughed! He said it was about time someone put that bunch in their place, and he thought Maya Brand was just the one to do it.”

Maya’s eyes widened as she stared at her mother.

“It’s true, hon. Oh, don’t you see, child? You’re getting what you’ve always wanted. Respectability. Why, you’re marrying into a family who could buy and sell this town and everyone in it. Every person who ever snubbed you is gonna be kissing up full force, just hopin’ to get invited to have a cup of coffee with you.”

Maya’s face puckered and her lower lip quivered. “Y-you’re right. That’s wh-what I’ve always w-wanted. But I wanted to earn it...not marry into it.”

“You’d already earned it, Maya. That’s the point. Those women are forced now to give you the respect you already deserved. You should be happy to see them so firmly put in their places.”

“I...know I should.”

Her mother tilted her head to one side. “Well, then, how come you’re crying?”

“I don’t know!” she wailed, and the tears flooded her face, and she shoveled in some more ice cream.

“Darlin’,” her mother said after a moment, “I *do* know. And so do you, deep down. And you’d best get busy thinking it through and figurin’ it out, because you’re gonna be married in a few hours, and it would be a darned good notion to have your head on straight when you do.”

Blinking several times, sitting up straighter, she thought very hard. Her mother snatched tissues from the box and wiped Maya’s face, her nose.

“Well?”

Maya stared down at the melting ice cream in the bowl. “I’m afraid I’m not good enough to be a senator’s wife.”

“You’re good enough to be anything you want to be, and you know it. I haven’t raised you to think otherwise. Now think some more. What’s really wrong?”

Maya frowned. “Maybe it’s...that I think *he* might not think I’m good enough—”

“Bullcookies. He wouldn’t be marrying you if he thought that way. Try again.”

“His...father. Yes, that’s it, his father hates me, and—”

“His father is a teddy bear trying to act like a grizzly. I can’t believe a daughter of mine didn’t see through that stuff and nonsense at first glance.”

Licking her lips, Maya nodded. “I did. He’s just lonely and feeling left out.”

“Uh-huh.”

Drawing a deep breath, Maya sighed, took a big bite of ice cream and thought some more. “Maybe it’s...that I don’t know what’s going to happen. I mean, I don’t want to move away from here. But he’s going to have to, if he becomes a senator. And I don’t want to go with him, but I don’t want to be left behind, either.”

“Why not?”

Her brows went up. Another bite. “Well, I...I...the babies. It would be hard on the babies, and hell, I don’t want to be raising them all alone. I mean, I’ve seen how hard that is.”

“We’ve been just fine alone, Maya. You know you could do it, and do it in spades, if you had to.”

“But this is different. I mean...okay, it’s not that I don’t think I could raise the kids alone, I mean, I could. Of course I could. I know I could.”

Vidalia nodded and dipped her spoon in for another bite.

“It’s just that I don’t want to be alone.”

“You were fine alone, a year ago,” her mother pointed out.

“That was before I met Caleb...” Maya blinked and went very still with a spoonful of ice cream halfway to her mouth. She lowered the spoon. “Oh, no,” she whispered. “What if I love him?” She turned to stare at her mother through eyes gone wide with horror. “Landsakes, Mom, what if I *love* him?”



Maya’s mother sat beside her, stroking her hair and talking to her until she finally fell asleep. A restless, fitful sleep, but still, she needed the rest. And she did rest, just fine, until about 1:00 a.m. when something woke her. She wasn’t sure whether it was the howling wind outside or the sensation of being soaking wet from the waist down. She only knew that the house was freezing cold and pitch dark, and that her water had broken.

“Mom?” she called.

And then a giant band seemed to close tight around her middle, squeezing her front and back, inside and out, and she gripped her belly and yelled louder, pain and fear driving the single word out of her with far more force than before. “Mamma!”



An insistent, howling sort of cry shook Caleb out of sleep. At first, in his drowsy state, he thought it was Maya’s voice, crying out to him for help. He came awake with a start, surprised that when he opened his eyes, the only light to be seen was the orange red glow of the coals in the fireplace, a few feet from him. And the cry he’d heard was only the wind, shrieking abnormally outside. Blinking away the sleep haze, Caleb realized he’d fallen asleep on the sofa in the living room of Ida-May’s boarding house. Still, there was usually a light left on down there at night.

Sitting up, he rubbed his shoulders, suddenly chilled. Then he reached for the big lamp on the end table.

Click.

Nothing. He tried again, but it was no use. Either the bulb was blown or...

"...or the power's out," he said aloud. And that was when that wailing wind outside drew his attention again. And there was rattling, too. He half expected to see a death wagon come thundering into the room with a banshee at the reins, singing her funeral dirge.

He shook that image away with another shiver, a full body one this time. "It's the wind," he muttered. And he went to the fireplace, added three chunks of wood, then rose again and tried the wall switch. Still no lights. But as the flames grew, they illuminated the room for the most part. He could see around him. Orange and yellow, leaping shadows.

Then another light appeared. A small flame, floating closer out of the shadows, until it morphed into Ida-May herself, carrying an old-fashioned kerosene lamp. "Caleb?" she asked, squinting at him, then nodding in answer to her own question. "Power's out," she told him. "And it's storming to beat all. Why I've never seen anything like it. Not here, and I've lived here my whole life!" She set the lamp on a high shelf and quickly went to the hearth to light another lamp—one Caleb hadn't even noticed sitting there. Come to think of it, there was a candelabra on that marble stand in the corner.

Caleb went for that, brought it to the fireplace and reached for the matches there on the mantel. He didn't need to listen to hear the fury of the storm. The wind whistled and moaned, and branches skittered against the windows and walls. He went to the nearest window, parted the curtain and tried to look outside. Dark as pitch. The entire town was black, and even the whiteness of the snow—snow that hadn't been there last night—didn't break it. "Looks like the whole town's blacked out." Then he turned. "I need to check on Maya."

"Oh, my, yes!"

Footsteps thundered, and in moments Bobby reached the bottom of the stairs with Cain at his side. In the fire-glow, the old man's face looked downright mean. "Dad, here, take the sofa." Caleb helped his father to a seat, then yanked a blanket off the back and draped it over his shoulders.

"It's colder than the hubs of hell in this place." Cain growled, pulling the blanket closer and hunching into it.

"The power's out, Mr. Montgomery," Ida-May explained. "But we have the fireplace. You'll be warm as toast in no time." Then she looked at Bobby. "Someone should wake the others, those two lawyer fellows and Ol' Hank. Have them come down here where it's warm."

"I'll get them," Bobby said. "Along with some more blankets."

"Why's the power out?" Cain demanded. "And what's that infernal racket?" Then, blinking, he looked toward the windows. There was snow piling in their corners. He sent a startled look at Caleb. "Snowstorm? Here?"

"Yeah, the whole town is without power, by the looks of things." Caleb tried the telephone, but there was only dead air. He clicked the cutoff several times, to no avail. Then he went to the foot of the stairs and called up them, "Bobby, bring your cell phone down."

Cain was shaking his head. "How bad is it out there, son?"

"I don't know, Dad."

The old man pursed his lips. "That Brand girl...she shouldn't be out there without heat, or even a telephone."

"I know."

"I have a radio, some batteries. I'll get them," Ida-May said, and taking one of the lamps, she hurried away. Caleb went to the door, yanked his coat off the rack and pulled it on. "I'm gonna take a look outside. Maybe it's not as bad as it sounds."

He stepped out onto the porch, pulling the door closed behind him. The howling there was louder, almost deafening,

and a rhythmic thumping worried him. He pulled up his collar and went to the door, opened it. The wind hit it, yanked it from his hand and slammed it against the wall. Caleb ducked his head, brought his hands up in front of his face and, squinting, stepped out onto the stoop. Icy barbs of snow slashed at his face like razors. The snow on the ground was level with the top step and still coming. He tried to see up and down the road, but only shadowy drifts looking like miniature mountains and wind-driven snow were visible. Everything was covered, every rooftop and porch, every vehicle and tree. Telephone poles, those he could make out in the darkness, were tilted and leaning. Wires, laden with snow, drooped low.

He hurried back onto the porch and forced the door closed against that insistent wind. It was an effort, but he managed it. He took off his coat, shook the snow off it, stomped off his shoes and went back inside. "It's a freaking nightmare out there. A full blown blizzard."

His father and Bobby were pushing all the chairs nearer the fireplace. Martin and Jacob Levitz, Caleb's lawyers, stood huddled over the radio as Ida-May turned the dial from static to static. The boarding house's permanent resident, a grizzled fellow Caleb only knew as "Ol' Hank," sat in a rocker looking confused.

Finally Ida's radio dial hit paydirt. "...the unexpected, blizzard is raging through Big Falls and surrounding areas with winds up to sixty-five miles per hour and temperatures well below freezing. Twenty-four inches of snow have already been dumped in the area, with another eighteen inches possible before morning. Residents are advised to remain in their homes if at all possible. Use fireplaces, woodstoves, kerosene heaters if you have them. If not, light all the burners on your propane or natural gas ranges. If you have none of those, then you need to dress warmly, stay dry and keep moving until daylight. All roads are closed. Emergency personnel cannot get through. Phone service is out in most of the county, and widespread power outages have been reported, though the full extent of them is not known at this time. Rescue personnel will be out in force at dawn, when this freak

storm is expected to abate. If you need emergency assistance, hang a red flag from a front window or door of your home.”

Caleb swallowed hard and looked at his father. “I have to get to Maya.”

“Son, they said to wait until dawn.” He glanced at the old-fashioned pendulum clock on Ida-May’s mantel. “It’s only five or six hours away, at the most. Surely she’ll be all right until then.”

He met his father’s eyes. “What if she isn’t?”

“You could get killed out there in this mess. It’s a good five miles out to the Brand farm.”

“Dad, the nurse we saw yesterday predicted she’d give birth within forty-eight hours. Anything could be happening out there.”

“Come on, Caleb, what makes you think—”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I just...I feel it in my gut. I have to get out there.” He paused, searching his father’s face. “What if it was my mother out there? What would you do, Dad?”

Thinning his lips, the old man nodded. “All right.” Then he turned. “Caleb’s going to need flashlights, with good batteries, and some damn warm clothes.”

“Flashlight, hell,” Ol’ Hank grumbled. “What the boy needs is one o’ them there snow machines. You know, like Joe Petrolla’s got.”

Caleb blinked and turned slowly to Hank. “A snowmobile?” It couldn’t be. Who would have a snowmobile in Oklahoma?

“Yep, that’s what I mean. A sno-MO-bile.”

“Hank, does this Joe...fellow live near here?”

“Lives a half mile south. Turn right at the light, if you can find the light—it’s the only light in town, you know. Turn right onto Oak Street. It’s the first house on the left.”

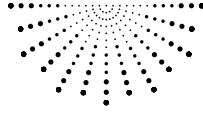
“I know where that is,” Caleb said, remembering every trip through this town. Picturing the street in his mind, hoping to hell he could find it in the pitch dark, in a blizzard.

“Caleb, there are guardrails along the edge of the road between here and there,” Ida-May said. “Only on the left hand side, though, cause that’s where the steeper drop is. You go out, and you find those guardrails. Let ‘em guide you so you don’t get off track. Hold right on to ‘em, till you get to the traffic light. You hear?”

He nodded. “That’s good advice, Ida-May, thank you.”

She nodded, picking up a lamp. “Now you come on upstairs with me. My late husband’s clothes are still packed in the closet. We’ll get you bundled up proper.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



The sounds of thundering feet in the upstairs hallway of the Brand farmhouse, immediately following Maya's shout, were loud enough to drown out the noise of the storm outside. In between the pounding feet, there were bangs and bumps and crashes, and voices asking what was wrong with the lights, and more rattling and clanking, and more footfalls. It only went on for a matter of perhaps two minutes, but Maya felt as if it was taking her family hours to complete the simple task of getting from their rooms to hers.

But then they were all stumbling through the bedroom door. Selene in her floor-length black silk nightgown looked even more like a Gothic heroine due to the black wrought iron candelabra she carried, with its spiderweb design. Her silvery hair spilled over her shoulders, and she looked so damn slender Maya suddenly wanted to growl at her. Right behind her came Mel, with a baseball bat in one hand and a flashlight in the other. She wore flannel pajamas, and her short dark hair stuck up in several directions. A fighting mad hen with wet feathers. She made Maya want to laugh. Behind her, Vidalia burst in, wearing her red satin bathrobe with the black lace collar and cuffs. She carried an old tin and glass hurricane lamp, its globe in need of cleaning, but it gave off some light all the same. Her masses of raven curls were bound in one long braid that twisted down her back. The fourth one in was Kara. She had no light and came bursting into the room so fast she ran into Vidalia, who bumped into Mel, who shouldered Selene, who fell onto the bed and managed not to set the blankets on fire with the candles.

There were several “oomphs” and “ughs,” and then Kara said, “Sorry. What’s going on?”

“Power’s out.”

“Big snowstorm.”

“Maya yelled.”

Three voices gave three answers. Then Maya gave the fourth. “I’m in labor.”

There was one brief moment of stunned silence, and then everyone started bustling at once. Kara muttered something about boiling water, and Mel said something about dialing 911, and Selene said, “I think I have a spell for this somewhere!”

Then Vidalia shouted, just once. “Stop!”

And everyone went still and silent “That’s better. Now calm down, all of you. Mel, take this lantern, bundle yourself thoroughly, go on out to the barn and get the generator fired up.” She handed the hurricane lamp to Mel. “Dress warm, now; There’s no big hurry. First babies take their time. Kara, you go on downstairs and call Caleb over at Ida-May’s. Tell him it’s time. And, Selene, you go on out with Mel and start up the van. Pull it right up to the door here. We’ll let it get nice and warm.” She smiled and took Selene’s candles, setting them on the bedside stand. “You’ll find some more lamps and candles in the kitchen closet, third shelf. Matches with them, as always. Go on now. I’ll stay here and mind your sister.”

Nodding, they shuffled out, Mel’s flashlight guiding the way.

Maya tried to slow her breathing, tried to be calm. It wasn’t easy. She was actually trembling. Drawing a breath, she sat up and flung back the covers. “I’m soaking wet,” she said. “I think my water broke.”

“Not to worry, hon. I’ll just get you some clean, dry things.” Vidalia went to the dresser, pulling open the top drawer, and hauling out an oversized flannel nightgown with pink flowers all over it.

“That thing’s big enough to shelter the homeless,” Maya moaned.

“And just think, this will be the last night you’ll need to wear it. Come on, now, up on the edge of the bed.”

Maya moved with no small effort, and her mother helped her peel off her wet nightgown. She brought a washcloth and towels for Maya to wash herself up, and helped her into the clean, warm nightie. Then she wrapped her in the extra blanket and set her in a chair beside the bed.

It took all of five minutes. And then the next contraction came, and it pulled tight, and Maya wrapped her arms around herself and bowed her head, and made a sound from down deep in her chest.

Vidalia was peeling the wet blankets and sheets off the bed, but she stopped, and her head came up. “Is that the second contraction?”

“Mmm.” Maya managed that and nothing more, but accompanied it with a fierce nod.

“And the first was when you called out?”

“After,” Maya told her. And she knew damn well it hadn’t been very long. She pried her eyes open, saw her mother look at the wind-up clock on the bedside stand. She didn’t look away until Maya sighed her relief and sat a little straighter. Her mother finished stripping the bed, carried the bundle of covers to the bathroom and came back with fresh linens. How she managed to be so fast and efficient in almost total darkness was beyond Maya. She thought her mother could probably do just about anything. Thank God she was here!

“There now,” Vidalia said. “I’ll throw fresh blankets on there, and it will be all ready and waiting for you when we come home from the hospital.”

Maya licked her lips. “Dammit, I was supposed to get married today,” she moaned.

“Watch your mouth, dear.”

“I don’t want my babies illegitimate.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, child, it’s the twenty-first century. What kind of a modern woman are you if you still think a baby needs its father’s name to be considered legitimate? I mean, really, who made that rule? When did the mother’s name become so unimportant?”

“Mom, this isn’t exactly the time for feminism or politics.”

A throat cleared, and Maya looked to the doorway, seeing Kara and Selene standing there, looking frightened.

“Um...Mom, can we talk to you a minute? Out here?” Kara asked.

Vidalia lifted her brows. Maya held up a hand. “No. Whatever’s wrong, you spit it out right here, right now. I’ve got a right to know.”

Kara looked at Maya. Then she looked at Vidalia. Vidalia heaved a mighty sigh, and gave a nod. “Go on, what is it?”

“Mom, there’s a blizzard going on out there. No power, no phones, at least two feet of snow piled up, and some of the drifts out there are higher than my head. Wind’s blowing something fierce. I can’t even see from the house to the barn.”

Frowning, Vidalia went to the window, parted the curtain. “Where’s Melusine?”

“She went out anyway. Bundled up and said she thought she could make it to the barn, get the generator started,” Selene said softly. “We told her not to go, but you know Mel.”

“Lord have mercy,” Vidalia whispered.

Maya bit her lip, but the cry was wrung from her anyway. Tears sprang to her eyes this time, the pain was so intense. Her sisters huddled around her, and Vidalia looked at the clock. “Four minutes,” she said. Shaking her head slowly, she looked at the ceiling. “Lord, if you’re still owin’ me any favors, now would be a fine time to pay up on ‘em. “Then, she stood straighter, lifted her chin. “All right, all right, we have what we have, we may as well deal with it. Kara, get that mattress cover from the hall closet, and get it onto this bed. Bring extra blankets, too. Selene, did you gather up the lamps and candles?”

“They’re right here. I brought the whole box.” As she spoke, she turned back into the hallway, bent to pick up a large cardboard box and brought it into the bedroom.

Vidalia went to the round pedestal table by the window and, taking the tablecloth by its edges, gathered it at the top, lifting a dozen framed photos, trinkets and knick-knacks all at once. She set them in an out-of-the way corner. “I want you to put every one of those lights right here, in this bedroom window, and fire them up. Tie back the curtains, well out of the way. We’ll need the light to work by, and if they’re bright enough, they might help Mel keep her bearings.”

“What if they don’t, Mom?” Selene was already unloading candles and kerosene and oil lamps from the box onto the table.

“Don’t you worry, Selene. Vidalia Brand is not going to let any blizzard take one of her girls. Now you just do what I told you, quick as you can. There’s work to be done. I need rubbing alcohol, scissors, that ball of string from Maya’s sewing basket....”



Caleb thanked God for Ida-May’s suggestion about clinging to the guardrails at least a hundred times before he made it to the traffic light. The snow was blinding, the wind constantly driving his body off track. He could have veered off course and not even known it. It was impossible to tell the road from the ditches. There was nothing but snow. White, ice-cold snow, crotch-deep and stubborn as hell. With every step he took, his legs and borrowed boots were pushing massive amounts of the stuff. It was unbelievable.

He had to let go of the guardrail and cross the street now. The rail was on the left-hand side, and the street he wanted was on the right. He turned, aimed the flashlight Ida-May had given him, hoping to pinpoint a spot on the other side so he could have something to aim for. But the light couldn’t cut through the wall of slanting snow. He started forward anyway,

but a gust caught him and sent him stumbling sideways. He fell over, snow in his face, even inside the fur-trimmed hood of the late innkeeper's parka. Shaking himself, Caleb rose to his hands and knees, got slowly to his feet. He was off track, turned around already. He'd lost his sense of which way he'd been facing, which way he wanted to go.

Tipping his head back, he turned in a slow circle, aiming the flashlight upward, until finally he saw it reflected back at him from the traffic light above. And when he found it, he realized he could just manage to make out the shapes of the cables that held it suspended above the street. He'd been on the left, so the shortest stretch of cable was where he'd been. The longest stretch was a map pointing the way to the other side of the road.

Bowing against the wind, he walked, stopping every three or four steps to look up at the traffic light and its cables to keep his bearings. And eventually he reached the spot where the cable ended. Again he shone the light. What now? Nothing to go by, no guardrails. He battled his way forward, facing directly into the biting wind now, took a few steps, then a few more. And at last his light gleamed on what turned out to be the reflective numbers on the door of a house. He was looking for the first house on the left. Joe Petrolla's place. He didn't know if this was the first house, or if it were on the right or the left. It was as close as he could guess, though.

His entire body shaking, he managed to get up the sidewalk to the front door, and then he banged as hard as the oversized mittens would allow.

It was only moments before the door opened and a man in a plaid housecoat pulled him inside, then slammed the door closed behind him. "Great jumpin' Jehoshaphat, who in their right mind would be out on a night like this? You all right, fella?"

Shivering, Caleb yanked off the mittens, so he could loosen the strings that held the hood—no easy task, since they were caked with snow and ice. But after a few seconds his cold fingers managed to accomplish it, and he pushed the hood down. "I'm Caleb—"

“I know who you are!” the man said. “Honey, it’s that politician fella from the newspapers. The one who’s gonna marry Maya Brand!”

Caleb hadn’t noticed the woman huddled near a pot-bellied wood stove on the other side of the room. He did now. “Well, I’ll be,” she said.

“Listen, I don’t have a lot of time to explain, but I’m looking for Joe Petrolla. Are you him?”

The man frowned and shook his head. “No. Name’s Cooper. Tom Cooper. This is my wife, Sarah.”

“How far am I from this Petrolla’s house?”

The man scratched his head, looked at his wife.

“Only Petrolla I ever knew moved to Texas five years back,” the wife said.

Caleb closed his eyes, lowered his head.

“Must have been some important, to bring you clear out here on a night like this,” Tom Cooper said.

“It is important. The roads are blocked, power’s out, as you probably already know, and the phones are dead. Maya is out there at the farmhouse, and I don’t have any way of even knowing if she’s all right.” He bit his lip. “Just yesterday a nurse predicted she’d have the babies within a day or two at most.”

“Someone ought to go on out there and check on her,” Tom Cooper said slowly.

His wife, who’d crossed the room, smacked him on the arm. “Well what did you think this young man was doing, Thomas, taking a moonlight stroll?” She rolled her eyes and looked at Caleb. “What did you want from this Petrolla, anyway?”

“Ol Hank, at the boarding house, told me the guy had a snowmobile. I thought I’d stand a better chance of making it out to the farm if I could borrow it.”

She sighed heavily. “Well, we don’t have a snowmobile.”

“You’d never make it on a snowmobile in this storm anyway,” her husband said.

Then the wife’s head came up. “Could you make it with the bulldozer, Tom?”

Tom blinked twice and turned a horrified stare at his wife. “What the—do you think I’d just hand over—that thing cost more than this house, woman!”

“Tom’s in the construction business,” she said, as if that explained his reaction. “His equipment is as precious to him as if it was attached.” She turned a narrow glare on Tom. “But there is a pregnant woman and twin babies at stake here, so of course he’ll realize there’s only one right thing to do.”

Cooper set his jaw and shook his head.

“Mr. Cooper, you said you knew who I was,” Caleb told the man. “So that must mean you know what I’m worth.”

The man’s brows drew together in a brief frown, then rose as his mind processed this new data.

“Tom, please...if you help me tonight, I’ll buy you a brand-new dozer tomorrow. Any kind, any size, any price, you name it.”

Tom Cooper rubbed his chin. “Don’t need a dozer,” he said slowly. “Got one.” Then, tilting his head to one side, he said, “Could use a backhoe, though.”

“Deal. You have my word, and your wife is our witness. The minute the roads are cleared, you go out and you order the biggest, shiniest backhoe in existence, and I’ll foot the bill.” Caleb thrust out a hand. “Deal?”

Tom pursed his lips, then reached out and shook on it.

Turning, he said, “Hon, I’m gonna need my wool union suit and my Carhartt overalls.”

“Hey, wait a minute. I didn’t say anything about you going with me,” Caleb said. “It’s not safe out there.”

Tom lifted his brows. “You ever run a dozer, mister?”

Caleb shook his head.

“Didn’t think so. I’ll be ready in ten minutes.” He glanced at the window, shook his head. “Nope, you’d have never made it out there on a snowmobile. Never.”



“I wanted to do this in the hospital! I wanted a freaking epidural!” Maya’s voice carried all through the house. But as the contraction eased and she relaxed back on the pillows, her focus changed again. “How long has it been?”

“Only an hour,” Vidalia said.

“Mom, you gotta go after Mel. Dammit, if I could, I’d go myself.”

“Mel’s the toughest of any of us,” Vidalia said. She couldn’t hide her fear from Maya, though, or from anyone else. It showed on her face. She was terrified for Melusine.

“Let me go. Mom, she’s right. We have to get to Mel,” Kara said.

“I can do it,” Selene put in. “You have to let one of us try, Mom.”

Vidalia looked again at the window. “Just give her a few more minutes. I don’t want to risk either of you getting lost out there.” She wiped the sweat from Maya’s brow with a soft cloth.

Kara had brought up the small portable kerosene burning heater from the basement, and it was almost too warm in the small bedroom now. Or maybe it only seemed that way to Maya.

She clasped her mother’s hand. “You have to let one of them go, Mom. Mel might be in trouble.”

“Maya—”

“Listen...oh, hell....” The pain was coming again, she clenched her jaw and her fists, and spoke through the pain. “Tie a rope...to the porch rail. Tie...the other end...around her waist.”

Vidalia nodded hard. “Do your breathing, Maya. Come on, breathe through it.”

She panted out the breaths as she’d been taught, while her mother joined her. When it passed, Vidalia stroked her hair. “Good girl, you’re doing fine, honey.” Then she turned. “Your sister’s right. Kara, I want you to get the rope from the hall closet. Tie one end around your waist and the other to the porch rail. Go out as far as you can reach and see if there’s any sign of Mel. Bundle yourself, girl. Cover every bit of skin, take the flashlight and don’t linger. You get out there, and if you don’t see her, you get right back in.”

“Why not me?” Selene demanded.

“Because you’re younger and you’re smaller. The wind would whip you around like a dandelion seed. I want you to stay on this end, every bit as bundled as Kara. You keep watch that the rope doesn’t come loose. And don’t you even think of leaving that porch, you understand me?”

Selene scowled, but nodded. She moved to the head of the bed and leaned over to kiss Maya’s cheek. “Be okay, hon. I won’t be long.”

“Hey, I’ve got your childbirth herbs in my pillowcase, your protection incense burning and your power stone being crushed to dust in my fist, sis. What could go wrong?”

Kara came to the other side. “Will you two be okay without us?” she asked.

“Mom’s done this a few times, don’t forget,” Maya said breathlessly. “Go on, bring Mel back.”

Kara nodded, and she and Selene hurried out of the room.

Another pain hit, and Maya’s head came off the pillow at the intensity of it “Is it supposed to hurt this much?” she growled.

“Breathe, baby. That’s it. You trust me, when we ask you about this later, you’re gonna tell us it was nothing at all. This part leaves your mind like it never happened.”

Panting through clenched teeth, Maya said, “That’s bull.”

“If it were bull, darlin’, you’d be an only child.” Vidalia smiled gently at her. “In fact, I think everyone would be. Well, everyone except for twins and triplets and such special little angels as those.”

The pain ebbed. Maya stopped panting, blew a sigh, dropped her head to the pillows once more. “Can you see out the window, Mom?”

“It’s damn near black as pitch,” Vidalia said, but she went to the window all the same and stood looking out “Well now, wait a minute...what in the world?”

“What is it?” Maya twisted her head to try to see, but couldn’t.

“Why...there’s a light, way off to the north. Looks to be coming this way, too. Who on earth...?”

“Is it Mel? Maybe she got turned around and wandered—”

“No, it’s too far away to be Mel. Besides, that little flashlight wouldn’t shine so far, not in this weather.”

Maya closed her eyes. Maybe it was Caleb. God, she wanted him so much right now. And it made no damn sense whatsoever, but there it was. He’d been her first thought when she’d felt the initial pangs. And he’d been on her mind constantly ever since. She’d been lying here foolishly fantasizing that he would show up, like some knight in shining armor. That he would fight his way through a storm that even emergency workers couldn’t penetrate just to be with her. She kept envisioning him bursting through the bedroom door.

She was hopeless. If he had a clue how she really felt about him, he would probably take his offer of marriage and run screaming back to Tulsa just as fast as his feet could take him. She’d always been so practical. When had she turned into this emotional, needy, lovesick basket case?

But she knew the answer to that. She’d been that way since she first laid eyes on Caleb Montgomery. And she didn’t think there was any cure in sight.

And yes, she needed him tonight, and no, he wasn’t there. But she knew now that she couldn’t judge him by that. If he

knew what was happening, he would be there. If there was a way to get there. His not being there didn't mean he would turn out to be a man like her father was, or that he would let her down or walk out on her children. It didn't mean that at all.

“Whoever it is, they're coming this way,” Vidalia said.

“I hope it's a team of paramedics with radios and a whole suitcase full of drugs,” she said, as yet another contraction tightened its fist around her.

“You are such a liar,” her mother told her. “You hope it's Caleb.” She licked her lips, shook her head slowly. “And frankly, daughter, so do I.”



The bulldozer moved at the speed of molasses, and with every snowdrift it crushed beneath its tracks, Caleb felt more certain that something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

His stomach was tied up in knots, and the cold wasn't the only thing causing his shivering.

What if something happened to the babies?

What if something happened to Maya?

A shaft of red-hot pain sliced right through his frozen body to lay open his heart. Damn, he was a mess, wasn't he?

“Shouldn't we see the house by now?” He leaned close to Tom Cooper, and shouted the question. Between the noise of the dozer and that of the storm, he wasn't sure the man could hear him even then. Besides, they were both wrapped in hoods and scarfs and a solid half-inch layer of snow at this point

Cooper turned slightly and yelled back, “Maybe. If there were any lights on.”

Hell, if there were no lights on, then what the hell did that indicate? Nothing good, he bet. A brief image of Maya lying frozen in her bed, still and white, her skin like glass, crystals forming on her eyelashes, floated into his mind. Like Sleeping

Beauty, he saw her. He squeezed his eyes tight and gave his head a hard shake to rid himself of that image.

She was okay. She had to be okay, and the babies, too.

Cooper held up one mitted paw, sort of pointing.

Caleb squinted into the cutting snow to try to see what he did and finally made out a dim speck of light in the distance. "Go toward it!" he yelled.

It probably was an unnecessary instruction.

The dozer belched and bucked, inch by inch, nearer the light. And the light didn't move. More and more it seemed to be coming from ground level, and the fear in Caleb's belly churned harder. Then the spotlights mounted on the dozer were pointing directly at the smaller light so it vanished altogether. But the edge of the house came into view, and he could see lights at last in one of the upper windows.

"Thank God," he whispered. "Thank God." At least it looked as if someone was alive in there.

The dozer rocked closer, and its lights picked out a lone form, struggling against the wind...with what looked like a rope tied around it. Turning to face the dozer, the form waved its arms frantically, held its hands flat out, made a pushing motion.

"Stop, Tom," Caleb shouted. "Shut her down, but keep the lights on."

Cooper did so. Caleb climbed off the machine, amazed at how difficult it was to bend or unbend anything. Every joint in his body seemed to have frozen over. His legs sank hip deep in snow as soon as he hit, but he waded forward, fumbling in his big pocket for the flashlight, grabbing it as clumsily as a bear cub in boxing gloves, and finally flicking it on.

The figure with the rope around it was bundled beyond recognition, until he got all the way up in her face. Then her eyes, peering over the top of a scarf gave her away as a Brand woman, and her height told him which one.

“Kara? What are you doing out here?” he said, loudly, over the wind.

“Caleb?” she asked. “Oh, thank God!” She hugged him, totally ineffective in all the layers of clothing.

“What’s wrong?” he shouted again, clasping her shoulders, and backing her up just a few inches.

“It’s Mel! She went out to the barn—for the generator—but she never came back.”

His heart did a little spasm in his chest. “How long?” he shouted.

“Almost two hours!”

He didn’t like it. Damn, Mel out in this for two hours? Why the hell hadn’t someone gone out after her sooner?

“Go back to the house,” he yelled. “I’ll find her.”

Kara shook her head. “Not without my sister!”

He started to get mad, then remembered the faint light he’d seen before. It hadn’t been Kara’s. It had been further out than that. He patted Kara’s shoulders. “Wait here!” Then he dragged himself back out to the dozer, where Tom Cooper waited. “Turn off the lights and come with me.”

Cooper cut the lights, clambered down, and the two of them hunched their backs against the storm and made their way through the snow once more. When they reached Kara, Caleb said, “I think I saw her. I’m going out. You two stay right here. If I’m not back in ten minutes, Cooper, you take this girl back to the house, whether she wants to go or not. It’s at the other end of her rope.”

Cooper nodded. Kara argued, but Caleb didn’t take time to listen. He started out through the drifts, praying to God he would see that little beam of light again.

And then he did. Ten feet from the barn, with an inch of snow already covering it. He raced closer, dropped to his knees, and pawed the snow away rapidly, digging out the light, and the gloved hand that clung to it. Mel’s hand. Then her arm,

shoulder and the rest of her. Lifting her upper body, he shook her. “Melusine! Mel, come on! Talk to me!”

There was a very slight movement of her lips. Maybe a moan, but if so, it was lost in the wind. At least he knew she was alive. He gathered her up into his arms, turned and started back the way he’d come. He homed in on the glow spilling from the upstairs window and trudged with everything he had.

He reached Kara and Tom Cooper with what felt like the last ounce of strength in his body, so cold he couldn’t even feel his hands or feet anymore.

Cooper took Mel from his arms, turned toward the house. Caleb took a step toward it, as well, and Kara put a hand on his chest to stop him. “We still need the generator,” she said.

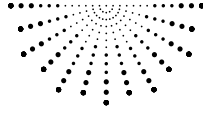
Cooper turned back. “Don’t walk it, Caleb! Take the dozer. No one out there to run over by accident now!”

With a sigh of relief, he nodded. “Get back to the house, Kara. I’ll be in with the genny in a few minutes.”

She looked him in the eye and said, “Hurry, Caleb. We need you in there.” Then she turned and trudged away.

In only seconds she was swallowed up by the storm. Drawing himself up, Caleb started toward the dozer.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



He hadn't thought about how he was supposed to get the generator to the bulldozer. The thing was huge, and it would have taken two or three men at the very least, to pick it up. But he discovered chains on the back of the dozer, attached them to the machine, and even thought to make sure it had gasoline in its tank, so he wouldn't have to make this trek again to syphon some from one of the cars. The tank was full, though, so he remounted the bull-dozer and ground it into motion. And he thanked his lucky stars Tom Cooper hadn't just handed it over earlier tonight or he'd never have gotten here. He'd been watching for five miles, and he still just barely managed to make it go where he wanted. There was a definite knack to this thing.

He dragged the generator right up to the front door, then shut the dozer down, got off, and, finally, after what seemed like an endless, freezing journey, he stumbled on frozen stumps into the house.

Cooper met him at the door "I'll start the genny and get her plugged in the second I get thawed out here. You'd best get out of those things. You're needed elsewhere."

He thought of Mel and rapidly, clumsily, started tugging at the snow-encrusted scarf and mittens. The parka's zipper was frozen, and there was so much snow frozen to his legs that he could barely tell where the boots ended and the overalls began. Snow scattered everywhere, but eventually he got shed of most of the layers and limped into the living room on numb feet.

Mel lay on the sofa, her clothes on the floor, her body wrapped in blankets. Kara and Selene worked fiercely, rubbing her hands and feet. Mel's hair was wet but thawed out. The fireplace burned full blast, giving off blessed heat that began to make his own hands and feet burn as the feeling came back to them.

"How is she?" he asked, leaning over the other two.

Mel's eyes opened. Her teeth were chattering and her body shaking, but she managed a weak smile. "I'll b-b-be fine. Thanks t-t-to you."

"Hey, that's what brothers-in-law are for, isn't it?"

"Caleb...I...need to tell you something." Mel was so cold her teeth were chattering. "I...the photograph. It...was me. I sent it."

He leaned closer to her, looked right into her eyes and said, "Then I know who to thank, don't I?"

Her smile was wavering, but heartfelt, he thought. Then she frowned. "W-what are you waiting for? You should be upstairs," she told him.

Caleb frowned. "Upstairs?" Then he glanced at the other two.

But before either of them could speak, a heart-ripping shriek tore through the house and right into his soul. He thought it might have cracked a few windows. A rush of dizziness hit him so fast, he almost fell down. "Maya?" he asked stupidly.

"You better get up there, Caleb," Selene said. "We'll take care of Mel."

Caleb didn't want to think what he was thinking, but he didn't take time to verify it. Instead he lunged to the stairs, and his half-functioning, damp sock-clad feet stumbled and slammed into steps on the way up. They would hurt like hell later, when the feeling came back.

"God, Mamma, why does it have to hurt so much!" Maya cried brokenly.

He lurched down the hall, burst into her bedroom and stared in shock at the scene being played out in front of him.

Maya lay propped up on pillows. Her knees were bent and pointed at the ceiling, and her bare feet pressed down into the mattress. Her mother, looking about as terrified as Caleb felt, was at the foot of the bed. Then, looking up at her daughter, pasting a calm and confident smile in place, Vidalia Brand said, “All right now, honey, it’s time. When the next contraction comes, I want you to push.”

For one brief instant he thought he might pass out cold. He shook that away and thought he might throw up instead, from sheer terror. But he shook that off, too. The look of unmitigated fear on Maya’s pale face was all it took to snap him out of it. It was fairly easy to size up the situation. The babies were coming, and they were coming now. There was no choice about it. His own fears didn’t matter. Hers did. His job here was to get her through this. Not add his own worries to hers.

“Now, Maya Brand,” he said, “I thought I told you I wanted to be in the delivery room. What are you thinking, trying to start without me?”

Maya’s head turned fast, and her eyes met his. And he saw something that almost floored him all over again. The look in her eyes when she saw him standing there...he’d never seen anything like that before. He’d never felt so wanted, or so needed. Or so loved.

He felt himself grow an inch or two taller.

“Caleb,” she whispered, sounding exhausted already. “My God, you’re here. You’re really here.”

“I’m here.” He moved closer, trusting his legs not to buckle.

Maya’s eyes widened. “Caleb, my sister...Mel...she’s—”

“Safe and sound on the sofa downstairs. Kara and Selene have everything in hand down there. And a friend of mine ought to have that generator running in a few minutes or so. I

want you to stop worrying about all that. You've got plenty to do right up here."



She heard his voice and thought it was her mind, weaving more fantasies. She'd been lying in the bed, in pain, terrified for her babies, for her sisters, for herself, wishing with everything in her that Caleb would walk through her door and somehow make her believe everything was going to be okay. So powerful was the image in her mind that when she turned her head and saw him there, she almost didn't believe he was real. And then she did, and everything she'd been feeling for him seemed to spill from her pores and beam from her eyes.

His face changed—something moved over his features. But she couldn't tell what. Then he was moving closer, and she noticed his odd gait—he was limping.

"Caleb, what's wrong?"

He shook his head, pausing to warm his hands over the small portable heater. "Nothing a little warming up won't fix," he told her.

Vidalia frowned at him. "How in the world did you manage to get out here, Caleb Montgomery?"

He winked. "Would you believe I hitched a ride on a sleigh with a guy in red and eight tiny reindeer?"

"It's a day early for that," Vidalia said. Then Maya saw her mother look down at Caleb's feet, saw her brows draw together in concern. She started to twist around to have a look for herself, but another contraction hit.

Caleb came to the bedside, and the second his hand was within reach, she clutched it in hers. Cold. His hand was still so cold.

"Time to push, honey," her mother told her. "You remember the drill."

“Come on,” Caleb said, sliding an arm around her shoulders to brace her up. His face was close to hers. “Push now. That’s it, one, two, three, four...”

When Caleb reached ten, she stopped pushing. Rested. He let her lie back and stroked her hair away from her face. Vidalia ran to the bedroom door and shouted down the stairs. “We need a bowl of ice chips up here,” she called.

By the time she was back in position again, another pain had Maya in its grip, and she pushed again while Caleb held her and counted.

Selene arrived with the requested bowl of ice chips and set them on the bedside stand. In her other hand she held a pair of wool socks. “Put these on, Caleb,” she said, handing them to him. “We warmed them by the fire for you. Your feet look about frozen.”

“That was sweet of you. Thanks.” He tugged the damp socks off, and quickly pulled the warm ones on, just barely finishing before the next contraction came.

It went on and on. Caleb holding her, counting with her, wiping the sweat away from her brow, feeding her ice chips in between. She pushed until she thought she couldn’t push anymore. She felt her body being torn apart. And then, finally, a rush of relief.

She fell back on the bed, breathless and limp. Panting, she looked at Caleb, and saw his gaze directed toward her mother, at the bed’s foot. His look was intense, and for the first time, she saw the fear in his eyes showing through the confident facade. The only sound from the foot of the bed was that of her mother’s hurried movements.

“Mamma?” Maya whispered. She tried to lift her head from the pillows to see. Her heart seemed to slow to a stop in her chest, and she held her breath. Caleb’s hand tightened around hers.

Then, softly, a hoarse and snuffly cry. Like the bleat of a newborn lamb. And then her mother was at her side, holding a tiny, messy, squirming, red-faced bundle, wrapped in a small

blanket. “A boy,” Vidalia said. “Your son, Caleb.” And she handed the baby into Caleb’s waiting arms.

Maya couldn’t take her eyes off the baby. Her mother helped her sit up farther, plumping the pillows behind her, which she’d pretty well flattened, as Caleb sat on the edge of the bed holding the baby. He hadn’t said a word. Not a word.

As soon as Maya was upright, Caleb gently placed the baby into her arms. Filmy, unfocused eyes squinted at her, and when she touched the tiny hand, it gripped her finger and her chest contracted with a kind of wonder and joy she’d never experienced. Lifting her head, she looked at Caleb.

His face was wet. His eyes, his cheeks. He met her gaze, and smiled at her. “My God, Maya, look what you did. You’re...incredible.” And then, leaning closer, he brushed his lips over hers, very gently. She closed her eyes, sighed very softly. His hand threaded in her hair, and he kissed her again. Then he drew back and just stared at her, as if he’d never quite seen her before.

She looked at the baby. “Cain Caleb Montgomery the Fourth,” she said softly. “Such a big name for such a little thing.”

Caleb lowered his forehead to hers, and the tears on her cheeks mingled with those on his.

The sound of a motor reached Maya, and only then did she tear her eyes away from her baby. Then the lights flickered on, blinked off, came on again, and stayed this time.

“Thank the Lord,” Vidalia said. “Now, darlin’, if it’s okay, can I take my grandson for just a bit?”

Maya nodded, and Caleb gathered the baby from her arms and handed him carefully to Vidalia. She turned toward the doorway, and for the first time Maya looked beyond Caleb to see that Kara and Selene were crowded there, peering in. They were both damp eyed, too.

“Well come on in here and close the door, this little one needs to be kept very warm just now,” Vidalia said.

“Mel’s resting,” Kara explained. “Tom Cooper’s gonna sit with her so we can help out up here.”

“I turned the furnace way up, Mom, and I brought diapers and baby clothes, and blankets,” Selene said.

“Yeah, and even a little hat.” Kara held up the tiny little cotton skullcap. “They always put hats on them in the hospitals.”

Vidalia looked at the baby, obviously not relishing the idea of handing him over. But then another contraction came, and Maya, caught by surprise, cried out. Vidalia shot her a worried glance and handed the newborn off to Selene, complete with a set of instructions, which she spoke rapidly even as she resumed her position at the foot of the bed.

“Oh, God, not yet,” Maya moaned. “I can’t do this again.” It hit her that that was exactly what was about to happen.

“Yes, you can. Come on, Maya, you can. I know you can,” Caleb told her.

Panting, she waited for the pain to pass, then looked up at him. “I need to sit up. I need something to brace against.”

He didn’t hesitate. He lifted her shoulders and positioned himself on the bed behind her, just the way they had done at the childbirth class. He bent his knees so she could brace her hands on his thighs, and his chest was solid behind her.

“Better?” he asked.

She let her head fall back against him and nodded. “I think...oh, God!”

“Another one? Okay, okay, it’s all right. Breathe through it.” His hands were on her belly, rubbing circles that were supposed to be soothing. But it was his breath, and his voice, so close to her ear that gave her the most relief, the most comfort. He was here. He was actually here for her, when it had been all but impossible to be. He was not like her father, and he would never be. He might not love her, but he would always, she sensed, be there for her. And for her children.

He held her like that all through the wee hours. He breathed with her, talked to her, held her. A few feet away, her sisters took turns holding the baby, their body heat, his incubator. And as the sun came up, breaking through the storm clouds, and climbing steadily higher, Maya pushed with all the strength she had left in her.

And finally the second baby emerged into the world.

She collapsed against Caleb. And his arms tightened around her. She heard the fear in his voice when he spoke. “Vidalia...? Is he...?”

Opening her eyes, Maya looked up at Caleb’s face, seeing the stricken expression. Fear hit her hard, and she shifted her gaze to the foot of the bed, where her mother was working. But she couldn’t see the baby.

But then Vidalia smiled, and she knew it was okay. Everything was okay. The baby started to cry gustily as Vidalia wrapped it in a blanket and held it close to her. “You men just tend to jump to conclusions, don’t you?” she asked Caleb as she brought the little bundle and placed it in Maya’s arms. “Your daughter is just fine,” Vidalia whispered.

“Oh...a girl?” Maya breathed. “A little girl? Just like Selene said....”

“Was there ever any doubt?” Selene asked softly. “Help ought to be here soon. At first light Mr. Cooper headed back to town. Said he’d go straight to the sheriff’s department and let them know the situation.”

Maya frowned tiredly. “How was he going to do that?”

“Same way he got out here with Caleb,” Kara said. “On his bulldozer.”

Maya blinked in shock, tipping her head backward to stare up at Caleb. “You came all the way out here last night on a bulldozer?”

He shrugged. “Hey, I was looking for a snowmobile, but I figured I’d better take what I could get.”

“But it must have taken over an hour—and in that storm... God, Caleb, it was a crazy thing to do.”

“Walking would have been crazier,” he told her. And his eyes got that look again. All...deep and potent. “But I would have, if that was the only way to get to you last night.”

Her brows came down. “How did you know?”

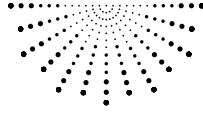
He shook his head. “I didn’t...I just had a feeling that I had to get here. That you needed me.”

“I was sending a telepathic 911,” Selene confessed from across the room.

But Caleb’s gaze never moved from Maya’s, as she whispered, “So was I, Caleb. I was wishing for you so much... and you came. You came.”

“I always will,” he promised her. And for the first time, she believed it with all her heart.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



She'd been resting in the hospital all day. Heck of a way to spend Christmas Eve. Caleb had been in and out a half-dozen times, each time seeming a little more tense. He brought flowers the first time, candy the second, a pair of giant teddy bears the third. He kept saying he had a very busy schedule today, but that he couldn't stay away from her and the babies for more than a couple of hours at a time.

She wished he wouldn't say things like that unless he really meant them—at least, the way she wanted him to mean them. She was sure he was sincere where the babies were concerned, but she was equally certain he could bear to be away from her just fine, if need be.

At any rate, he certainly was heroic. She'd had the TV on for the past hour, and the coverage of the storm told her more than she'd already known about how bad it had been last night. The last time a blizzard of this magnitude had hit Big Falls had been in the latter part of the last century. Caleb had literally risked his life to get to her.

Her admiration for him—her love for him—grew even deeper at the knowledge.

The door opened, and she looked up, wondering which of her frequent visitors would appear there. Selene, Kara, her mother, Caleb—or Mel, who was in a room down the hall recovering from her brush with hypothermia. Aside from a touch of frostbite, she was going to be just fine. They'd promised she could go home today. Maya and the babies would be released on Christmas morning.

But the visitor was none of those people. It was, instead, Cain Caleb Montgomery II. He hesitated in the doorway, peering in at her, leaning on his cane. “I can come back later, if you’re resting,” he said.

“No, no, please come in.”

He did, his cane thumping the floor with every other step.

“Have you seen the babies yet?”

He looked at her with a smile...an actual smile. She hadn’t seen one on him until then. “I’ve been in the nursery for the past half hour.” The smile grew. “They let me hold them. I didn’t want to put them down.”

“I’m glad I’m not the only one,” she said. “Come in and sit down, Mr. Montgomery.”

“Oh, now. You call me Cain.” He sat down, pursed his lips. “Actually, I’m hoping that, down the road, you might want to call me Dad, instead. I mean, you know, since you’re marrying my son.”

Her hand touched her chest involuntarily—in response to a small flutter there. “I haven’t called anyone that in years.”

“Yes, well...” He cleared his throat. “I owe you an apology, Maya. I came here judging you, insulting you and your family, and the truth was, I was only reacting out of fear that you were going to take my son away from me. Instead, you’ve given me...such a precious gift.”

She didn’t know how to respond to that, so she said nothing.

“I want you to know that Caleb and I have had a long talk. I’ve told him already that whatever he decides to do or not do with his life is fine with me. Just so long as I have plenty of time with his...his family.”

“Oh, my goodness.” She had to dab at her eyes. “That must have meant so much to him. And it does to me, too. Thank you Cain...Dad.”

His smile was quick and bright. “Well, I won’t keep you. We have lots to do tonight after all. But um...I have a little gift

for you first. Two, actually, but um—”

Caleb came in then, glanced at his father, then at Maya, and smiled warmly.

“Good, good, you’re here. You should be,” Cain said. “Would you kindly get the package I left outside the door there, son?”

Caleb frowned, but did as his father asked. He came back with a huge package wrapped in gleaming gold foil, with elaborate ribbons. “It’s for Maya,” Cain said.

Caleb brought the package to her and laid it across her lap on the bed.

“My goodness, it’s almost too beautiful to open.”

But she opened it anyway. She tore the paper aside and took the cover off the large box it had concealed.

And then she felt her mouth fall open and tears spring to her eyes as she stared down at the wedding gown of ivory satin and lace. She looked up at Cain, who hurried forward and took the dress from the box by its shoulders, holding it up so she could see it better. The full skirt spilled free, and Maya caught her breath. “I don’t know what to say. It’s...it’s beautiful. The most beautiful gown I could imagine.”

“I knew you were planning to have the ceremony before the birth,” Cain said. “So I thought you probably didn’t have a dress—at least, not one that would fit you now.”

“Well, you were right,” Maya said, still admiring the gown.

“This was...this was Caleb’s mother’s.”

Her gaze shifted to Cain. “Oh...oh, my...” Pushing aside her covers, sending the box and wrappings to the floor, Maya got to her feet, went to the older man and kissed him softly on the cheek. “Thank you. You don’t know how much this means to me.”

He grinned and handed Caleb the dress. “I’ll go now, so you can give her the other present.”

“Thanks, Dad. Or should I say Grandpa?”

“Grandpa is a title I’ll bear with great pride.” He winked at his son and limped out the door, with a decided bounce in his step.

Caleb opened the small closet and carefully arranged the dress on a hanger. Then he turned to where Maya was still standing.

“You should be lying down. Resting.”

“I’ve been lying down all day, Caleb. I’m fine, really.”

He smiled. “You sure are.”

Feeling her cheeks heat, she averted her face, walked to the chair beside the bed and sat down. Caleb went to the bed, sat on its edge. “I want to talk to you about our...um...our arrangement.”

Her head came up fast. “You do?” Worry gnawed at her. Had he changed his mind? Had he decided he didn’t want to marry a woman he didn’t love after all?

“Things have changed, Maya. And...well, I just don’t think it would be fair to let you go through with this marriage without being perfectly honest with you.”

Lifting her chin, bracing herself, Maya looked him in the eye. “All right. I’m listening.”

Drawing a breath, he took her hands in his. “First of all, I’ve decided not to run for the Senate. In fact, I’m pulling out of politics altogether.”

It was not what she’d expected to hear.

“I thought I’d go into private practice. Open a law office right here in Big Falls. How would you feel about that?”

She knew she was gaping, but she couldn’t seem to stop. Shaking herself, she finally let her relief show. “I’d feel... wonderful. God, Caleb, that’s almost everything I’ve been hoping for.”

“Really?” He smiled. “Why didn’t you say so?”

She shook her head. “I...I didn’t want to start making career decisions for you, Caleb. I don’t have the right to do that.”

He came off the bed, still holding both her hands. “You have every right. Maya...” He hesitated, bit his lip. “You said that was *almost* everything you’d been hoping for. What else was there?”

She looked away fast. “Nothing. It doesn’t matter, Caleb.”

One hand rose, palm gentle on her cheek, turning her to face him again. “Come on, Maya, tell me the truth. Please. Because...I’m hoping for more, too.”

She felt her eyes widen as she searched his. “Caleb?”

“I’m in love with you, Maya. I don’t want to marry you for the sake of the babies, or to save your reputation or mine, or anything else. I want to marry you because I don’t ever want to have to spend a day of my life without you. And I’m sitting here like a big idiot hoping to God you feel the same way about me.”

Her lips trembled, and tears spilled onto her cheeks. “I do love you, Caleb. I have all along.”

He cupped her face and kissed her, long and slow and deeply. And when he straightened away again, he took a small velvet box from his pocket. “This is the other gift Dad mentioned.” He opened the lid to reveal a glittering diamond engagement ring, its large teardrop-shaped stone utterly flawless. “This was my mother’s, as well. And I know she’d want you to wear it.”

Taking the ring from its nest, he slipped it onto Maya’s finger. “Will you marry me, Maya? For real?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Yes, Caleb, I will.”

He kissed her softly again. “In an hour?”

“I...” Her eyes flew open. “An hour?”

“What did you think I’d been running around planning for all day?”

“But...an hour?”

“What’s wrong, darling? Do you need help getting ready that soon?”

“Maybe a little,” she said, her tone sarcastic.

He grinned at her, gave her a devilish wink and one last kiss, then went to the door and pulled it open. “Would all my pending in-laws please come in now?”

One by one, her sisters came in the door. Selene, and then Mel, and then Kara. Her mother came in last and let the door go.

“No, no, no. That’s not everybody,” Caleb said, snatching the door before it closed all the way, opening it wide once more. “I said *all* my pending in-laws.”

Several confused frowns were aimed at him. And then it became clear.

Edain Brand, the prodigal daughter, walked through the door, looking even more beautiful than she had when she’d left home two years before.

“Edie? Oh my God, Edie?” Maya cried.

Kara, Selene and Mel mobbed her with hugs, and when they parted, Edie faced Vidalia.

Their eyes met, and for just one brief second Maya wondered if the old tension would rise up yet again between them. But then Vidalia smiled and opened her arms, and Edie rushed into them.

Maya met Caleb’s eyes across the room. “You did this, didn’t you?”

“Merry Christmas,” he said.

Edie and Vidalia pulled apart, and Edie went to Maya, hugged her gently, and said, “I can’t believe I’m an aunt twice over.”

“It’s so good to have you home, Edie.”

“It’s good to be home, hon.”

They separated, and again Maya looked toward the door. Caleb blew her a kiss and slipped quietly out of the room.



An hour later, Caleb waited in the elaborately decorated hospital chapel as his bride walked toward him. His children were held in the loving arms of their grandmother and grandfather, and every time he looked at them, he felt his chest swell with pride.

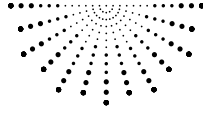
When he looked at their mother, it was more like awe. He couldn't believe he'd gotten so lucky. But maybe... maybe luck had nothing to do with it. Selene kept insisting that it was no coincidence that caused him to have a flat tire in front of the OK Corral almost nine months ago. She kept saying it was something far more powerful. Something like fate.

When Maya stood beside him and slipped her hand into his, smiling up into his eyes with love shining from hers, he thought maybe his bride's kid sister was wiser than any of them.

He slid a glance toward where Selene was sitting.

She gave him a nod as if she knew exactly what he was thinking.

EPILOGUE



So that's the whole story. Well, not the whole story, but that's how it began. I'm sitting here now on the wide front porch of my log cabin. The snow melted almost before Christmas Day was over; spring came as it always does. From here, I can look down on the farmhouse on the far side of the wildflower-dotted meadow below. It's within shouting distance. Not that shouting is ever needed. My mom and sisters are up here as often as Caleb and the babies and I are down there. But we always were a close family. Always will be, too.

Edie's still here. She's been quiet and moody, and I think Mom has been letting her get away with that for the past few months, but her patience is wearing thin. Any day now I expect her to tell Edie enough is enough and it's time to stop licking her wounds and tell us what went wrong out there in La-La-Land. Something sure did.

My dream house is almost exactly the way I pictured it. I say "almost" because I never pictured it this big and sprawling, but I guess that's what happens when you marry a millionaire. Caleb got rid of the Lexus sports coupe, though. Bought a minivan for me and an Explorer sports utility for him. Eddie Bauer Edition, of course, but that's okay. He managed to rent office space in town, just around the corner from Sunny's Place, and he hung up a shingle that says Montgomery Law Office. He takes all kinds of cases—and many of his clients can't afford to pay him. But he says that, luckily, he can afford to represent them.

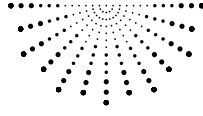
He's a hell of a guy, my husband.

Here he comes now, walking across the meadow from Mom's house, a baby in each arm. Look at him, smiling and talking to them as if they can understand every word. Sometimes, the way they look at him, I almost think they can. We wanted to name our little girl after my mom. Vidalia. But Mom insisted we call her Dahlia instead. You know, like the flower. Mom said as much as she might deny it, it wasn't easy growing up with an onion for a name. As for little Caleb, we call him Cal, just to avoid confusion. Tough having three men in the family with the same name. And Caleb's father is around enough so that he finally broke down and rented a house in town, so he has a permanent residence out here. He could stay with us when he visits, of course, but he's too stubborn to want to appear dependent. Still, he's out here more than he's in Tulsa. He took Caleb's decision not to run for office far better than either of us expected him to. The old goat is so madly in love with his grandchildren that there isn't much Caleb or I can say or do to upset him. But if he brings any more toys to the house, I don't know where we'll put them.

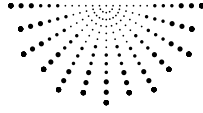
Caleb's halfway to the house now. He just looked up and caught my eye. And the breeze is ruffling his hair. Gosh, when he looks at me like that, my stomach still clenches up. I love that man more than I ever thought possible. He healed my old wounds for me...and I like to think I helped mend some of his. And he gave me something more precious than gold—our babies. And his love.

And we're happy—deliriously happy with our little family. And I think we will be for a long, long time.

A MOMMY FOR CHRISTMAS



CHAPTER ONE



When he first opened the door to her knock, he thought the woman standing there was a homeless drug addict. And then he realized she was his wife.

Ex-wife.

For a second he just stood there staring at her. A bag of bones with stringy once-blond hair and drug-dulled eyes that used to sparkle like sapphires. Yeah, she was his ex. *And* a drug addict. The one didn't preclude the other, though if anyone had told him that five years ago, Jim would have pounded him into taco filler.

"Hi, Jim," she said, face expressionless. She didn't bother brushing the rapidly melting snowflakes from her hair or her shoulders. "It's been a long time."

Four years. Four long years. And now she was back and all he could feel was panic. "What do you want?" Not Tyler, he thought silently. Please, God, not that. Not that she would have a leg to stand on even if she *had* come for their son. She'd signed him away to save her own skin. After nearly killing him, she hadn't had much choice about it.

"Not even going to invite me in? Say it's good to see me? Ask how I've been?"

"I don't particularly give a damn how you've been." But he wasn't sure how much longer her stick-figure legs were going to hold her, and it was chilly in the hallway. She was so skinny she was shivering. So he stepped aside and prayed Ty would remain blissfully sound asleep in his room. The boy

needed a mother, was desperate for a mother. And Jim was working hard to find him one. Just not *this* one.

Angela came inside, staring blankly at the wreath on the door as she walked past it. Real pine. He'd bought it last week and then he and Ty had spent hours decorating it with pine cones and tiny ornaments and a can of spray on snow. And some bells. Ty had insisted he add bells that would jingle whenever the door opened.

He'd have told her all that. But she wouldn't have cared. She was already swinging the door closed behind her—he caught it before it slammed and closed it quietly. Looking around the apartment, she nodded slightly. “Nice place. Way nicer than our old one was.”

He shrugged. “I had to find a ground-floor unit. It's easier on Ty.”

She nodded, trailing her fingers over the gleaming hardwood finish of a coffee table before sitting down on the couch. He almost winced at her sitting on the furniture. He had a lot of experience with addicts. They were usually dirty, often contagious. And she was an addict. No question. He hadn't seen her in four years, but he'd seen her name countless times.

A second glance told him she wasn't filthy. She'd bathed and her clothes had been washed recently. He thought she might have even run a comb through her hair. Not the usual behavior of the types he dealt with on a daily basis.

“What are you doing here, Ang?” He took a seat in a chair across from her, hoping she'd get straight to the point. He just wanted her out of there.

She lowered her head. “I need a favor.”

“Figures.” He didn't try to hide his disgust. “Are you even going to ask how he is?”

Her brows drew together and she seemed momentarily angry—the first hint of emotion he'd seen in those zoned-out eyes of hers. But she bit back whatever she'd been about to say and replaced it with, “How is he?”

“He’s wonderful. But he’s still suffering. Still in the leg braces. Has physical therapy twice a week and hates it. One more surgery to go, though. Just one more.”

She nodded slowly. Didn’t ask any questions. Why he felt compelled to fill her in, he didn’t know, but he kept on talking.

“We’ve been through six nannies so far. But they move on, you know. Get boyfriends, lives, less demanding jobs. He’s a lot. I’m taking every bit of time off I can get without being fired. Not that I mind. I love being with him.”

She drew a breath and studied her hands. Was he boring her with this?

“He’s sleeping. But if you want, you can look in on him.”

“No.” She said it a little too quickly. “That’s not why I came.”

He turned his head so she wouldn’t see the hatred in his eyes, focused instead on the photograph of Ty that hung on the wall near his bedroom. His twinkling eyes and deep dimples and baby teeth eased the rage in Jim’s heart. How could Angela not want to see her own child?

Didn’t matter. He was glad. Ty didn’t need this pile of human refuse in his life. “Right,” he reminded himself. “You’re here because you need a favor.”

She drew a breath, lifted her head. “That’s right”

“Hell, Ang, you look like what you really need is a month in rehab. What the hell has happened to you?”

She averted her face.

“You’re still using.” He didn’t make it a question. It had been her damned drug addiction that had almost killed Tyler. She’d been wasted on coke when she’d fallen down two flights of stairs, taking their newborn son with her. If he’d only been more aware, been paying more attention....

“I’m clean. Have been for four weeks straight.”

He looked at her eyes and knew better.

“Really. I mean it. I’m changing my life, Jim. I met a guy—a man, a decent man. He’s helping me. He...he loves me.”

So did I once, he thought.

“He wants to marry me.”

“Congratulations.”

She drew a breath. “But it might not happen. There are... problems. Legal problems.”

He lifted his head slowly. Something about the tone of her voice set off alarm bells in his head. “Who is this guy?”

“Vincent Stefano.”

He shot to his feet the minute she said the name, stunned. “What the hell is this, Angela?”

“He’s a decent man, Jim.”

“He’s a porn king, Ang.”

“But that’s not illegal.”

“No, not until it involves kids.”

“He didn’t do what you think he did. Those photos were planted in his office. He was set up.”

“Right.” Working on an anonymous tip, he and his partner had executed a search warrant on Skinny Vinnie’s office and found an envelope full of photos that made him want to puke. Kids. *Young* kids. “He’s a piece of dirt, and he’s going away for a long time. So don’t make any wedding plans just yet.” He closed his eyes and swallowed the bile that rose in his throat. “God, how could you be with a sleazebag like him?”

“I *love* him, Jim!”

“Then you’re as sick as he is.” He started toward the door.

“You don’t understand,” she cried, getting up and hurrying behind him. “He’s not what you think. He’s being framed. And the only thing they have on him now is your testimony.”

“Is that what he told you?” He speared her with his eyes. “He’s a liar, Ang. I’m not the only cop who saw those photos.

And even if I was and I agreed to change my testimony... that is what you're asking for here, isn't it?"

She couldn't hold his eyes, so she lowered hers and nodded.

"Even if I did, there would still be the small matter of those photos locked up safe and sound in the evidence room. Your slimy boyfriend's going down, Ang."

She blinked slowly. "I don't understand. Vinnie said—"

"Just understand this—I wouldn't change my testimony if your damn life depended on it. You got that? Because these are kids. *Kids*, Ang. Kids come way higher on my list of priorities than my drug-addicted ex-wife's love life. Deal with it."

"Damn you, why can't you just listen?"

He went to the door, opened it wide. The bells on the wreath jingled like mad. "Get the hell out."

"I have a chance to be happy, Jim. Don't take it away from me."

"Yeah, it's all about you," he said, holding the door. "I'm testifying against this pervert because I can't stand the thought of you being happy with someone else. You keep believing that."

She leaned toward him, pressed her hands to the front of his shirt. "Don't you care about me anymore? Even a little bit?"

He closed his hands around her wrists to remove them from his chest. "Care about you? You got high and took my baby son down two flights of stairs, Angela. Twenty-four stairs pounded his tiny body. Twenty-four. You broke his little legs in seven places, twisted up his spine, split his head open, and he's still suffering from it. Every time I take Tyler in for physical therapy and listen to him cry in pain and beg me not to make him go through it, I hate you more. That's what I feel for you. Now get out. And if you come within a mile of my son again, I'll find a way to put you behind bars."

She'd backed away from him as he'd pummeled her with his words. When he finished, she lowered her head and moved slowly through the door. "You never loved me. Not really. Not the way he does."

"You think so? Tell me something, Ang, when did you meet this slimeball?"

She stopped in the doorway, head hanging low. "A few months ago."

"Before or after I arrested him?"

"A-after. But it's not—"

"And where did you meet him? Did he drive his Porsche to one of the gutters where you sleep, one of the dives where you drink? Did he walk up to you in his designer suit and ask for a date?"

She shook her head. "It's none of your business."

"Was he a John, Ang?"

She shot him a wide eyed look.

"I'm a cop, you think I don't know? So he picked you up. You, out of every working girl out there. The ex-wife of the cop who busted him. You think that's some kind of coincidence?"

She blinked fast, tears springing into her eyes. "You don't know anything."

"I know he's using you to get to me. And it's not gonna work. You wanna get clean, you do it yourself. Get into rehab. Stand on your own two feet and take control of your life for a change. But don't see this guy as some fairytale prince to your Cinderella. He's trouble, Ang."

Her tears were flowing now. "You're wrong!" she shouted. "You're wrong and I hate you. I *hate* you!"

She surged through the door, ran down the hall to the big double exit doors, getting to them just as they opened and his partner stepped through in a whoosh of snow and wintry wind.

Colby Benton sent a puzzled look at the woman as he stomped his feet and brushed at his sleeves. She pushed past him, out into the snowy Chicago night. The doors swung closed behind her and Colby gave his balding red head a shake, brows raised as he met Jim's eyes.

"Tell me that wasn't a date with one of your mommy candidates," he said. "And if it was, I hope it was a *blind* date."

"Didn't you recognize her, Colby? That was Ang."

Colby's reddish eyebrows went up even farther. "Shit."

"Yeah, that sums it up pretty well." Jim sighed, still staring through the windows in the big double doors, though she was long gone. There was only the steady, swirling patterns made by the snow and shifting wind in the glow of the outdoor lights. Finally he shook himself. "Come on in. I have to go make sure she didn't wake Tyler with all her bull."

Jim turned and walked into his apartment with Colby on his heels. He didn't have to tell his longtime friend to close and lock the door behind him. They were cops, they did some things automatically.

Jim stood for a long moment in Tyler's bedroom. It wasn't dark. He always left a night-light on for his son—a little blue cartoon hound-dog lit by a Christmas-tree lightbulb. The same blue dog and numerous blue paw prints decorated the bedspread, the sheets and the pillowcase. A strip of wallpaper border halfway up the wall sported the same character. There was even a blue "thinking chair" in the corner.

And in the midst of it all, snuggled deep in the covers, lay Tyler. Hair too thick and a little too long and looking like a mixture of honey and amber. Eyes usually sparkling with mischief and intelligence, and so big you could fall right into them, but closed now as he slept. He lay with his lashes resting on his chubby cheeks, hugging a stuffed blue dog. Still sound asleep.

"He okay?" Colby whispered.

Jim turned, saw his friend in the doorway and nodded. “Never even knew she was here,” he said. He walked softly out of the bedroom, pulled the door closed, but not all the way. Colby handed him one of the beers he’d taken from the fridge, and the two headed for the sofa and sat.

“That’s a blessing,” Colby said. “He doesn’t even remember her, does he?”

“No. He only knows his birth mother had to go far, far away and can’t ever be a mom.”

Colby nodded slow, sipped his beer as he got comfortable. “Any progress finding him a new one?” He asked it with a slight smile, as if he still wasn’t convinced Jim was serious about his ongoing project

“I’ve crossed the first ten candidates off the list. Have to find some new prospects before I can move on.”

Colby blinked. “You’re kidding, right? I mean, you’re really... auditioning women for this?”

“Dating. As far as the women know, anyway. Hell, it’s not exactly honest, but I need to find out what they’re about before I make any kind of decision here. I need a woman who can love him the way I do. That’s a tall order to fill. She’s got to be willing to put him first in her life, ahead of everything else. Family, career, friends—”

“You?”

Jim nodded. “Me, certainly. And herself most of all. I don’t want another selfish bitch within a hundred miles of Tyler.”

Colby seemed to consider that. “I didn’t think you were that serious about all this. Hell, Jim, you really mean to get married to a woman you don’t love, may not even be attracted to, just to give Tyler a mother?” He searched Jim’s face. “It seems kinda... cold.”

“Love doesn’t enter into it. Sex doesn’t have to either. It’s about Ty—he’s what’s important.” Jim lowered his head. “I can’t be with him all the time. The nannies aren’t working out, the physical therapy is torture and all he does is cry. Night after night the kid cries, asking me why he doesn’t have a

mom. All the kids in his preschool class do, the kids he sees at his doctor's appointments and PT sessions, even the kids on television. He's suffering."

Colby nodded. "But lots of kids don't have moms. He can do just fine without one."

"But he doesn't *have* to. He's suffered enough. Anything I can give that kid to make his life easier, to make it happier, come hell or high water, Colby, I'll damn well do it. Hell, I'm a decent-looking man."

"A stud-muffin, according to the girls in the prosecutor's office," Colby said.

Jim shot him a look and went on with his analysis. "I earn a good living. And I'll tell you, if I can find a woman who'd be the kind of mother Tyler needs, I'd treat her like solid gold."

"Except for loving her. You won't do that."

Jim tipped his head back, looked at the ceiling. "Who'd have pegged you for a sappy romantic, pal? I told you, love has nothing to do with it."

"It isn't gonna work without it, Jim."

"No? Well, it didn't work too well with it, either. I loved Ang. Look where that got me. More importantly, look where it got Tyler." He pursed his lips, shook his head. "Nope. I don't need to love her. Just need her to love my son."

Jim took a pull from his longneck brown bottle and set it down. "So what's up, partner? I know damn well you didn't come all the way over here to talk about my love life."

Colby nodded. "No, you're right. But I have to admit, this whole mommy finding mission fascinates me. We, uh—we have a problem. With the Stefano case."

Jim frowned. "Funny, that's what Ang was here to talk to me about."

Colby looked up fast. "No kidding? What about it?"

“Skinny Vinnie’s her new boyfriend. Hooked up with her sometime after we busted him—probably as soon as he made bail and paid a P.I. to check into our backgrounds, looking for some leverage. He’s got her asking me to back off on my testimony.”

“Yeah? And what did he plan to do about *mine*?”

Jim shrugged. “He told her my word was the only thing the D.A. had on him. I told her he was a liar.”

“Oh, he’s a liar all right. Maybe not about this, though.”

Jim frowned. “What do you mean?”

Colby drew a breath. “Those photos we found in his office have disappeared from the evidence room, Jim. They’re gone. They’re just... gone.”

“We have copies.”

“They’re gone, too. There’s nothing left. So now all the D.A. has on Vinnie Stefano is you and me. We saw the photos, booked them into evidence. We can testify to that, describe them. But even that might not be enough.”

“Particularly not if the defense attorney finds out Vinnie’s screwing my ex,” Jim said, a knot forming in his stomach. “That wouldn’t exactly make me an objective, reliable witness, cop or not.”

“Nope.” Colby took another pull on his beer, draining the bottle. “Chief Wilcox figures Vinnie will be trying anything he can use on us. Blackmail, intimidation, threats, character assassination. Might even try to take us out.”

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” Jim said. “He’s got the money and the connections to pull it off, too.”

“The chief wants us to get out of town until the trial, Jim.”

Jim sighed, glancing toward his son’s bedroom. “It’s not as easy as all that. I’ve got Ty. His doctors, his PT. Hell, it’s almost Christmas.”

“So go someplace you know. Someplace where you can easily set him up with a doctor and physical therapist. Call it a

holiday vacation, and we don't come home until January 4th, the day of the trial. That's just under three weeks from now."

"What do you mean *we*? We're going together?"

Colby slapped him on the shoulder. "Hell, you don't think I'm going to let you go without me, do you? I gotta see the way you manage to con some unsuspecting woman into marrying you. A new town will give you a whole new pool of potential brides, won't it?"

"A new town." Jim tipped his head and thought about that. "Or maybe an old town."

Colby stared at him. "What are you thinking?"

Jim went to a shelf, pulled down an old high school yearbook and began flipping through the photos, pausing on the head shots of every girl he'd dated back then. There were a lot of them.

"Thinking of going home for Christmas, pal. Back to Big Falls in the northernest, westernest part of Oklahoma. And one of the girls I left behind."

"Which one?"

"I'll let you know."

Colby rolled his eyes. "You're hopeless, you know that? Hell, that's farther than I wanted to go. But I'm in," Colby said. "I got three weeks' vacation time coming, and Wilcox says you have at least that much. When you wanna head out?"

Jim sighed, thought about Angela, the desperation in her eyes. She'd be back. And she wouldn't be above using Tyler to get her way. "In the morning," he said. "We can take both cars—make it easier to get around once we're down there."

"I'll be here at eight, then," Colby said, rising to his feet.

"Bring breakfast," Jim told him.



BEFORE GOING TO his room to start packing, Jim looked in on Tyler once more. His cheeks were starting to lose a little of their baby roundness, his face turning into the face of a little boy. He was an angel. He was Jim's whole life. There was nothing he wouldn't do for his son.

He ran a hand over Ty's silken hair. Then he frowned as he noticed a bit of paper sticking out from under his pillow.

Tugging it out, careful not to wake his son, he looked down at the sheet of oversize lined paper Ty must have got from preschool. He'd drawn on it in crayon. There was a head with squiggles sticking out the top that represented hair. Stick figure arms and legs sprouted directly from the head itself. It had unevenly matched eyes, a round purple nose and a smiling pink mouth. There were squiggly objects all around the figure. Written painstakingly across the top of the page was a single word that made Jim's heart turn the consistency of oatmeal.

Mommy.

His son rolled over and opened his eyes—eyes as blue as the sky back home in Big Falls. “Hey, Dad.”

“Hey, Ty. Sorry, pal. I didn't mean to wake you up.”

Ty took the drawing from his dad's hands and studied it..

“Ty?”

“Hmm?”

“You draw that picture in school today?”

“Yeah. We was makin' wish pitchers.”

“Wish pictures?”

Tyler nodded. “We had to draw a pitcher of somethin' we wanted for Christmas or Hanka.”

“Hanukkah?”

“Yeah that. We got two kids that call Christmas Hanka.”

“It's not exactly the same thing,” he said.

“I know! They get candles 'stead of a tree, and presents every day for a week. Teacher 'splained it.” He smiled

broadly. “So I drew a mommy.”

“How come you didn’t show me?”

Tyler shrugged. “I thought if I put it under my pillow, the tooth fairy might find it.”

Jim swallowed the lump in his throat “Tooth fairies don’t bring mommies, Ty.”

“I know that. I just figured she might know some other fairies or somethin’. But it’s okay if she doesn’t. I’m made another one to send to Santa.” He sat up a little and pointed at the sealed envelope on his night stand with SANTA written on the front. Then he looked at his picture again. “I made her real pretty, Dad. And look—” he pointed to the shapes on the page all around her “—she has a pony *and* a dog and she knows how to make cookies and she never *ever* gets mad or yells at anybody. She gets a tire swing and a big backyard and she loves little boys. Even the ones who are kinda brokened.”

“Ah, Ty...” Jim damn near choked on the lump in his throat as he wrapped Tyler tight in his arms and held him. “You are the best little boy any mommy could ever have, you understand me?”

“Then how come I don’t have a mom?”

“Because I haven’t found one good enough for you yet,” he told his son. “Not because you’re broken. You’re perfect. You understand? Perfect.”

He gave one last squeeze, then gently eased Tyler back onto his pillows and tucked him in. “And it’s not up to Santa to pick out the best mom for you, son. That’s kinda my job.”

“Then he won’t bring me one?”

“Probably not. I mean, he’s pretty much in the toy business, you know? Moms are people. You see the difference?”

Tyler heaved a big sigh. “Yeah. I see. So *you* have to get me a mom.”

“That’s the idea.”

“But you’re so slow, Dad. Most of my friends at school already got moms.”

Jim thinned his lips and decided it was time to change the subject. “Guess what we’re doin’ tomorrow?”

Tyler was instantly distracted. “I thought I was goin’ to school and you was goin’ to work.”

“Nope. We are going on a vacation.”

Tyler tipped his head to one side. “We are?”

“Yep. I’m going to take you back to the little town where I grew up. You’ll get to see the house I lived in and my old high school and everything.”

“Wow! And the waterfall, too?”

“Yep. The waterfall, too.”

“Cool.” Then he frowned. “But will we be back in time for Christmas?”

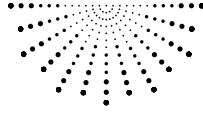
“I was thinking we might spend Christmas there.”

“But what if Santa can’t find me?” Tyler asked, his eyes suddenly huge and extremely worried.

“I’ll make sure to let him know where we are, kiddo. Promise.” Tyler sighed in relief. “You get some sleep now. It’ll be a big day tomorrow.”

Tyler held up his arms and puckered up his lips. Jim leaned down for a good-night kiss. Then he left his son to his dreams of the perfect mommy, and went into his own room. But instead of packing, he sat down with his old high school yearbook, a yellow legal pad and a black-ink pen and he got to work on a list of potential mothers for his son.

CHAPTER TWO



*K*ara Brand came down the stairs, not touching the garland decked bannister, to find her mother and three out of four sisters waiting for her with the huge Christmas tree as their backdrop. She very nearly turned around and went right back up again. But those smiling, expectant faces wouldn't allow it.

"You look wonderful," her mom said, clapping her hands together. "Except for that doe-in-the-headlights expression. Girl, what are you afraid of?"

Eddie elbowed the matriarch gently. "Now, Mom, ease off. It's a big day for her. She's got every right to be nervous." She strode forward, eyeing her younger sister as if she were one of her photographs. "You do look great, hon."

"Yeah, thanks to you." Over the past year her model-turned-photographer sister had made Kara her pet project. She'd nagged her about her walk and her tendency to slouch, grilled her until her entire demeanor had changed. Kara didn't trip over her long legs anymore. She walked surely, deliberately, and had broken the habit of hurrying all the time. She held her chin up and her back straight and she looked people in the eye when she spoke to them. Between that and the fashion coaching, shopping trips, skin-care and makeup tips and a half dozen new hairstyles, Kara almost felt beautiful now. And she'd finally begun to stop thinking of herself as a klutz.

But today she wondered if even Eddie's coaching and makeovers would be of any help.

“There’s no reason for you to be nervous, Kara,” her oldest sister Maya told her. “You’ve got a solid business plan and no competition. The bank will be tripping over itself to lend you the money.” She thinned her lips. “Caleb’s still a little hurt that you wouldn’t take a loan from us, but—”

“I want to do this on my own, sis,” Kara told her. “Just to prove I can.”

“Be careful coming out of the bank,” Selene told her.

She glanced at her youngest sister’s mystical silver-blue eyes and platinum hair and frowned. Selene sometimes...knew things. “Why? What...?”

“I don’t know. I just keep thinking it, so I’m telling you.”

Kara nodded, clutched her briefcase tighter and glanced at her reflection as she passed the picture window, which had paper snowflakes made by Maya’s twins, Scotch taped all over it. She blinked and looked again. God, she would never get used to seeing herself as she was now. Edie’s current hairstyle of choice for Kara was a shoulder-length cut that, with a handful of mousse and a little scrunching, turned gently curly. The color was her own dark brown with auburn highlights. She wasn’t all that dressed up. Casual chic, Edie said. Trousers with legs so wide they moved like a skirt. Burgundy button blouse. A cameo her mother had given her rested at her throat for luck.

She drew her gaze away and forced her feet to carry her to the front door, grabbed a jacket, and accepted the hugs of her family. Then she got into the car and drove into the festively decked downtown area of Big Falls, where every lamppost had a lighted wreath, and every shop window, a holiday display, for her appointment with Mrs. Terwilliger at the bank.

An hour later, she stepped out of the bank and into the bright winter sunshine with a very good feeling. It was cool but not *cold*. A brisk fifty degrees with an insistent wind. Mrs. T, as she’d insisted Kara call her, felt certain the loan application would be approved. Kara was going to have her day-care center.

She could hardly believe it!

She celebrated by allowing herself to indulge in her guilty pleasure of choice. Next door to the bank was Barlow's Jewelry, and her ring—the ring she'd always thought of as hers, anyway—was on display in the window. Oh, it wasn't huge. But it was the most romantic ring she'd ever seen. A pink diamond in a simple pear cut, accented by two tiny ruby chip, one on either side. She loved that ring.

Mr. Barlow saw her in the window, sent her a knowing smile. Her love of the ring was a secret they shared. She didn't worry about him telling anyone. He would keep her confidence as surely as her own doctor would. And one of these days, if all went well, maybe she would march into that store and buy that ring for herself!

She tore her eyes away from the dream ring and turned to head for her car, and home. Remembering her sister's words, she looked both ways before starting across the street. And then she looked again, because she thought she'd seen....

OhmyGod, she *did* see him. He was back in town.

Him. Jimmy Corona. The hottest hunk of Big Falls High, back in the day. He'd been the star quarterback of the football team. The most popular boy in school. And she'd been the biggest nerd. Too tall for her body, painfully shy, accident-prone and, some said, a jinx.

Klutzy Kara had been her nickname back then. Not that he'd ever called her that. She liked to think he was too nice to call her such a horrible name, but the truth was, she doubted he had ever so much as noticed she was alive.

Oh, God, he was looking at her!

She turned her head quickly so he wouldn't know she'd been staring, but the heel of her shoe caught in a crack in the pavement, jerking her off balance. Her arms shot out to her sides, wheeling crazily. A car was speeding toward her and she was going down fast.

And the next, thing she knew, a pair of strong arms scooped her right off her feet



The car slammed its brakes and skidded sideways as Jim himself half shoved, half carried the woman out of harm's way. He'd glimpsed her from a distance... and now he figured it was a good thing she was so stunningly beautiful, because he hadn't been able to tear his eyes away. Which was why he'd seen disaster about to strike. He was holding her with one arm under her legs, one supporting her back. Despite her height, she wasn't heavy, which was good because he had to keep moving to avoid the chain-reaction disaster unfolding around them.

The skidding car hit a lamppost and tipped it over. The lamppost hit the craft store's outdoor holiday display, bringing tangles of Christmas lights and tinsel down with it. A puppy tugged his leash from his owner's hand, raced into the mess and emerged with a length of silver garland in his teeth, growling and shaking it for all he was worth. People ran every which way. Displays and decorations were scattered over the sidewalk, and they tripped people, who fell down, tripping other people.

Jim saw it all in a single sweeping glance. And then he lowered his head to meet the eyes of the woman who was staring up at him and couldn't look anywhere else. He saw huge green eyes, wide-set and round.

"Jimmy Corona," she whispered.

He smiled at the breathless way she'd said his name and tried to place her face. It was familiar and yet not quite.

"Are you okay?" he asked, not wanting to admit he didn't know who she was. That tended to offend women. She wasn't one of the girls he'd dated in high school—or at least he didn't think so. He'd studied all those faces closely, memorized the names. He had six solid potentials he intended to visit before he left town.

She blinked at him. "Uh... yeah. I... I'm fine."

He set her carefully on her feet, and she stood facing him, close. Very close. Something stirred in his belly. Then she seemed to realize that her arms were still locked around his neck. She lowered them, though it was the last thing in the world he wanted her to do just then.

It was about that time recognition hit him—well, not specific recognition but better than none at all. He had the genus and species down, if not the name. “You’re one of the Brand girls, aren’t you?” he asked. As he spoke, he put a hand on the middle of her back to guide her the rest of the way across the street, away from the chaos she’d caused, back toward where he’d left the truck parked with Tyler safe and sound in the passenger seat and Colby keeping an eye on him.

He’d heard one of the Brand sisters had made it big as a model. No wonder her looks had taken his breath away like that. This had to be the one. She was tall, had legs up to her neck, and that kind of confident walk—or at least she had until she’d lost her footing in the road. “Edie, right?” he asked, recalling the model’s name.

“No. I’m Kara.”

They stepped up onto the sidewalk, and as they did he turned to look at her. “*Kara?*” No way, he thought as the name wormed its way into the crevices of his mind and wrenched open the pathways to musty old memories. Kara Brand. The name brought to mind a skinny girl who was taller than everyone and tended to slouch. The girl who kept her eyes downcast and shuffled her feet when she walked. The girl who used to let her untrimmed hair fall into a thick mass of nondescript brown that always looked messy. Who always seemed to be in a terrible hurry and was constantly tripping, falling, colliding with innocent bystanders. Who had, up until the tenth grade, worn thick tortoiseshell glasses so big he’d wondered if she meant to hide behind them. And her clothes had always been big, too. She had been a walking disaster. Klutzy Kara. No grace, confidence, social skill or self-esteem.

No way was this beautiful creature the shy and awkward wallflower he remembered from Big Falls High.

“Kara Brand?” he repeated.

“You probably wouldn’t remember me.” She smoothed her blouse. It was silky and wine-colored and brought out the vivid green of her eyes. “I was a year behind you in high school, but I—”

“I remember you. I just... don’t remember you like *this*.” He let his gaze slide down to her feet and up again, but then smacked himself upside the head with an unspoken *Knock it off, caveman*.

She almost looked as if she wished he didn’t remember her at all. But there were other memories crowding into his mind now. Memories that made the gears in his brain start grinding and his pulse race a little faster. As he recalled, Kara Brand had been known as something of a pushover, mostly because she’d had the biggest, softest heart in the entire high school. He wondered if that had changed as drastically as the rest of her had. If not, then she was a real possibility.

He handed her the soft sided briefcase she’d dropped in the street. Several papers were sticking out the top. A couple of them fluttered to the sidewalk. He bent down to pick one up, taking a look at it as he did because he needed to look at something besides her. Man, he could barely take his eyes off her. The transformation was astounding.

“Brand-Name Day Care? That’s cute.” He handed it to her. “Sorry. I wasn’t trying to snoop.”

“It’s okay.”

God, she seemed uneasy. The cop in him wondered why. “So where is this day-care center of yours?”

“It’s, um... nowhere. Not yet. I just applied for a loan to get started.”

“You have a place in mind?”

She licked her lips, averted her eyes and shook her head. “What brings you back to town, Jimmy?”

“Wanted to show my boy where I grew up.”

“Your... you have a son?”

He nodded. “You want to meet him?”

Her smile was quick and bright and her nervousness had vanished. “I’d *love* to meet him,” she said. And she meant it, he could tell.

He took her arm gently, turning her toward his pickup truck parked by the curb. Tyler sat in the passenger side with his window rolled down, waving at them as they came closer. Colby stood outside the truck, leaning against the door and talking to Ty through the rolled-down window.

Jim walked up to the truck, met Colby’s speculative glance and sent him a quelling one in return. Colby stepped aside to give the space to Jim and Kara. “Tyler, I’d like you to meet Kara Brand. She and I went to high school together. Kara, this is my son, Tyler.”

“Hi!” Tyler said. He gave Kara a thorough looking over, from her toes to her head. “Can you make cookies?”

Colby tried to smother a chortle and failed. Then he stuck out a hand. “Colby Benton,” he said. “Just along for the heck of it.”

“Good to meet you, Colby.”

Jim watched Kara’s face as she turned her attention back to his son and then he got stuck there. The former tension, that frown of unease, was completely gone. She was relaxed now, open, and her smile was so sweet it melted his bones.

“Not only do I make cookies, I make the best cookies this side of heaven.”

“Really?”

“Uh-huh. The only person in town who can make them better is my mom.”

“Chocolate-chip?” Tyler asked.

“They’re my specialty. If you’re going to be in town long enough, I’ll make a batch just for you.”

“That would be great,” Tyler said, his eyes wide. “Do you have a pony?”

“No. Why?”

Tyler pursed his lips in thought, then lifted his gaze to hers again. “Well, how ‘bout a dog?”

“I don’t have a dog of my own, but my sister has one. And it’s as big as a pony, come to think of it.”

Tyler grinned. He was leaning out the pickup window, and Kara bent closer to him. “Do *you* have a dog or a pony?” she asked.

“Not yet. That was cool the way my dad saved you, wasn’t it?”

“It *was* cool,” she agreed. She straightened away from the truck and turned to Jim again. “I didn’t even thank you for that.”

“Don’t. It wasn’t a big deal.”

“No big deal,” Tyler repeated. “My dad saves people all the time.”

“Oh, does he now?” Kara’s eyes sparkled with amusement. Amazing how relaxed and at ease she became as soon as she turned her focus to his son, Jim thought again.

Tyler nodded. “Uh-huh. He’s a p’liceman. So’s Uncle Colby.”

Kara tipped her head to one side and looked at Jim as if seeing him for the first time. “Jimmy Corona, a cop? It fits.”

“You think so?” he asked, and when she nodded he asked, “Why?”

She shrugged and a hint of nervousness returned to those huge eyes. She’d done something to her hair, something that made him want to touch it to see if it was as soft and thick as it looked. It was shiny and the curls bounced when she moved.

“So, um... where are you staying while you’re in town?” she asked, not meeting his eyes.

“Boarding house. We checked in this morning.”

“Mama would skin me if I didn’t invite you to dinner,” Kara said. “She and your father went way back, you know. Always stayed in touch, even after he moved away. I heard he’d passed. I’m sorry.”

“He had a good life. I still miss him, though.” Jim glanced at his son, wishing his father had lived to see his grandchild. Then he brushed that thought away. “To tell you the truth, it would be good to see Vidalia and catch up with the gang.” The memories were flooding back now. The Brand girls, five of them as he recalled, all of them raised by a single mother. “How are your sisters doing?”

“Great. Edie quit modeling, came home and married Wade Armstrong. You remember him? He was a few years ahead of us in school. He owns a garage here in town and another over in Tucker Lake. They bought the big place out on the Falls Road. She opened a photography studio there.”

“How about the others? I don’t remember all the names, but”

“Half the time I don’t remember all the names,” she joked. “There’s Melusine. She’s married, to a private detective name of Alexander Stone, from the city. She’s his partner now. They’re in and out of town all the time, depending on what they’re working on. Maya, she married Caleb Montgomery.”

“The senator’s son?”

She nodded. “They built a place up behind Mom’s. Have three-year-old twins, a boy and a girl. Caleb has a law office just around the comer.” She pointed as she spoke. The wind came careening around a corner, dry and cool with a wintry nip to it that didn’t even resemble the bite of December in Chicago. It played with her hair, though, and pinkened her cheeks.

“Your mom used to own a bar, didn’t she?”

“She prefers ‘saloon,’ and yes, the Ok Corral is still up and running, with a little help from the rest of us. Selene and I still live at the house with Mom.”

“Wow. Unbelievable how things change. Mel settled down. Maya with twins.” He shook his head.

“Dad, you said we could see the waterfall!”

Jim let his son tug his gaze away. “We’re going, we’re going.”

“Go on,” Kara said. “Dinner’s around six, if that’s not too early.”

“It’s just right,” he said.

“You’re welcome, too, of course,” she added to Colby. “Any friend of Jimmy’s...”

“Thanks. That’s real sweet of you.”

She nodded. “So, um, should I tell Mom to set four extra places at the table? Maybe five?”

Jim frowned, and she just looked at him with those big eyes, waiting. And he realized she was asking if he—or Colby—would be bringing a wife along. “Three, Kara. Only three.”

“Oh,” she said. “I thought maybe your wife...”

“I’m—we lost her four years ago.”

He could have kicked himself for blurting it in a way that made it sound as if Angela had died, and he knew from the daggers he was hurling with his eyes that Colby wanted to kick him for it, as well. He was damned if he knew why he’d said it that way. Except that he’d be ashamed to admit to Kara Brand and her family—a family he remembered as being as wholesome as whole milk, if a little scandalous from time to time—that his ex-wife was a drug-addicted prostitute.

“I’m sorry,” she said for the second time in their five-minute conversation. But this time she put a hand on his arm, and he thought the sadness in her eyes was genuine. Especially when she glanced again at his son.

“It’s okay. It’s...okay.”

He was a slug. Now he had her feeling sorry for them when, in fact, Angela’s absence was a blessing. He needed to change the subject. “So we’ll see you at six then.”

“Great. You remember where to find us?”

“I remember,” he said.

“Till dinner, then. Nice meeting you, Colby.” She turned to the truck again. “Bye, Tyler.”

He held up his arms. Smiling, Kara leaned down and accepted the hug his little boy offered. Jim was close enough to see her notice the braces on Tyler’s legs. He saw her frown at them and then hug Ty a little tighter.

“Bye, Kara.”

She straightened, sent Jim a parting smile, then turned and started down the sidewalk. Jim leaned back against the passenger door of the pickup and watched her go. Damn. Who’d have believed little Kara Brand would turn out like that?

She hadn’t gone ten steps when Tyler spoke in a very loud, slightly squeaky voice. “She’s pretty, Dad. And she smells good and she can make cookies. She doesn’t have a pony, but...well, that’s okay. Can she be my new mom?”

He knew Kara had overhead because she tripped, careened sideways and just barely caught herself on the side of someone’s car. Her touch set off a noisy car alarm. She straightened, smoothed her pants and never looked back as she walked the rest of the way to her car.

“Not that one, Jim,” Colby said softly, in a voice not meant to carry to Ty. “Not that one, okay? She’s too nice.”

Jim shook his head. “No such thing as too nice.”

“Come on, Jim, you can’t. I got a bad feeling about this.”

Jim shrugged, clapped a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “We should bring something to dinner. It’s good manners.”



“What happened?” Selene asked the second Kara sank onto a bar stool at the OK Corral.

Kara looked down at herself in search of any evidence of the shock she'd just had. "What do you mean?" she asked. "What makes you think something happened?"

"I don't think it, I know it. Something big, too. Your aura's practically shooting off sparks. Did the bank turn you down?"

"Give the girl a chance to breathe, for heaven's sake," Vidalia said. But her eyes were raking Kara as if she saw something too.

"Could I have a drink?" Kara asked.

Vi blinked and shot a look at Selene, who only smiled knowingly as she grabbed a peach wine cooler, the strongest thing Kara ever drank, twisted off the cap and set it on a coaster in front of her.

"It's not even noon yet." Vidalia muttered. "And you never drink. What's going on? If that banker thinks she can brush you off and—"

"The banker was fine. Mom. I won't have an answer until the end of the day or so, but she thinks my application will be approved without a problem."

"Then what's going on?"

Kara sighed and took a big gulp from the bottle. The bar was empty. They didn't open for business until seven on weeknights. She loved the Corral when it was empty like this. It was such a wide, big space, with as much wood as a small forest. Polished red oak floors. Gleaming mahogany bar. Door made from a single slab of redwood. The round tables and ladder-back chairs were tiger maple, and the trim around the ceiling and windows was pine. She loved the blending of the woods, the colors, the scents, the giant wagon-wheel light fixtures hanging from the peaked ceiling. Green garland was draped from the barn beams that crossed it, the tablecloths were white with red poinsettias, and holiday music wafted non-stop from Thanksgiving to New Year's, when they were open.

Setting the bottle down on a coaster, Kara kept her gaze on it and said, "Jimmy Corona's back in town."

“Uh-oh,” Vi said. “Does he know you’re planning to buy his father’s house?”

“No.”

“You think he might intend to get the place back himself, child?”

Kara shook her head. “I don’t think so. He said he came to show his son where he grew up. I didn’t get the feeling he was planning to stay.”

“He has a son?” Selene asked. “Damn, that implies a wife, huh?”

“No. No, he’s alone. Just him and his son. The boy’s adorable. I just wanted to hug the stuffing out of him.”

“You’d best tell the man what your plans are, Kara,” Vidalia said. “It’s best to be up front with people right from the start. Don’t go behind his back the way your sister Edie did with Wade. Why, they started out so far off track I’m surprised they got back on.” She frowned at her daughter. “You look all out of sorts, girl. What did that man say to you?”

“Nothing. It’s just...” Kara heaved a sigh. “I just caught a glimpse of him and it was like everything Edie taught me evaporated. I was tripping over my feet and babbling like an idiot and blushing.” She rolled her eyes and took another sip of the wine cooler.

Vidalia looked at Selene, her eyebrows raised. Selene said, “You had a little crush on him in high school, didn’t you?”

“*God*, no.” It was a lie and she thought her sister probably knew it. “He was way out of my league. Most popular guy in school, don’t you remember? Star quarterback, top scorer on the basketball team. Such an athletic guy, nothing but strength and grace. I always felt even clumsier than usual around him.”

“But you’re not clumsy, Kara.”

Kara pressed her lips tight. “Not until I get nervous. Then I’m a walking insurance claim.”

“So he makes you nervous. Why do you think that is?”

“Don’t start with the pseudo-psychology, Selene.” Kara took another drink from her bottle.

“Well, is he still good-looking?” her meddling sister asked with a twinkle in her eye.

“Better than ever,” Kara whispered, then she bit her lip and wondered why she hadn’t censored herself.

“What’s he do for a living?”

“He’s a cop.” She got all tight in the pit of her belly when she said it. Why did knowing he was a police officer make him even more attractive to her? “I’m not sure where.”

“Chicago,” Vidalia said. “At least that’s where he was the last time I spoke to his father, God rest his soul.”

Might as well have been the moon, as far as Kara was concerned. “I invited him to dinner tonight. He’s got a friend along, another cop named Colby... something. Seems like a nice enough guy.”

“Good girl,” Vidalia said. “And dinner will be as good a time as any to tell him your plans for his house.” Then she sighed. “It’ll be nice to see that boy again.”

He was hardly a boy, Kara thought. He was all man. And she was probably going to spill something on him or dump soup into his lap at dinner.



The boarding house was not ideal for Tyler. The rooms were all upstairs, and Tyler detested being carried. But with the braces and the crutches, doing it himself was as risky as it was frustrating and time-consuming.

He convinced Ty that piggyback rides up and down the stairs were a lot of fun, but after the third trip the novelty of that wore off fast. Poor kid.

Clever kid, too.

He'd just about melted Kara Brand's heart with that hug he'd doled out this morning. And Jim knew his son too well to think it hadn't been deliberate.

Colby sat beside him. Tyler was having a snack and watching TV, and the two adults were out of his earshot, on the far side of the living area of their three-room suite at the only boarding house in town.

Jim had been avoiding Colby's questions all afternoon, but he knew he'd run out of time. Colby was his best friend and he knew him far too well.

"So what's the story on this Kara Brand?" he asked.

Jim sighed and knew there was no getting around it. "I've been thinking about that all day. Hell, Colby, you wouldn't believe how much she's changed. At least on the surface. Wait, I'll show you." He went to the bedroom he would be sharing with Ty and got the old high school yearbook he'd brought along, flipped it open to the page that showed Kara Brand and brought it back to shove it into Colby's hands.

Colby looked at the awkward-looking skinny girl in the photo. "No way is that the same girl."

"It is," Jim assured him. "I just hope the changes are only skin-deep."

"Why's that?"

He sighed as he sank into his seat, took the yearbook back and looked down at the ugly duckling who'd grown into a swan. "Because she had a heart as soft as a chocolate bar in the sun."

"Did she?"

Jim nodded, his eyes on the face in the photo, seeing now things he'd missed as a shallow high school jock. The Audrey Hepburn cheekbones, the delicate jaw and perfect nose. The wide set of her eyes and their exotic shape, thick lashes. So much natural beauty, but she'd kept it to herself.

"Whatever kid was having the worst time of it, that would be the one you'd see at her side. She'd latch onto them and

protect them like a mother hen. Foster kids moving in and out of our district. Kids whose parents were going through a divorce. Kids so poor they came to school in secondhand clothes that didn't quite fit. Kids with disabilities."

"The outcasts," Colby observed with a nod.

"Yeah. She had this tendency to... I don't know... take care of people."

"I know the type. Rarely meet one, though."

"Yeah." Jim smiled, remembering. "She even tried to take care of me once."

"Since when were you an outcast?" Colby asked.

"Just once. Just once. Championship basketball game, tie score, seconds left on the clock. I had the ball and a choice to make—pass it to the benchwarmer who was wide open right under the basket or take a hot-dog shot from half court."

"What did you do?"

"I took the shot. Missed it. Blew the game." He lowered his head, shaking it slowly. "No one spoke to me after that game. The kids who usually flocked around me like groupies scattered. Teammates took off, cheerleaders. Even the coach. When I came out of the locker room, there was no one there. No one but Kara, who managed to overcome her shyness—no small feat—and come up to me and tell me nobody could be perfect all the time."

"That was sweet of her. 'Course, you already knew that."

"Yeah. What I didn't know was that the kid, the benchwarmer—damn, I wish I could remember his name—he was one of her causes. Poor kid, no confidence, no friends. Coach only put him in the game because the other three replacements had fouled out. Anyway, Kara told me he was standing there under that basket while the clock ticked down, praying I wouldn't pass to him."

"No kidding?" Colby asked.

"No kidding. She said he was scared to death. That if he'd taken that shot and missed, he'd have never lived it down. But

because I did it, it would be forgiven and forgotten within a few days.”

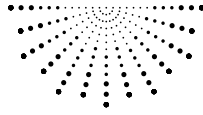
“Was she right?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I was back to being the most popular guy in school within a couple of days. And Kara faded back into the woodwork.”

“So my gut feeling was right,” Colby said. “She’s too nice for you to play the way you’re thinking of playing her.”

“Playing her, hell. If she’s the same girl she was back then, I’m not gonna play her at all. I’m gonna marry her.”

CHAPTER THREE



“*Y*ou know I’d do anything for you, Vinnie.” Angela stood looking down at him, the man who was going to change her life, make it perfect. For so long she’d thought nothing ever could.

He sat in a leather chair in his office, wearing an expensive suit, the jacket unbuttoned. “So you say,” he told her. “I don’t believe anything without proof.”

Sighing, she pushed her hair behind her ears, hiked up her short skirt, dropped to her knees in front of him.

“That’s not what I meant, Angela,” he said. “Just listen.”

She sat back on her heels and listened.

“I told you what I needed you to do. I told you Corona’s testimony could destroy me. But you didn’t convince him to back down, did you?”

“Vinnie, I tried. I swear, I tried. He just wouldn’t listen. I went back this morning, but his neighbor said he’s left town.”

“Then you’re gonna figure out where he is,” he told her. “You’re gonna prove your loyalty to me, because I won’t marry a woman who’s disloyal. You understand?”

Lifting her gaze to his eyes, she nodded. He’d promised her so much. A good life. A big fancy house. Cars. Clothes. Money.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small plastic bag full of white powder. Angela reached for it, but he snatched it away.

“You’ll do anything for me?”

“You know I will. I have.”

“Then you’re gonna help me track down this ex-husband of yours. And then you get all you want. Okay?”

“Okay, Vinnie. Okay.”



It broke Kara’s heart when she saw little Tyler making his way across the front porch with metal braces on both his legs, leaning on odd-looking crutches that snapped around his arms for support. He paused as she watched his approach, admiring the Christmas lights she and her sisters and brothers in law had strung from every possible part of the house. They lined the roof, following the peak up and down again. They bordered every window and door. And more trimmed the pine trees along the edge of the driveway. Their house looked like the North Pole. Christmas was huge in their family.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and turned to see Maya standing beside her, looking at her. “Ohhh, look at him. He’s gorgeous.”

“Yeah,” Edie agreed, shouldering up to the kitchen window. “And his kid’s cute, too.”

Maya tried to scowl at her but wound up laughing. Then Vi shot the three of them a quelling look and opened the front door.

“Welcome, gentlemen,” she said.

“Mrs. Brand,” Jimmy said. “It’s great to see you again.”

“Don’t you ‘Mrs. Brand’ me, boy. It’s Vidalia. Now get in here and greet me like you mean it.”

Grinning, Jimmy stepped inside and wrapped Vi in a bear hug.

Edie elbowed Kara. “Look at this. The woman’s shameless.”

“You blame her?” Maya asked.

A throat cleared, and Kara looked up to see that Colby had come in behind Jimmy and Tyler. Caleb and Wade, stood nearby, and each had a twin on his hip.

“Vidalia Brand, meet my good friend, Colby Benton,” Jimmy said.

Vidalia took Colby’s hand in a fervent grip. “Any friend of Jimmy’s is welcome here.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Brand. It’s a pleasure.”

“Please—Vidalia.” She released his hand, then bent down to eye level with the little boy. “And you must be Tyler. Hello, there, young man. You can call me Gramma Vi, if that’s okay with your dad.”

Tyler tipped his head to one side. “Kara says you make good cookies.”

“Cookies, cakes, pies, doughnuts—oh, you don’t even know the half of it. You come on in here and I’ll see if I can’t find you a sample, all right?”

“Okay.” He made his way through the kitchen, followed by the twins, who’d scrambled down and were following him closely.

“Tyler,” Kara said, peeling herself away from her sisters. “This is Dahlia. And this is Cal.”

The three-year-olds smiled shyly, Dahlia reaching out a hand to touch one of Tyler’s crutches. “What’s that for?”

“My legs are messed up. I need these to help me walk.”

“Do they hurt?” Cal asked.

“Not much. And I’m gonna get better, anyway, pretty soon.”

Vi nodded to Kara. “Introduce our guests to everyone, daughter, while I get these kids set up with a pre-dinner cookie.”

“Mom... “ Maya began.

“Oh, don’t start with me now. One cookie won’t spoil their dinner. Good land, I raised five of you without losing a single one to malnutrition.”

Maya bit her lip, closed her eyes, shook her head.

Kara saw Jimmy send her a sympathetic look. Then he offered a hand. “Hi, Maya.”

“Good to see you again, Jim. This is my husband, Caleb.”

“Jim.” Caleb shook his hand.

Kara kicked in then to complete the introductions. “Wade Armstrong,” she said, nodding toward Wade. Jimmy shook his hand. “And I know you remember Edie.”

He smiled at Edie but spoke to Kara. “And how do you know that?”

“You thought I was Edie when you first saw me today.”

“That’s because I’d heard Edie Brand had become a supermodel.”

“Model, yes. Super, never,” Edie said. “So you took one look at my gorgeous little sister and thought she must be the one making a living as a model.”

“Edie, don’t—” Kara began.

Jimmy held up a hand. “No, she’s right. That’s exactly what I thought. I hardly recognized you, Kara.”

She shrugged. “Thank Edie for that. Giving me makeovers is her favorite hobby.”

“Thank your mother, Kara. I think it’s got more to do with genetics than cosmetics.” His eyes were on her as he said it and they were warm enough to raise her body temperature.

Selene popped into the room then. She’d been upstairs in her room, and Kara had noticed interesting aromas coming out of there for the past hour, while she’d been in her own room trying on everything she owned. She came in slowly, a tiny red drawstring pouch in her hand. “Sorry I’m late,” she said.

“That’s okay,” Jimmy replied. “You have to be Selene. I think you were twelve or thirteen when I last saw you, but that blond hair is a dead giveaway.”

“Hi, Jimmy. Long time, no see. I have something for you.” She held out the little pouch.

He took it, frowning. “And this is...?”

“It’s for protection.”

Kara saw Jimmy’s face change instantly. His brows drew together and his eyes narrowed. A quick look passed between him and Colby. “What makes you think I need protection?”

“Am I wrong?”

He watched her for a long moment, saying nothing. Selene just shrugged. “Keep it close to you. Better yet, close to your boy.”

“You think Ty needs protection?”

Kara put a hand on his arm, drawing his gaze. “Selene... sometimes gets feelings about things.”

“And she’s usually right,” Edie put in.

Jim shot a look at Caleb, then at Wade. They only nodded in agreement. “If she says you need protection, you probably better buy a guard dog.”

“Speaking of dogs,” Edie said, “anyone seen Sally?”

At the sound of her name Sally gave a loud woof, from the living room. The entire bunch of them trooped through the house into the living room, where the three children surrounded the dog, stroking her, feeding her bites of their cookies under the giant, Christmas tree with its flashing lights and glittering ornaments. The Great Dane, her tail wagging so hard that getting too close seemed risky, actually seemed to be smiling.

Tyler turned toward his father, his eyes wide. “Kara was right, Dad. This dog *is* as big as a pony!”



Dinner was too delicious and too plentiful to make moderation even possible. Jim only stopped on his third helping because his stomach would have exploded if he'd eaten any more.

It had been a pleasant evening. Tyler wore himself out playing with the other two kids and the Godzilla-size dog and then he ate more than Jim thought he'd ever seen him eat. He'd taken to calling Vidalia "Gramma Vi," so Jim figured those cookies of hers had passed muster. And if he didn't know for sure, he supposed he would find out, because she'd packed piles of them into a gallon sized zipper bag to go with him back to the boarding house.

After dinner he offered to help clear up, but Vi shooed him away. She and Selene handled cleanup. Maya and Caleb took the twins home, and Edie and Wade walked them to their house, on the hill behind this one so that Wade could listen to the noise Maya's car had been making. Colby had gone up with them to help walk off the dinner, he said. They said they'd stop on the way back out to pick up their monster-size pet.

Tyler curled up on the floor with his head pillowed by the big dog. Jim took a seat on the sofa, and Kara brought in coffee, a cup for each of them, then took a seat in a nearby chair.

"He had fun," she said.

"More fun than he's had in ages." He watched as his little boy's eyes fell closed. "And he didn't complain once."

Kara's heart twisted a little. "Is he in pain, Jimmy?"

"No, not usually. The braces chafe sometimes, and physical therapy is hell. One more surgery, though, and he'll be... well, if it goes the way it should."

Sally turned her head to watch over him, seemed almost protective of the child. "Look how much she loves him

already,” Kara said. “Jimmy, if it’s rude of me to ask, say so. But, what happened to him?”

He sighed. “It was an accident. He fell down two flights of stairs when he was barely a month old.”

“Dear God.”

He understood the reaction. It twisted him into knots to think about it even after all this time. New subject. And a one he’d been thinking about all day. “Kara, have you been by my dad’s house lately?” he asked.

She looked suddenly guilty, as if she had something to hide. Which was odd, because he couldn’t think of a reason for it. “Yes, lots of times. Why?”

“Well, the stairs at the boarding house just aren’t cutting it. We might be out here as long as three weeks, maybe longer.”

She smiled suddenly. “You’ll be here for Christmas?”

“Yeah, looks like.” Her face lit up as brightly as the twinkling pine tree in the corner of the living room. “If that real-estate company I sold the place to, hasn’t resold it yet and it’s still habitable, I was thinking…”

“You and Ty and Colby could stay out there while you’re here.”

“Yeah.”

She licked her lips. “You know, it’s actually a great idea. There’s a ground-floor bedroom and bath. He wouldn’t have all those stairs to deal with. And it’s a lot roomier there. I mean the boarding house is fine, but not for a whole month. And it’s in pretty good shape, too. Betty Lou—your real-estate lady—has been renting it out to defray upkeep and taxes while waiting for a buyer. It’s vacant at the moment, though. The furnace and central air unit have just been cleaned and checked over. Power’s turned on. It has a great well and a brand-new pump.”

He stared at her for a long moment. “You know an awful lot about it.”

“Yeah. Well. That’s because I’m buying it.”

He was surprised.

She kept lowering her eyes, as if she felt guilty. “I mean, if it’s all right with you, I am. The bank called tonight and the loan was approved. I should have told you that was the place I had in mind for my day-care center this morning, but I was just so stunned to see you back in town on the very day I was applying for the loan to buy your childhood home.”

Again only a quick peek upward. He wanted to ease her mind. “I love the idea of a day-care center in that old house. I think Dad would have, too.”

“There are lots of other places I could—”

“No. No way.”

She lifted her head. “I don’t need to start work right away, though. I think it would be good for Tyler to spend some time in the house where you grew up. And maybe... good for you, too. You know, before any drastic changes are made.”

He shrugged. “I refuse to cause you to delay your plans.”

“And I refuse to have Tyler dealing with the stairs in the boarding house when there’s a perfectly good place sitting empty.” She shuddered and rubbed her arms. “God, the very thought of him on stairs at all, given what happened... “

He wasn’t sure, but he thought that her eyes got damp. “Maybe we could make some kind of deal, then?” he suggested.

She met his gaze, blinked that dampness away. “Such as?”

“I’ve got nothing to do for the next few weeks. Let me repay you by getting started on the work you need done on the place.”

Tipping her head sideways, she blinked those big green eyes at him. Damn, she was something. “You’re on vacation.”

“Not by choice,” he said.

“What does that mean?”

He waved a hand. “Doesn’t matter. You’d be doing me a favor, Kara. I’ll go stir-crazy before long.”

She nodded slowly. “Okay, it’s a deal. I’m supposed to meet Betty Lou out there at ten tomorrow morning. Why don’t you guys be there, too? We’ll check it out together.”

He nodded. “We’ll be there. Thanks, Kara.”

She hadn’t changed a bit, he decided. She’d give the shirt off her back to the first person she met who needed it.

“Bring your gear,” she told him. “You might as well move right in.”

He wondered if Kara Brand ever did anything for herself. Was she as kind and giving as she seemed? As she had always been in the past? Time, he decided, would tell.



Betty Lou Jennings was smiling when Kara walked up the sidewalk toward where she waited near the front door. The house was a large double-decker square with a roof. Nothing fancy. Not built in any particular style. It was white, with the front door smack center of its face between two bay windows, and its back door on the far right side in the rear. The place was backed by aspen trees, their leaves golden in the winter sun. No snow on the ground, of course. They didn’t get much snow in Oklahoma as a rule, but Big Falls got more than most other places in the state. There had been a frost last night, though, and Kara could see her breath making little puffs in the air. At least the wind wasn’t blowing this morning.

The round little woman held up a key ring with two keys and shook it to make it jingle. “I’m so pleased the bank approved your loan, Kara. All we have to do is sign the papers and this place is yours.”

Betty Lou must adore the Brands, Kara thought. She’d sold the most expensive house in town a little more than a year ago to Edie. And now she was unloading what was probably its polar opposite on Edie’s little sister. Betty Lou had bought the place from Jimmy Corona, through lawyers, after his father left it to him five years ago, and had been holding it and probably losing money on it ever since.

Kara turned at the sound of another vehicle. Jimmy Corona's white pickup truck pulled in. It was a Durango, tough-looking and big. Reminded her of a feisty white horse in some odd, obscure way. Something about the shape of its hood. Or maybe it only did because it had come galloping into town bearing a handsome hero.

He got out, smooth and easy, walked around to the passenger side and opened the door to lift Tyler down to the ground, then he handed the boy his crutches. A second later a red SUV pulled in behind him, and Colby Benton got out.

Tyler made his way over the smooth path to the door, his jacket making the crutches even more awkward than usual, Kara thought. His dad and Colby came along behind him. When Jim met Kara's eyes, his were warm, and he was smiling, and she had to remind herself he exuded that natural charm with everyone he met, not just with her.

"Mr. Corona!" Betty Lou shot worried looks from Jimmy to Kara and back again. "Oh, my, I hope this isn't going to be a problem."

"It's not," Jimmy told her. "Relax, Betty Lou. Kara and I have it all worked out Depending on what kind of shape the place is in, of course."

"This is it?" Tyler asked, looking at the place doubtfully.

"Yep," Jimmy said. "Hey, it doesn't look like much now, but—"

"Heck, it looks like heaven to me after being cooped up in the boarding house," Colby put in. "And with a fresh coat of paint—"

"And some Christmas decorations," Tyler said loudly.

"You've got that right, Tyler," Kara said. Then to Jimmy, "The inside's not bad at all. Betty Lou's kept it in great shape."

"That's right," Betty Lou said. "It's fully furnished. The last couple who rented it only moved out a month ago. And everything from the sofa to the carpeting has been cleaned. Heat and power are still on. You know letting a place get damp

can cost you.” As she spoke, she led the way up the two concrete steps to the front door.

“I think it needs a porch,” Kara said. “A nice big front porch. Don’t you think so, Tyler?”

Tyler looked up at her, frowning as if deep in thought. “If it had a porch, you could put a swing on it. And the dog could lay there sometimes. That would be good.”

“But I don’t have a dog, Tyler.”

He tipped his head to one side. “But now that you have your own house, you’ll prob’ly get one, won’t you?”

She couldn’t help but smile and she forgot to worry about tripping as she walked up the two steps with Tyler at her side. “You know, I might just do that.” She kept one hand close to him but not touching. She didn’t want to make him feel as if she were hovering, but she did want to be ready to help him should he stumble.

Jim stood behind them. “Ty, before we go in, come with me, huh? I want to show you the backyard.”

Tyler turned. Kara glanced at the uneven ground the boy would have to walk over and frowned a little, wondering if it would be too much for him. “I’ll come, too. Betty Lou, go ahead and unlock the place. You can leave the keys and the paperwork in the kitchen. Okay?”

“Well, sure, hon.” Betty Lou tipped her head to one side. “I have two sets of keys. I take it you’ll be needing them both?”

Kara pursed her lips. Betty Lou was fishing for information, wondering what was going on between her and the former high school hunk. “Well, it’s that or keep a set for yourself, and you won’t be needing them,” Kara said with a smile. “When you go in, would you unlock the back door for us?”

Colby said, “I’ll get our gear inside.”

Kara nodded her thanks, then joined Tyler and Jimmy, and the three of them started around the house.

Jim mypaused, and Kara saw him notice that his son was having trouble negotiating the lawn on those crutches. He hunkered down. “How about a piggyback ride?”

“I can do it, Dad.” Tyler seemed a little miffed at his dad for offering to help him. He continued moving over the grass, but it was clearly an effort. His little face was getting red.

“At least let me hold on to your arm, Ty.”

“No, Dad.” The boy sounded impatient now.

Kara moved a few steps ahead of him and then she deliberately tripped in a hole and fell.

“Kara!” Jimmy was beside her in an instant, leaning over her, his face full of concern. “You okay?”

“I don’t know. I hurt my ankle. Darn.” She looked up at him, and with her face hidden from Tyler’s, she winked. “Maybe I’m the one who needs to hold someone’s hand out here, before I really get hurt.”

She let Jimmy help her to her feet. Then she turned to Tyler. “Would it be okay if I held on to you, Ty?”

Tyler smiled. Dimples appeared in his cheeks and his eyes twinkled. “Sure. But maybe you better hold my dad’s hand, too. I’m not for sure if I could catch you all by myself if you fall again.”

She reached down and closed a hand around his upper arm. “Thank you, Tyler. You’re a real hero.”

Her gaze was tugged away from the boy’s, though, when she felt Jimmy take her free hand. He met her eyes, and there was something tender in his. He squeezed her hand, gave her a nearly imperceptible nod of thanks. She smiled, and together they moved across the back lawn.

“See that big apple tree right there, Ty?” he asked his son.

Tyler nodded.

“That’s where I used to have my tire swing. And over there, in that maple, that’s where I had my tree house.”

“You had a tree house?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Wow!”

“Come here, there’s something else about this tree—let me see if it’s still here... yep, there it is,” he said, leading his son closer to the tree. He pointed and Tyler looked.

Kara looked, too.

“What’s it say, Dad?”

Jimmy traced the heart-shaped carving with a forefinger. “It says J.C. plus question mark.”

“Huh?”

“Your dad had so many girlfriends in high school,” Kara said, “he probably didn’t know whose initials to carve.”

“Really?”

Jimmy sent Kara a smirk. And then Tyler said, “You went to school here, too, didn’t you Kara? Were *you* ever my dad’s girlfriend?”

Jimmy’s eyes held hers for a long moment. She looked away first. “No, Tyler, I wasn’t.”

“How come?”

She smiled down at him. “Did you ever hear the story of the ugly duckling, Ty?”

“No.”

“Well, I’m going to tell it to you one of these days and then you’ll understand. But in the meantime, why don’t we go inside, see how you like the place, okay?”

“Okay!” He turned and started hobbling over the ground again but soon mounted the fieldstone patio that led right up to the back door, so the going was a bit easier for him.

Kara started forward, but Jimmy stopped her with a hand on her arm, and she turned to look up at him, half smiling at Ty and his silly questions. But her smile died when she saw the intensity in his eyes.

“You were never an ugly duckling, Kara Brand.”

“Sure I was.”

“No. No, I remember. You were shy. Painfully shy. A little unsure of yourself. Hiding behind all the hair you could grow and clothes you could disappear into.”

“And too clumsy to make it down the hall without falling or crashing into somebody at least once a day.”

He smiled. “I think it was more nervousness than clumsiness.”

She shrugged. “Same result.” She started to turn away.

He touched her cheek, turned her to face him again. “The only thing you have in common with that duckling from the story is that you grew into a swan.”

She lowered her head quickly, heat flooding her face. “Jimmy, you don’t have to say that. I know I’m—” She stopped speaking because she’d lifted her eyes to his and found them fixed on her lips. Almost as if he was thinking about kissing her.

Jimmy Corona, thinking about kissing *her*. Had the earth’s magnetic poles reversed or what?

Her knees buckled a little and she lost her balance and had to grab on to his shoulders to keep from falling.

His hands closed on her waist and he steadied her. “Yep,” he said. “Nervousness.”

Then Tyler called to them to hurry up, and Jimmy turned her toward the house, keeping one hand on her arm as they walked onto the patio to join him.



“This is it, Angela. How do you like it?”

Angela tried to keep the tears from welling up in her eyes when she looked around the apartment. It was small, yeah, but it was light years better than the squalor in which she’d been

living. It was a nice building in a nice neighborhood, a building her precious Vinnie owned lock, stock and barrel.

“Bedroom’s through there,” he said, pointing. And she peeked in. There were a bed, a dresser, and one window draped in a white curtain. “Bathroom’s off the bedroom. Closet-size. No room for a tub, just a shower. And the kitchen’s right here.” He pushed open a swinging door and led her through. The fridge and range were half-size, and there was no room for a table, but two stools stood in front of the counter.

She didn’t care. She turned to him and blinked through grateful tears. “I can’t believe this. I can’t believe you’re doing this for me. God, Vinnie, I love you so much.”

He shrugged. “There are rules, Ang. Don’t think I won’t throw you back into the gutter where I found you if you can’t live with them.”

She nodded. He might be known as a porn king, but he was a classy porn king. Wealthy. Well-dressed. “I know the rules,” she promised. “This is a clean building.”

“That’s right. So you keep your dirt out of it. No drugs here, no Johns. And I mean it, Angie, it’s important.”

She nodded. “I promise.” She didn’t suppose the gram she’d jammed in the back of the useless watch she’d picked out of the trash and gutted really counted. She wouldn’t keep a lot of coke here. Just what she needed for a day at a time.

He nodded toward the bedroom. “I picked you up a few things. They’re in the closet.”

Blinking in shock, she spun and ran into the bedroom, opened the tiny closet not much bigger than a high school locker and started yanking hangers out of it. Three blouses, three skirts and three jackets. And there were two pairs of new jeans stacked on the dresser nearby.

“Underthings are in the drawer. I’d have done shoes, but I didn’t know your size, so I figure you can buy your own.” He tossed a wad of cash onto the bed. “Shoes, Angie. Not drugs.”

She flung her arms around his neck and squeezed him hard. “You’re like an angel, you know? You’re like an angel to me.”

“I’m far from an angel. Did you do what I asked?”

She nodded. “I went up the fire escape just like you said. Smacked out the window. No alarm there. I didn’t find much in his apartment, though.” She yanked her huge shoulder bag from her arm and tipped it upside down on the bed, then began pawing through the contents. “This is all the mail he left out, and the notepad that was next to the phone.”

Vinnie reached down, yanked up the stack of mail, flipped through it, then picked up the notepad. “Ah, there’s a phone number on here.” Yanking his cell phone out of his pocket, he dialed, then sat on the edge of the bed.

Angela sat down beside him, close enough to hear. She heard ringing, then a woman’s voice. “Peabody’s Boarding House,” she said. “Can I help you?”

“Yes, I hope so. My fiance and I have looked at so many places in trying to decide where to honeymoon.” Vinnie glanced at Angela and her stomach turned soft as she smiled up at him. “Somehow I jotted down this number, but I neglected to write the location beside it. I know it was one of our favorites, though.”

“Well, now, don’t fret about it. We’re in a little town called Big Falls in the great state of Oklahoma.”

“Of course,” he said. “Now I remember. Thank you so much.”

“You’re more than welcome.”

He hung up, pocketed the phone and looked at her. “Why would your ex be in Big Falls, Oklahoma?”

“I should have known. It’s where he grew up. He used to talk about it all the time, but he never went back before. At least not as far as I know. I always thought he had some unhappy memories from there.”

“He may just get some more.”

She frowned at him, but Vinnie ran a hand over her hair and sent her a wink. “You know I’m just teasing. You’ve done good for me, sweetie. You’ve done real good. And you can do even better.”

“How?”

“Come with me to this Big Falls.”

“Aw, Vinnie. I don’t want Jim to think I’m harassing him. He’s gonna get pissed and he’s a cop, you know.”

“I know. Believe me, I don’t want to harass the police either. God knows I don’t need to give them any more reasons to railroad me. But you always said Jim was a reasonable man. So maybe if I could just talk to him, reason with him, he’d understand what a terrible mistake is being made here.”

She pursed her lips, lowered her head. “I don’t know. I don’t want....”

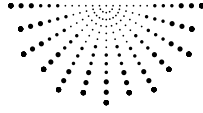
“What, Angie?”

“I don’t want you to do anything to hurt him. He’s... he’s all my baby boy has.”

“Come on, you know me better than that. There’s not a violent bone in my body. I wouldn’t hurt a fly. Just come down there with me, huh? Maybe you can help me talk to him. Make him see reason. This is my life on the line here. You know that.”

Licking her lips, she nodded. What she really wanted was to settle into her new apartment, try on her new clothes, her new life. But she owed him. She had to help him if she could. “All right, Vinnie. I’ll come with you.”

CHAPTER FOUR



Jim walked into the kitchen and got hit between the eyes with the past. For just a second, he could almost hear his mother's voice.

Jimmy! Come on inside, dinner's ready!

He blinked back the rush of emotion and pressed a hand to the countertop for support

"Jimmy? Are you okay?" Kara asked, her eyes on him rather than on the old-fashioned kitchen.

He looked at her, realized she always called him Jimmy, just the way his mother had. No one else ever called him by his childhood name anymore. He'd missed it

He nodded, then focused on the room again. Tongue-and-groove boards normally reserved for floors had been used as cupboard doors and stained a pale oak hue that went nicely with the yellow walls and tile floor, a checkerboard of yellow and mint-green. "It's almost the same."

Kara nodded as she looked around the kitchen. "I doubt Betty Lou saw much need to change it."

He moved his head from side to side, looking the place over more thoroughly. "No, she did," Jim said. "She changed it a bunch. It's nothing like it was when Dad and I lived here alone. But it's *just* like it was before Mom..."

"I'm sorry. It didn't even occur to me how many painful memories this was going to bring flooding back for you."

He drew a breath as if it could steady him. “This was her color scheme.” He said. “Dad couldn’t be bothered. She’d been gone five years before he decided to repaint, and when he did, white was as easy as anything else. But Mom, she loved color. This sunny yellow.” He moved to the windows, running one hand over the white casing. “She wanted the trim painted mint-green. Like those tiles in the floor. She used to talk about it all the time. If only she could get the casing painted mint-green and maybe find some ceramic knobs for the cupboard doors in that color, too, her life would just be perfect.” He smiled at the memory.

“I remember her,” Kara said.

“Do you?”

She nodded. “I don’t think she and Mama were friends or anything. Different worlds, you know?”

“Yeah. Your mom and my dad only got to be friends after Mom was gone, I imagine, because Dad started spending inordinate amounts of time at the Corral.”

She winced a little. He held up a hand. “It wasn’t a problem. He was probably self-medicating, but he wasn’t a drunk, didn’t come home and smack the kid around, nothing like that.”

She nodded, seeming relieved. “I remember your mom coming to school sometimes back in our elementary days. She was always so pretty. Always smelled great. Was always bringing things for our bake sales and whatnot and making sure to pack extra so we could sample them.” She sighed. “I thought of her as the kind of woman I’d like to grow up to be.”

“I think your mom would be disappointed to hear that,” he said softly, studying her, touched by her memories of his mother and curious to hear more. To learn how his mom had seemed through the eyes of Kara Brand.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. My mother is the most incredible woman I’ve ever known. But I never deluded myself into thinking I could be like her. She’s tough. Hard as nails, can take anything, get knocked down over and over

again and always come back up swinging. Not me.” She shook her head. “No, your mom, on the other hand, always seemed... I don’t know... a little on the fragile side. Maybe not so strong and sure of herself, and yet somehow she managed to be beautiful and kind and graceful all the same. I think that’s what struck me about her most. The way I could see myself in her, only a better version of myself. You know? She was like the me I wished I could someday be.”

He studied her for a long moment “You have a way, you know that?”

“Do I?”

He nodded. “You say the most beautiful things. Touching things. Things that move me. I don’t think my mother has ever been paid a higher compliment than what you just said.”

She lowered her eyes, and her cheeks pinkened. “It’s nothing but the truth.”

“Yeah? Well, I think you got your wish, Kara. I don’t know many women who could compare to my mother in my eyes, but you...”

She shook her head. “Don’t Jimmy. I couldn’t hold a candle to your mother.”

“No, I mean it. You remind me of her. I hadn’t even realized how much until this moment. Seeing you here in this kitchen.” He shook his head. “It’s a little surreal.”

“Thank you. You, um... say some pretty nice things yourself.”

He nodded and walked around the kitchen, absently opening cupboards and drawers, most of which were empty. “I miss her,” he said idly. “I miss her a lot”

“I know. I can’t imagine losing my mom even now, much less at the age of ten.”

“Eleven,” he told her.

“I don’t know how an eleven-year-old could handle that. I don’t know how you did.”

He couldn't quite shake the feeling of *deja vu* that overtook him as he watched her. She was looking around the room now, just as he had, a little frown between her brows. And he was remembering again. Remembering the funeral, when he stood beside his mother's grave. Half the town had turned out. He'd been in sixth grade, just beginning to develop an interest in girls, but the fairer sex had been the farthest thing from his mind that day. He'd been drowning in grief, and wondering how it could possibly be true. How could he and his dad keep waking up every day, going to work and school, coming home and having dinner? How could they, when Mom was gone? He expected the entire world to just suddenly stop, and it would have been fine with him if it had.

And then this little girl had come walking up to the graveside. She'd been a fourth grader. Probably nine or so. And even then she'd been painfully shy, quiet. Somehow, though, she'd overcome that shyness to step forward, to lay her little bundle of wild-flowers, which she'd picked herself, onto his mother's casket. And then she'd come to him and she'd said, "I have a lot of sisters and a mom over there."

He'd followed her gaze to where a crowd of females stood. Some younger than him, some older, with their mother.

"So?" he'd asked.

"So you've only got your dad now. So if you need some extras—more family, you know—you can borrow mine."

He had been angry that day, angry at the world. But not so blinded by it that he didn't recognize the gesture as her way of trying to help him. He'd choked out a thank-you, and she'd run back to her family with tears rolling down her little cheeks.

As the memory faded, Kara turned, caught him staring at her. "That was you, wasn't it?" he asked.

She lifted her brows. "What was me?"

"The little girl at my mother's funeral. With the scraggly bouquet of forget-me-nots and black-eyed Susans and wild chicory. You offered to share your family with me."

She smiled softly and nodded. “That was me. I wanted to do something, but I just didn’t know what. I couldn’t imagine anything that would help.”

“You cried for her,” he said.

“No. Mama promised me she was fine, singing with the angels. I cried for you, Jimmy.”

He shook his head slowly. “You’ve probably got the biggest, softest heart around.”

“That’s the rumor.”

He reached out a hand, stroked a strand of hair behind her ear.

She trembled a little, but even as he thought she might lean closer, her eyes grew serious and she stepped away. “Where’s Tyler?” she asked.

That snapped him out of his musings in short order. Since when did he get so lost in nostalgia for the past and admiration for a woman that he forgot to watch his son?

Already Kara was hurrying through the house looking for him. He heard her footsteps as she searched the ground floor, so he started up the stairs. Before he got to the top, she was calling to him. “It’s okay, Jimmy. He’s right here.”

A lump came into his throat when he heard where that voice came from. He walked down the stairs and through the house to enter the bedroom that had been his mother’s when she’d become too weak to negotiate the stairs.

He’d spent a lot of time with his mother there. Always believing she’d be well again someday. But that day had never come.

Tyler stood there now, near the window. Colby was nearby with Ty’s duffel bag full of belongings, which he must have fetched from the car. The look on his face was accusing, and Jim knew he must have overheard at least some of his conversation with Kara Brand.

“Can this be my room, Dad?” Tyler asked.

Jim swallowed hard. “This is just the room I had in mind for you. It was your grandma’s room, you know.”

“Really?”

Jim nodded, then turned to Kara. “The place is in great shape, Kara. Better than I realized. You have to let us pay you rent for staying here.”

“You’re not paying me rent to stay in your own house, Jimmy. No way.”

“It’s not my own—”

“It’s always been yours. Always will be, no matter whose name is on the deed.”

“But you’re paying a mortgage on it.”

She shrugged. “I need a fence around the backyard, and that’s just for starters. There’ll be plenty to do. And...” She glanced down at Tyler. “Look, I just really want you guys to stay here. And to tell you the truth, I think you *need* to stay here. Tyler... he needs to touch his roots, Jimmy. And maybe you do, too. Please don’t back out now.”

He stared at her, studied her and thought she really meant it. Hell, he half thought she might be right. “Okay,” he said. “We’ll stay.”

“That’s great news,” Colby said, joining them in the little room. He set the duffel bag on the bed. “I was getting tired of carrying that thing.”

Tyler giggled at him, then made his way over to the bag to unzip it and begin unpacking his things all by himself, while Colby looked at Jim the way he’d look at an assassin.



Jim didn’t sleep that night. Colby had spent an hour after Tyler had gone to sleep, telling him that it was wrong, what he was doing to Kara Brand. That if he intended to go through with it, he wasn’t going to be a part of it. He couldn’t stand by and watch a woman like her get taken in by a damned con-artist

who just wanted a mother for his son. And that yes, Tyler did deserve a woman like Kara. But Jim did not.

It ate away at him. Guilt. But it didn't matter. He'd do anything for his son. And he'd told Colby so.

In the morning he lay in the bed beside Tyler in what had been the last place he'd ever seen his mother alive. The place where he used to bring her hot tea and dry toast when the chemo got to be too much for her. The place where he used to sit for hours reading to her from her favorite books or watching her favorite TV shows or just talking.

God he'd missed that when she'd gone. He'd had his father, and they'd been close, but it just wasn't the same.

As he looked down at his precious little boy sleeping in that bed, he realized he was lucky. At least he'd had a mother for a little while. Hell, eleven years. Better than half his childhood. She'd been there and she'd been great, right up to the end. And the thing that had bothered her most about dying was that she wouldn't be there to keep doing things for him and for his dad.

Poor Tyler. He deserved to know that kind of love. And he wanted it. He wanted it so much.

He thought about that and he thought about Kara. And then he thought, why not? Hell, he'd have to be careful not to let Tyler get too attached until he was sure she was committed. Because there was always a chance she would tell him thanks but no, thanks. But really, why shouldn't he make a try for her? He liked her well enough. If he was going to trust any woman with Tyler, it would be her. She was gorgeous. He was pretty powerfully attracted to her and he had a feeling it was mutual. Those things would help.

And she was the farthest thing from a self-centered party girl that he could imagine. So why not? What did he have to lose?

He pursed his lips, paced through the living room and into the kitchen, thinking it through. There had to be a downside here. A solution this perfect couldn't be without pitfalls.

And as if that realization conjured them to mind, the pitfalls came floating up to make themselves known. He'd lied to Kara Brand. Well, he hadn't lied exactly, but he'd certainly twisted the truth. He'd told her he had lost his wife. But Angela was alive, if not exactly well. He was going to have to come clean about that at some point and hope Kara would forgive him.

And there was a second issue. If she were to sign on as Tyler's new mommy—*as my new wife*, a little voice whispered—she would have to relocate. She'd have to move to Chicago with him.

Jim sighed. He couldn't quite imagine Kara Brand thriving in the city. She was a wildflower, a long-limbed tiger lily, not a hothouse rose.

Hell, he doubted she would consider leaving her family anyway. Maybe, though. Maybe... for Tyler.

The sound of a motor drew his attention away from the subject at hand, and he looked up to see that the sun had risen some time while he'd been mulling, and the object of his thoughts was backing a red pickup truck into the driveway.

He watched her pull out into the road, straighten it and back in again. She cut the engine and got out, then tried to close the door softly. It made him smile as he opened the front door. "Don't worry about that. I'm already awake."

The way she looked at him, her eyes kind of landing on his chest and getting stuck there, reminded him what he was wearing. Jeans. No shirt. And it wasn't warm outside.

She stared at his chest hard enough to burn holes through his skin, then jerked her eyes away almost violently. She held up two big grocery bags. "I, uh, brought some essentials."

"Yeah?"

She nodded. "Can I come in?"

"It's your house." He held the door open and she came inside, started taking items out of the bags. There was a big box with the name of a local bakery on the cover, and he felt his stomach rumble in appreciation. Then a pint of half-and-

half, a bag of sugar, a pack of paper filters and a pound of coffee. Finally she pulled out a drip coffeemaker, set it on the counter and plugged it in. “Mom had this one in the back closet. She bought a new one last year.” She took the carafe from the burner, filled it with tap water and poured it into the coffeemaker’s reservoir. He grabbed a filter, tucked it into the basket and added coffee, then slid it home.

She flicked on the power button.

He leaned back against the counter, crossed his arms over his chest and studied her. She wasn’t dressed up today. She wore jeans and T-shirt. She was tall—he liked that. Tall and willowy. She had a denim jacket over the clothes, but it was unbuttoned. Her hair was loose and a little careless. He liked that, too.

“Where’s Colby this morning?” she asked.

He frowned. “I assumed he was still sleeping. He took an upstairs bedroom.”

“Nope. His car’s gone.”

Jeeze, he’d been serious last night, hadn’t he? “I guess I must have dozed a little after all. I didn’t hear him leave.”

Kara took a few more items from the second bag—two boxes of cartoon-character cereal, a dozen eggs and a jug of milk. It was as she reached for the fridge that she paused, then yanked a sheet of paper off the door. “Note,” she said. She handed it to him and put the milk away.

Jim scanned the paper. “I’m taking some time” was all it said. Then he frowned. He’d really pissed his partner off, then, hadn’t he?

“Maybe he met a pretty girl,” Kara said.

“He hasn’t had time to meet a pretty girl.”

“Then maybe he’s looking to meet one.” She sent him a smile that somehow eased his mind.

He stopped worrying about Colby and got back to thinking about his plan of action with Kara Brand. “Actually,” he said,

“maybe he *has* had time to meet a pretty girl. I certainly managed to.”

“No fair,” she said. “You met me in grade school.”

“I suppose that’s true.” He was glad she hadn’t denied being pretty. “So what brings you around so early, Kara?” he asked.

“I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“Hell, no. I told you you didn’t. I’ve been up all night”

Instantly the teasing light left her eyes, and a flood of sympathy and concern replaced it. “It’s this place, isn’t it?” she asked. “I knew it got to you last night. Are you okay? I should have stayed here and let you guys use my room at the house.”

He held her gaze and nodded firmly. “You ever worry about yourself the way you worry about everyone else, Kara?”

She seemed to consider the question. “There’s no reason to. I have all I need.”

“Do you?”

She averted her eyes, cleared her throat and changed the subject. “I’ve got the supplies for the fence out in the truck. Ordered everything yesterday, and it came in to the lumber yard this morning, so I went to pick it up. I thought I’d sneak in here and get it unloaded without waking you guys.”

“Yeah? And what were you going to do with the groceries?”

“My plan was to slip in and leave them in the kitchen for you, along with a freshly brewed pot of coffee.” She nodded toward the bag. “There’s hot cocoa mix in there for Ty. With mini-marshmallows.”

Her eyes met his, then traveled down to his chest again. He saw something in them. Attraction. Maybe a hint of desire. That *was* a good thing, wasn’t it? Assuming he meant to go on with this insane notion. Now that he was face-to-face with it, standing at the threshold of it, it seemed a little crazy. And with Colby reacting as strongly as he was, Jim had to at least consider that he was doing the wrong thing here.

He glanced toward the bedroom, but Ty wasn't making a sound. Probably still out cold. He normally slept until at least eight-thirty. So it was safe to play with this thing a little, find out just how deeply her interest in him extended. He could at least do that much, couldn't he?

He moved a little closer to her. She backed up until the table blocked her and looked up at him with eyes so wide he thought he could fall into them.

She was nervous around him, though he couldn't imagine why. He put his hands on her arms, trailed an easy path from her shoulders to her wrists and back again, as he lowered his head a little closer.

She nearly hit him in the chin with the box of doughnuts when she snatched it off the table and lifted it between them. "I think the coffee's done," she blurted. "I'll just..." She shoved the doughnut box into his chest and let it go. He had to either take it from her or let it fall, so he took it and backed off a step. Kara darted out from between him and the table faster than a rabbit slipping from the jaws of a hunting dog, shot to the counter and started pouring coffee into the cups she'd brought along. She left his on the counter, took hers and sailed out the back door.

Jim stood there for a moment. Okay, something definitely went wrong here. He wasn't sure just what, but his approach apparently needed some honing.

He went to put on a shirt, located some shoes and checked on Tyler. Then he carried his coffee outside. Kara had slipped on a pair of calfskin gloves and was taking lumber out of the bed of the pickup and stacking it in the backyard.

"Hey, hey, hold on now. I'm the guy here. Shouldn't I be doing that?"

She glanced up at him. Wary. Skittish. "No such thing as man's work in my family." She shrugged. "Then again, that might be because there were no men. We did it all ourselves."

"Well, you're not doing it yourself today." He set his coffee cup on the stoop and came to the back of the truck,

started unloading lumber. As he carried a stack of boards to the pile she'd started, he said, "I'm sorry if I got out of line in there, Kara. I wouldn't want to scare you for the world."

She shot him a look, maybe surprised he was being as direct as he was about what had just happened—or almost happened—inside the house.

"You didn't do anything out of line," she said.

He grabbed another armful of boards, carried them into the backyard, piled them and turned to face her. "Okay, in case you're not clear on this, I was about to kiss you in there. And I think you know it."

"Oh."

"It scared you."

"No, it—"

"You scurried away from me like a startled rabbit."

She shrugged, turning slightly away, apparently unable to look him in the eye. Her cheeks were pink again. "It's just that... I'm not used to..."

"What?" He came closer but not too close. He didn't want to scare her off again. "You're not used to men wanting to kiss you?"

She peeked at him, then lowered her eyes. "No."

"So the men of Big Falls have all been struck blind, have they?"

The color in her cheeks deepened to rose. "I'm not... this isn't..."

"I'm surprised they're not beating down your door, Kara."

She lifted her chin and met his eyes, a hint of boldness appearing in her own, though he thought she'd had to dig deep to find it. "It wouldn't matter if they were. It's not the same."

"Why not?"

She lifted one shoulder just a little, and he saw her throat move as she swallowed. "They're not you. They're not Jimmy

Corona.”

That took him by surprise. He hadn't been expecting it. And he wasn't entirely sure what it meant. Was being Jimmy Corona good or bad?

She turned and dragged a box of nails from the pickup bed, carried it to the pile of lumber and set it on top. “Take the tools, too,” she said over her shoulder. “Should be just about everything you need in there to get started on the fence.”

He took the toolbox out, set it in the backyard near the lumber pile and then returned to the truck for the long-handled posthole digger, pick and shovel, as well. “You thought of everything.”

She nodded. “Yeah. I want to bring some wallpaper samples over later.” She shot him a quick look. “Not for the kitchen. I don't want to change a thing in there. But that family room in the back? The big one? That's going to be the main part of the day-care center and I want it bright and cheerful and full of color. Is there a time when you and Ty wouldn't mind too much?”

“Have dinner with us.”

She blinked and shot him a look of surprise.

“I owe you. Payback for dinner at your place. And for letting us stay here. And for... everything.”

“I see.”

Not enough. Okay then, he thought. A little more. Just not enough to send her panicking. “Kara, I'd like to spend some time with you.”

She lifted her head. And suddenly all her shyness was gone, all her uncertainty, all the color in her cheeks. She was dead serious now and she said, “Don't play with me, Jimmy. I couldn't handle it.”

Her words shook him. Gave him the eerie feeling she knew exactly what he was up to with her. Had Colby ratted him out before taking off on him? “I'm not playing.”

She studied his face for a long moment. He lifted a hand to cup her cheek and saw her catch her breath. But this time he leaned in before she could chicken out and brushed his lips very gently over hers.

When he lifted his head away she looked scared to death again. He stepped back, wondering how to ease her mind. But before he could think of a thing she said, “I... um... have to go.” And she turned to start for the pickup truck, only to trip on the way. She caught herself on the truck, though, to keep from falling down and then yanked open the driver’s door and got in. As she pulled away, she leaned out the window.

“Tell Tyler to enjoy the doughnuts. And that I’ll see him later.”

“Does that mean you’re coming to dinner?”

She nodded, waved and pulled away.

Damn. The woman was not going to be an easy sell.

Maybe Colby was right. Maybe he ought to chuck this whole idea.



Kara was a basket case by the time she pulled up to the front of Edie and Wade’s beautiful home on the hill above the falls. It was early enough that Wade hadn’t yet left for work, but too early for Edie to have any customers in the studio. Her work kept her busy. She took plenty of nature shots, sold them to magazines and calendar companies. Did senior pics and family portraits in between. It wasn’t the glamorous life she’d once led. But it had what that life hadn’t. Happiness. Joy. Love.

Kara hurried along the stone walkway, hit the doorbell and heard Sally barking happily on the other side.

Wade had the dog by the collar when he pulled the door open. He greeted his sister-in-law with a broad, welcoming smile that quickly died as he studied her. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Everything.”

He slid an arm around her shoulders and led her inside. “No, not everything. Nothing’s ever as bad as you think it is, kid.” He called toward the stairway, “Edie, Kara’s here. We’ll be in the sunroom.”

“Be right down,” Edie called.

Kara followed Wade through the house into the sunroom they’d added last year. It was octagonal, completely glass and had the best view of the falls of any room in the house.

“Sit,” Wade said. “I’ll get you coffee. Or would tea be better? Have you had breakfast?”

“I don’t want anything.” She lifted her eyes. “Thanks, though.”

He took a seat beside her and studied her face. “So what’s wrong? Is everyone okay?”

“Everyone but me.”

“I knew it!” Edie all but shouted as she burst into the room.

Kara started so hard she almost came out of the chair, then she saw her sister in the doorway, wearing a beautiful silk kimono, purple with pink lilies.

“It’s that man, isn’t it? It’s Jim Corona.”

“What do you mean, you knew it? How could you know it? I didn’t even know it. What are you, turning into Selene all of a sudden?”

“You knew what?” Wade asked.

Smiling, Edie came closer and leaned down to plant a kiss on his cheek. “You’re so sweet when you’re dense.” Then she slid into a chair opposite Kara, beside her husband. The table was bamboo, round, surrounded by fan-backed chairs lined with thick floral-print cushions. “Mel and I spoke on the phone last night. She told me what a huge crush you used to have on Jim in high school.”

“It wasn’t a crush.”

“No?”

“More like a case of idol worship. But he never so much as noticed me.”

“Sure. That’s what Wade thought about me, too. That I’d never so much as noticed him.”

Kara blinked up at the handsome bad boy who’d married her sister. “You thought that?” He nodded. “God, she was nuts about you.” Then she thinned her lips. “This isn’t the same, though. I mean, I don’t know what to think. Jimmy... he tried to kiss me.”

Wade came out of his chair. “Do I need to take care of this? You want me to go over there, Kara?”

“No. God, no, Wade, he didn’t get out of line. He just... sort of... well, it was nothing. It’s not like... it’s just that I don’t understand it.”

Edie tipped her head sideways. “You don’t understand why a man would want to kiss you?”

“I don’t understand why *Jimmy Corona* would want to kiss me.”

“Oh. Now I get it,” Wade said.

“Well, I don’t.”

He looked at his wife. “You *were* my Jimmy Corona, hon. You *wouldn’t* get it.”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous. Jimmy Corona is just a guy. He’s in his hometown and he runs into a girl from high school who grew up to be a total knockout. Naturally he’s interested. The thing you need to think about, Kara, isn’t why he would give you a second glance. You’re a hottie now, you gotta just trust me on that. The thing you should be thinking about is, where can this thing go? He’s in town for—what?—a couple of weeks?”

“Around three,” Kara said.

“So then what? I mean, suppose you fall head over heels for the guy? What happens when he has to leave?”

“Good grief, Edie, you’re worrying about long-term relationship decisions already?” Kara cried. “He’s only been in town a day. It was one tiny little kiss.”

“I thought you said he only *tried* to kiss you.”

Kara averted her eyes. “Well, yeah. And then he tried again. And I sort of let him the second time.”

“Aha! So you kissed him back.”

“I didn’t really do anything but stand there with my knees knocking.”

Wade grinned and averted his face to try to hide it

“Look, Kara,” Edie said. “You have to find out what he has in mind here. A vacation fling? Or...something else?”

“I can’t ask him that. It’s... it’s too soon. I don’t even know if it’s anything more than... than just what it was. One kiss.”

Edie looked at Wade as if for help. He shrugged, but Kara could see his mind working overtime.

“Don’t, Wade. Don’t do anything,” Kara pled.

“What do you mean? What would I do?”

“I don’t know, but whatever it is, don’t. Just let me bungle my way through this, okay?”

“Okay.”

She doubted he meant it. The man had a hero complex, liked to go charging in to save the day when he sensed trouble afoot. Usually she loved him for it, but not today. She pushed away from the table. “I gotta go.”

“Remember who you are, Kara,” Edie told her. “Remember that you don’t have to hurry everywhere you go and that you can hold your head up and look people in the eye. And don’t forget the Perfectly Plum eye shadow. It’s your best color.”

Kara sighed. “I’ve got it, Edie. Thank you.”

She started for the door and Edie raced after her, gave her a hug and whispered, “Don’t give your heart away, Kara. Not until you’re sure of him. I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.” Edie kissed her on the forehead and Kara headed home.



“How much farther, Vinnie?” Angela shifted in her seat, tugging at the dressy skirt that seemed entirely too fitted and snug. She’d taken off the jacket and tossed it over the back of the seat, heeled off the pumps and left them lying on the floor. She was restless. Itching for a hit—just one—but Vinnie wouldn’t give her so much as a sniff. He said he wanted her to look respectable when they arrived in Big Falls, Oklahoma.

“You know, if they find out you left the state you could be in big trouble, Vinnie.”

“So long as I show up for my trial, they won’t do a damn thing.”

“They might.”

He shrugged. “We won’t be gone long, sweetie. We’ll get back just as soon as we’ve convinced your ex-hubby to cooperate, hmm?”

“I know.” She looked lovingly at him. “It was so thoughtful of you to bring all those toys and games and things along for my little boy,” she said. “I haven’t sent him any Christmas presents since I left him.”

“So this year you will.”

She sighed. “I hope you don’t mind so much that I... don’t want to see him. I mean, it’s not that I don’t want to, just that...”

“It’s too hard for you. I understand.” He patted her thigh. “We can have the stuff shipped or give it to Corona to give to the kid after we’re gone.”

“I’m so glad you understand.”

He nodded. “Lemme see that photo you have in your wallet again.”

She opened her wallet, took out the photo of Tyler—the one she’d taken from Jim’s apartment. It showed Tyler sitting on a rocking horse, wearing a cowboy hat smiling big. No braces on his legs in that shot. He looked like a normal little boy.

She handed the photo to Vinnie.

He glanced at it. “He’s four, you say?”

“Almost five now.”

“And he doesn’t even know you?”

She pressed her lips tight “It’s better that way.”

He sighed. “Wouldn’t you like to see him, Ang? I mean, not to tell him who you are or anything but just to look at him from a distance, you know? Wouldn’t you like that?”

She blinked rapidly because tears welled. “It hurts too much to see him. He’s better off without me messing up his life, Vinnie. And seeing him just makes it harder.”

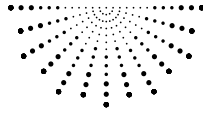
He shook his head. “I think you need to see him. I think you’re going to.” He nodded his head firmly. “Yeah. You’re gonna see him. You’re gonna do it for me.”

She closed her eyes, knowing she would do whatever Vinnie told her to do, but even so, she knew it would be almost too painful to bear.

Vinnie glanced into the back seat, and Ang followed his gaze. She felt sorry for the man who lay back there. Vinnie had wrapped the duct tape awfully tight around his wrists and his ankles and his head so it covered his mouth. She didn’t know how Vinnie got him to meet a hundred miles from Big Falls along a deserted stretch of road in the middle of the night, but as Vinnie was constantly telling her, she didn’t *need* to know every little thing. He’d made a phone call, and two hours later the man was there and Vinnie was ordering him around at gunpoint.

He looked miserable back there, face red, hands turning almost blue, eyes watering. "It'll be all right," she told him. "We'll be there soon."

CHAPTER FIVE



*K*ara had catalogues spread out on the dining room table and was trying very hard to focus on her excitement over her new business. Unfortunately she was failing. Despite the child-size furniture, swing sets, sandboxes and various educational toys and games lining the pages in full vivid color, she couldn't seem to focus on anything but her impending dinner with Jimmy Corona and his adorable son.

She'd been focused on that all day and was still no closer to knowing how she should approach the evening. As a date? It felt more like a nerve-jangling audition.

"I'd rule out that mini-trampoline, sis. Too dangerous." Kara looked up to see Selene looking over her shoulder at the catalogues. She smiled up at her and tried not to let her inner turmoil show too much, though hiding emotions from Selene was next to impossible. "There's this big room on the ground floor with double doors that open into the backyard," she said. "That's going to be the main focus. I want to make it almost magical for the kids. But educational and safe, too."

Selene nodded, pushing her silvery blond hair behind her shoulders and crossing the kitchen to the large range. She flipped on a burner, set the teapot on. "I'm making tea. You want a cup?"

"Sure. What kind?"

"Chamomile. You're a nervous wreck." She said it with a quick glance over her shoulder and a wink. "I looked for you in your room. Looks like a fashion show exploded in there."

Kara rolled her eyes. “I was trying to decide what to wear to dinner tonight.”

Selene took two china cups from the cupboard, dropped a pair of her homemade teabags into them, then turned to face Kara. “I guess that depends. Is it a date or just a casual thing?”

Kara thinned her lips. “I wish I knew. I mean, I guess it can’t really be a *date* date, since Ty will be there.”

“Oh, that doesn’t mean much.” Selene lowered her head. “Eddie said Jimmy kissed you this morning.”

Kara stood up, bumping her chair back so the legs scraped noisily over the floor.

“Relax, sis. You know you can’t keep a secret in this family. So what kind of kiss was it?”

“What... what *kind* of kiss?”

“Yeah. You know, was it a peck or a slow, dreamy kiss? Or maybe a hot and hungry one? Was your mouth open a little? Any tongue involved?”

“Good grief, Selene, knock it off.” Kara sank back into her chair and pressed her palms to her hot cheeks.

Selene giggled and turned to the now-steaming pot to pour water into their cups. “It sounds to me like tonight’s a date.”

“Maybe it is, but what I’d like to know is why.”

Carrying a cup in each hand, Selene came to the table, set them down and took a seat. “You don’t know why he would kiss you?”

“I mean why now? He never gave me a second look in high school.”

“Well, you’ve changed since high school.”

“That’s just it. I haven’t changed. Not at all.”

Selene frowned at her. “You know that’s not true.”

“It is so. I’m the same girl. I look better, that’s all. Eddie taught me how to dress, gave me hair and makeup tips and

endless lectures on posture and grace. But inside I'm the same."

Pressing her lips tight, Selene shook her head. "You are so wrong. You've changed in a dozen ways, Kara. On the inside, where it counts. You're not so painfully shy anymore. You're more confident, more sure of yourself, more comfortable in your body. You're starting your own business, you're stronger than ever before. You've stopped hiding your light under a bushel, as Mom would say."

Kara thought it over and finally nodded. "Okay, so maybe I've changed a little. But when I'm around him, I revert right back to that babbling, clumsy nerd I was before."

"And yet he likes you anyway."

"Yeah. Because of the changes that don't really matter. The surface stuff. So sue me if I'm a little wary of a guy who notices me just because I learned to embrace my inner Barbie."

"I think it's more than that. The inner changes show, you know, to anyone who cares to notice." Selene shrugged her shoulders. "But it's easy enough to make sure he sees beyond the glam."

"Yeah? How? I've been racking my brain all day and I haven't come up with the answer to that one."

Selene sipped her tea. "Don't do your hair or makeup. Don't dress for dinner. Wear old jeans and a sweatshirt and a ponytail. Maybe even your glasses from high school. You still have those?"

Kara had worn contacts since eleventh grade. But she still had the oval tortoiseshell glasses that had been the bane of her youth. She hated the idea of going back to them. And yet Selene's suggestion held a lot of appeal. Not so much because it would be a test of the true depth of Jimmy Corona's interest in her, but because it would no doubt end that interest faster than a pail of ice water over his head. He'd been shallow in high school, interested in the pretty girls, the shapely girls, the popular girls, regardless of what they had in their heads. Even

if it was mostly air. No, the appeal of this idea was just exactly that. He'd cool toward her and she would no longer be burdened with this frightening new complication in her life.

It would ease things immensely.

"You're so smart, sometimes I can't believe you're the youngest," she told her kid sister.

"That's cause I got the benefit of all my big sisters' combined wisdom."

Selene picked a catalogue and began inspecting playground equipment.



Jim dialed Colby's cell phone a half dozen times, but only got his voice mail. He left messages, but he couldn't tell his friend what he wanted to hear. That he'd given up the notion of wooing and winning Kara Brand. If anything, he was more determined than ever. So he just asked Colby to call in, that he was willing to hear him out. Then he phoned Chief Wilcox to check in while Tyler crunched his Count Chocula.

"Good to hear from you, Corona," Wilcox said. "You settling in all right? Everything good?"

"Fine, Chief. Listen, does anyone besides you know where we are?"

"Not to my knowledge. Why? There a problem?"

Jim sighed. "No, I don't think so. Colby took off last night. But I pissed him off, so...?"

"It's still early. You have reason to think there's anything wrong?"

"No reason at all, Chief." And yet he had a niggling feeling all the same. "Anything up with Skinny Vinnie?"

"Nothing unusual. We're keeping tabs. I don't expect him to try anything now that you guys are out of town."

"Glad to hear it. Let me know if anything looks off, okay?"

“Sure. Call in when you hear from Benton.” The chief paused. “Actually why don’t we set up a schedule? Call me on the eights, huh?”

Jim told himself it wasn’t necessary, but something in his belly disagreed. “Sure. On eights, beginning tonight.”

“Great. I’ll give you safe time of an hour. I don’t hear from you by the nines, a.m. or p.m., I take action. All right?”

“Fine.”

“Anything else?” the chief asked.

Jim paused, tipping his head to one side. Then nodded, his decision made. “I’d like a background check on one Kara Brand from here in Big Falls. Can you do it for me?”

“Sure. If you have a reason. Do you?”

“Suspicious behavior,” he said.

“Very funny. You know, Corona, having a woman investigated probably isn’t the best way to start off a romance.”

“Who said anything about romance?”

“You want her checked out, check her out yourself. Talk to you tonight, Corona.”

Jim spent the rest of the day wandering the town, admiring the fervor with which Big Falls decked its proverbial halls for the holidays. Everything was tinsel and bells, reds and greens, silvers and golds. A tree had been erected in the very middle of the village square since he’d been here yesterday, and a sign proclaimed that Santa would be arriving in time for the official tree lighting. It was late, someone told him as they caught him admiring the giant blue spruce. Should’ve been up two weeks ago.

He spent his time renewing old acquaintances and visiting old haunts, asking casual questions about the Brands—one Brand in particular. Yeah, he felt guilty. What he was doing was dishonest, sneaky and not very nice. But if he was going to consider bringing another beautiful woman into his life—into his son’s life—he was damn well going to know all there

was to know about her. And while it seemed almost unbelievable, he was considering it.

It wasn't hard. And it wasn't his only area of interest today. He also dug into the reputation of the physical therapy facility where he had made an appointment for Tyler. It had come with glowing recommendations from his doctor back home, but there was nothing like hearing it from the locals—patients past and present. He couldn't be too careful where Tyler was concerned.

He and Ty picked up groceries and supplies for their stay, had a fast-food lunch and spent some time in the library. The air held a definite chill, but compared to what it was probably like in Chicago about then, it was downright balmy. It tasted like winter, though. Oklahoma winter. It was different from winter anywhere else. He had to argue to make Tyler keep his jacket on.

Everywhere they went, with everyone they met, Jim made sure to take time to engage in conversation, reminiscing about his childhood in this town, his parents, the PT center in Tucker Lake and his dear friends, the Brands. Gently, carefully, he extracted bits of information about Kara, never letting on that was what he was doing.

Or that was what he thought, anyway, until as he and Ty were heading back to their pickup late that afternoon, a man walked up beside him and slung a friendly arm around his shoulders. The sun was sinking, temperature already dropping.

He looked up to see Wade Armstrong, Edie's husband, walking beside him, and the look in his eyes gave the lie to his friendly smile. "Afternoon, Jim."

"Hello, Wade." He tightened his grip on Tyler's hand. "Something I can do for you?"

"Yep. Join me for a cup of coffee. Caleb and me, that is. Right, Cal?"

"That's right." The voice came from the right, and Jim realized that Caleb, Maya's husband, had come up on his other

side, beyond Tyler. He smiled down at the little guy. “And maybe a slice of warm apple pie for you, huh, Ty?”

Tyler grinned and shot a look up at his dad. “Can we?”

“Sure we can.” Jim knew what was going on. The two were playing protective big brothers to Kara. He didn’t blame them. “Where we headin’, fellas?”

“Right over here.” Wade nodded toward a festive-looking cafe on the corner, where red and green jalapeno peppers formed a Christmas conga line across the big glass window. It hadn’t been there when Jim had left town. He followed the other men through the front door and saw that Julia’s Place sported several small tables, a coffee bar, a sign that read Seat Yourself and a coin-operated racehorse that drew Tyler’s attention.

He didn’t even have to ask. Just shot Jim a look with his big blue eyes, and that was all it took. Jim scooped Tyler up and set him on the horse, inserted a quarter and took a seat at the table closest to it.

The other men sat, too, and came to the point as soon as a teenage waiter had taken their orders.

“So what’s up with you and Kara?”

Wade was the one who asked the question. But Caleb was watching Jim’s face as he thought about how to answer. He wasn’t used to being on the receiving end of an interrogation, but he did know the drill. So he relaxed, didn’t let himself tense up or become defensive. He leaned back in his chair, glad Tyler was out of earshot, and sighed. “I know what you’re asking me, guys. I’m just not sure how to answer. I mean, I hadn’t seen her in years, until I got back into town.”

“But you liked what you saw when you did,” Caleb said.

“Sure. What’s not to like?”

Caleb and Wade exchanged a look. Wade said, “You’ve been asking questions about her around town.”

He lowered his head quickly, surprised at the speed of the Big Falls grapevine. “A few, yeah.” He glanced sideways at

his son. “Look, we’ve been through a lot, Tyler and I. You can’t blame me for being... cautious.”

Caleb nodded slowly. “I think maybe you’ve been a cop too long.”

Jim allowed a self-deprecating smile. “You could be right.”

“Kara’s exactly what she seems, Jim,” Wade said. “She’s not hiding a thing. Been right here in Big Falls her whole life. And she’s the most selfless person I’ve ever met.”

“The most,” Caleb confirmed with a firm nod. “She’d give her last dollar away if she thought someone needed it.”

“That’s the impression I always had of her. But she’s changed. A lot.”

“Not as much as you think,” Wade said. “I mean, yeah, she’s learned how to put herself together, largely thanks to coaching from my wife. But the rest was just genuine growing up. Growing into herself, I think.”

Caleb nodded. “If it’s Ty you’re worried about let me put your mind at ease. Maya and I love all her sisters more than life itself, but we’ve agreed that should something awful happen to us, Kara would be named our kids’ guardian.”

“Really?” That surprised Jim and he didn’t bother trying to hide it.

“Really,” Caleb said. “I know Mel or Selene or Edie would be great with them, but Kara... Kara’s special. She loves kids. She’s a born nurturer and she’s great with the twins.”

If true, that would just about seal the deal as far as Jim was concerned. God, could she really be the one? The woman Tyler needed to make his life complete?

“But we didn’t come here to ease your mind about Kara. We came here to ease ours about you,” Caleb continued. “She’s sensitive, Jim. Easily hurt. And just starting to come into her own. A heartbreak right now could set her back a whole bunch. Maybe send her crawling right back into her cocoon, you know?”

He nodded slowly. “I don’t plan to hurt her. That’s not my intent.”

“Yeah, well, intentions don’t count for a hell of a lot, my friend,” Wade said. “Don’t hurt her. Just don’t.”

He nodded. “Okay. I won’t.”

The men nodded, and the kid brought their coffee and delivered Tyler’s hot apple pie with a scoop of ice cream melting over the top.



Kara was about to knock when Tyler yanked the door open, grabbed her hand, and tugged her inside, all the while holding one crutch under his arm. “Daddy’s making lasagna! It’s his best supper.”

She took off her coat, hung it on a peg near the door and couldn’t keep from smiling at Tyler’s enthusiastic welcome. Then she closed the door behind her and followed Ty into the kitchen, where the smells made her mouth water almost as much as the sight of Jimmy Corona standing at the counter, tossing a huge salad, did. She couldn’t take her eyes off him and suddenly she wished she hadn’t taken her kid sister’s advice to dress down. She wore jeans—nice jeans, but jeans all the same—and a little T-shirt with the Dixie Chicks across the front. She’d pulled on a milk chocolate-colored cable-knit sweater over it, in deference to the winter chill. Her hair was in a high ponytail, and she wore no makeup. She hadn’t gone so far as to pull out the old tortoiseshell eyeglasses, thinking that would be too obvious. But to make up for it, she’d dressed her feet in ankle socks and running shoes.

She thought she must look pretty lame. Especially in comparison to Jimmy. He wore jeans, too, but on him they were delicious. She was staring at the way he filled them out in back when his voice startled her out of her state.

“I saw that,” he said, looking over his shoulder at her.

She jerked her gaze up to eye level. “Saw what?” She was waiting for his face to change. For his shock at her appearance to show in his eyes. But it didn’t.

“You were going to knock. I can’t have you knocking at your own door, Kara.”

“That’s silly. Of course I’m going to knock.”

He shrugged but didn’t argue. “Lasagna will be ready in ten minutes. Table’s set and ready. Get comfy. I get to be the server tonight”

Nothing. Not a word about her lack of makeup or the pony-tail or the sneakers. As she followed Tyler into the dining room, she glimpsed her reflection in the tall windows and looked again. She hadn’t completely reclaimed her former persona. She wasn’t half running or tripping over her feet or slouching. She was standing up straight, looked almost poised. God, Edie was good. She should open a charm school for awkward girls.

Tyler was calling her. “Right here, Kara. That’s where you’ll sit,” he said. She looked up to see a winter dandelion lying beside the place setting he indicated, and her heart melted into a warm puddle.

“My goodness,” she said. “Somebody put a beautiful flower at my spot. Who could have done that?”

Tyler grinned wide. “Me!”

“You? Wow. That’s just the nicest thing.” She went to the wilting yellow blossom, picked it up and brought it to her face as if to smell it. “Thank you, Tyler.”

“You’re welcome.”

He made his way to his own chair and got into it then dropped the crutches on the floor beside it. Just in time, too. His father came in bearing a pan of lasagna large enough for to last them all a week. He set it on hot pad, eyed the dandelion and held up a finger. “Be right back.”

He vanished and returned with a glass of water. “A vase for your bouquet,” he said, holding it toward her.

She stood the flower in the water glass, and Jim placed it carefully in the center of the table. Tyler beamed, clearly proud of himself.

“I forgot the rolls. One sec,” Jim said.

Kara leaned back in her chair. “So what did you do today, Tyler?”

“We had fun! We went shoppin’ and we got some liberry books. And then we had pie and ice cream with... um... oh, you know. Them guys from your house.”

She lifted her brows. “Guys from my house?”

“Uh-huh. And I rode the pony. Two times!” He held up his fingers. ‘Course, it wasn’t a real pony. It’s the kind you have to put money in to make it go. But it was fun anyway.”

Jim returned with a basketful of warm rolls and set them on the table. Then he sat down with them. “Dig in!”

Tyler reached for the rolls, took one and handed the bowl to Kara. His father cut into the lasagna and scooped a piece onto his son’s plate. “We’ll let this cool while we have our salad, okay, Ty?”

“Okay.”

“So I hear you ran into Wade and Caleb today,” Kara said. She put a piece of the luscious-looking lasagna onto her own plate to cool, then filled her salad bowl.

“They told you?”

“Not exactly.” She slanted a look toward Tyler.

“Oh.” Jim filled his own plate. “Yeah, we saw them in town. Stopped at that cute little place on the corner for coffee.”

“And pie!” Tyler reminded him.

“Pie with ice cream,” Jim corrected.

She watched Jimmy Corona’s eyes, knew darn well he was keeping something from her—and she was sorely afraid she knew what it was. “They gave you a hard time, didn’t they?”

He only smiled at her. “Now what would they have to give me a hard time about, Kara? We had a nice chat, and the coffee was great.”

“So was the pie,” Tyler said.

“Did they try to warn you away from me?”

He lowered his eyes. “They love you, Kara. They’re worried I’m going to break your heart and they wanted to let me know they’d have something to say about it if I did. It was all perfectly civil.”

She rolled her eyes, suddenly wondering where her appetite had gone.

“Is there somethin’ wrong with your heart, Kara?” Tyler asked.

“No, honey. My heart’s just fine.”

He smiled. “That’s good. You don’t gotta worry. My dad hardly ever breaks anything. And I’ll try hard not to break you either.”

She looked at that child, at the genuine concern and the promise in his big blue eyes, and thought her heart was under siege and falling fast. Then she drew her gaze away and fixed it on Jimmy. “I’m a big girl. I can make my own decisions, take my own risks. I don’t want anything those overprotective louts said to get to you.”

“*You* get to me,” he told her. He held her gaze for a long moment, until she had to look away, her cheeks flooding with heat

When she managed to look up again, he was focusing on his meal. But after he’d chewed and swallowed, he said, “And I told your brothers-in-law that I have no intention of doing anything that might hurt you.”

“You shouldn’t make promises you can’t keep.”

“Don’t worry, Kara,” Tyler said. “Dad always keeps his promises.” He munched lasagna, his salad barely touched. Then he took a big gulp of milk. “Dad, can we go to that pie place again tomorrow? I wanna ride the pony again.”

Kara saw Jim's face change. Saw a cloud come right over it. "Well, tomorrow we have... something else we have to do, son."

"What?" The little boy shoveled in more food. Chugged more milk. He'd already nearly cleaned his plate.

"Well, you remember I told you that just because we were going on vacation it didn't mean we could take a vacation from everything. Right?"

Tyler stopped with a bite halfway to his mouth. He looked up at his dad. his eyes wide and pleading. "Not PT, Dad."

"It's the only way you're gonna get better, Ty."

"But I don't wanna!"

"I'm sorry, son. But we have to. It's in the next town over, called Tucker Lake. It might be really nice there, Ty."

"No!" Tyler cried. "No, it's not fair!" He dropped his fork, and tears welled in his eyes. "I hate it. I hate it! I hate it!" He flung himself out of his chair but fell to his knees, off balance.

Kara jumped up, but Jim was beside his son in a heartbeat, gathering him up, trying to hug him even though Tyler wriggled. "Let me go! I can do it myself!"

"Ty, babe, I'm sorry. I know you hate physical therapy. I hate it, too."

"It's not fair."

"No. It's not fair."

The child was sobbing. Kara came around the table, put a hand on Ty's shoulder. He immediately hid his face from her. "I wanna go to my room."

Jim met Kara's eyes over the boy's head. His were damp, and her heart tied itself into a hard knot. "Go on, Jimmy," she said. "Take as long as you need."

He nodded. "Don't leave, okay?"

"I won't."

Hugging his child tightly, he carried him to his bedroom.

Kara had completely lost her appetite, and doubtless Jimmy had, as well. Poor Tyler. No child should have to go through what he was going through. His entire day ruined by a single sentence from his father. She started to clear the table and she racked her brain for some way she could help ease the pain from little Tyler's eyes. If only she could think of something fun to do in Tucker Lake. Something to take his mind off the PT or even make it worthwhile. Something he would love so much that he would be willing to get through his therapy just to get to the reward on the other side.

She hit on something while loading the dishwasher.

She finished her task, then grabbed her phone from her purse and called the Corral. No one would be home at the house. Her mother answered on the third ring, the din of the evening just warming up around her.



Kara poked her head in the bedroom door just as Jim was finishing up one of Tyler's library books. Ty wasn't asleep yet. He'd brushed his teeth and put on his pajamas, been tucked in and read a story, but he was still agitated at the thought of the day to come. He would probably wake up crying tonight, Jim thought. It made him ache down deep to know there was nothing he could do about it

It wouldn't be the first time Tyler had lost sleep while dreading another round of physical therapy. His eyes were red-rimmed, and Jim knew he was embarrassed to have cried in front of Kara. He almost waved her away, but Tyler glimpsed her in the doorway and gave her a halfhearted smile.

"I'm really a good boy most of the times," Tyler told her.

"I know you are, Ty," she said, coming inside. "Such a good boy that I wanted to do something nice for you. Something that would make physical therapy day into the most fun day you ever had. And I think I figured out just how."

His lower lip quivered. "Nothing could make it fun."

Jim almost told her to stop, not to get his son's hopes up, but she went on before he could form the words.

"Oh, I think *this* will. See I have a friend... well, she's a friend of my mom's, really. Her name is Barbara. She has a farm in Tucker Lake. That's the same town where you have to go for PT."

"A real farm? With animals and stuff?"

Kara nodded. "Uh-huh. And I'll bet you can't guess what kind of animals."

"I don't know," he said. His tone was sulky, his shoulders were slumped. "Cows, prob'ly. Or chickens."

"Ponies." Kara dropped the word into the middle of Tyler's dark mood as if she were dropping a glowing light into a dark cave.

Tyler's head came up off his pillows and his eyes widened. "*Ponies?*"

"Miniature horses if you want to be technical about it. I just spoke to her on the phone. And she said that after your physical therapy session tomorrow we can come over. And you can see the ponies. You can feed them and brush them, even ride one if it's okay with your dad."

Tyler sat up in the bed, his tears forgotten. "Can I, Dad? Can I ride a pony? Oh, please, can I?"

It was an effort for Jim to tear his eyes away from the face of the angel standing in the bedroom doorway, but he did. His son was transformed. Animated, excited, happy. "Of course you can ride the pony."

Tyler's smile lit up the room.

"So what do you think, Ty? Would that make PT day a better day for you?" Kara asked.

He nodded hard. "I still don't like it, but... I can't believe I'm gonna get to ride a real pony! I can hardly wait!"

Jim looked at Kara. She was blinking back tears. He thought the Almighty must have performed a miracle to put

this woman into his path. Every doubt he had about whether he was doing the right thing for his son was obliterated tonight. She was the one. She was almost too good to be true.

My God, he was going to do this thing. He was going to marry this woman.

“It’s settled then,” Kara said. She focused on Jim. “What time should I tell her to expect us?”

“Around noon.” His voice came out hoarse.

“Perfect. I’ll call her back and let her know.” She ducked out of the bedroom quickly, probably because those tears in her eyes were getting near to flood stage.

Jim watched her go, then turned to his son. “Think you’ll be able to sleep now, Ty?”

“Uh-huh. I’m gonna dream about my pony.”

“That’s my boy. Night, Ty.”

“Night, Dad.” He hugged his father’s neck, kissed his cheek and then sank into the pillows. Jim tucked him in nice and snug, ran a hand through his hair, kissed his forehead.

Then he got to his feet and returned to the dining room, where Kara was wiping off the spotless table as if she hadn’t just performed a full-blown miracle. He went to her, put his hands on her shoulders. She straightened and turned to face him.

For a long moment he just searched her face, her still-damp eyes.

“I hope I didn’t overstep,” she said. “I wasn’t trying to interfere, I just—”

He pressed a finger to her lips. “You’re an angel,” he said. “I don’t even know how to begin to thank you.”

“There’s no need.”

“No need? You just did the impossible, Kara.”

“It was nothing.”

“It was everything.”

She shrugged and lowered her eyes. He touched her chin, drew her gaze back to his again and lowered his head until his lips met hers, captured and held them. She didn't pull away. Instead she twined her arms around his neck and held on, and he deepened the kiss—but he was careful. Not too much, too soon, he warned himself.

When he lifted his head away, her eyes were glistening again. She whispered, “If that was just gratitude, Jimmy, I—”

He silenced her doubts by kissing her again. And this time his body got involved, first when his hands moved to her hips to urge her gently closer and then his arms when they tightened to keep her pressed snug against him. He was aroused and he considered that a bonus. This was going to work. This insane plot of his was actually going to work. He was going to *make* it work. When he moved his hips, she arched against him, and when he slid his mouth over her jaw and down to her neck, the frantic pulse there told him she was as turned on as he was.

But then her hands flattened to his chest and she pushed gently, blinking up at him with eyes that were slightly glazed. He could see passion and confusion and fear all roiling there in those green depths. And she whispered, “I don't... this is happening too fast for me.”

He nodded and drew a deep, calming breath. “It's hitting me like a ton of bricks, too,” he told her. And it was—the very fact that his plan seemed to be falling into place without a hitch. That he'd not only found the perfect mother for his son, but that marrying her wasn't even going to be the sacrifice he'd expected it to be—that he honest to God liked this woman. And even *wanted* this woman. And she wanted him, too. It was too good to be true.

God, don't let it be too good to be true.

“I don't know where this is going, Jimmy.”

“Where do you want it to go?” he asked her.

She closed her eyes. “It's too soon. I can't—”

“Don’t tell me you don’t believe in love at first sight.” He smiled a little. “Okay, first sight in way too many years.”

Her eyes opened wider. “L-love? You *can’t*... you don’t even—”

His cell phone rang. He swore and let go of her just long enough to pick it up and glance at the screen. His first thought was that Colby was finally phoning home, but it was the chief’s number on the screen. Dammit, he’d missed his eight-o’clock check-in.

A little chill whispered up his spine. “I’m sorry, Kara. I have to take this.”

She nodded. He answered the call. Kara turned and headed for the door.

“Hold on,” he said to the phone. “Kara, wait—”

She looked back at him, shook her head. “I need to go, Jimmy. I need to think. This is all... it’s too much. But I’ll see you in the morning, okay?”

He nodded, hoping to God he hadn’t blown it. “We’ll pick you up. Ten o’clock, okay?”

“Good night,” she whispered. Then she took off as if a pack of demons were chasing her down.

Jim sighed and tried to focus on the phone call. “I’m back. Everything’s fine. Sorry I didn’t call, Chief, but—”

“Everything’s not fine, Corona. Vinnie’s dropped out of sight. Left a decoy in his penthouse apartment, so we can’t be sure how long he’s been gone. And Angela’s missing, too.”

“Hell. I don’t like this.”

“Neither do I, Corona. Have you heard from Benton yet?”

“Not a word. It’s not like him not to call.”

The chief drew a breath. “Vinnie Stefano has never been violent.”

“That we know of,” Jim put in.

“Listen, I still don’t think this is a reason to panic. Is Angela likely to figure out where you are?”

“She knows I grew up here, but frankly her brain is so fried I’d be shocked if she could remember.” God, he didn’t want to blow this thing with Kara Brand now, especially if this Vinnie scare was all just bull. “I could kick Colby’s ass for not calling in.”

“He will. Wait for him. Meanwhile, I’m going to contact the local cop shop, Corona. That town have a police department?”

“Shares one with Tucker Lake. I think the headquarters is actually over there—used to be, anyway. The county sheriff’s office is over in Ridgewater.”

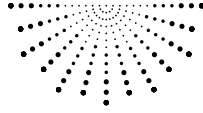
“All right. I’ll let them know. And maybe have them keep an eye out for Colby’s SUV just in case.”

He didn’t like the way his stomach clenched up when the chief said that.

“Go about your routine, Jim. There’s probably nothing to any of this. Just keep your guard up, okay?”

“Okay, Chief. Talk to you in the morning.”

CHAPTER SIX



“*Y*ou don’t have a thing to worry about, you know,” Vinnie told the cop.

He was standing behind the car with the trunk open, talking to the man inside. Angela thought it must have been cold in there overnight. Vinnie had found a motel twenty miles from Big Falls, and that was where they’d slept. The cop had spent the night in the trunk of Vinnie’s car. Cruel, sure. But Vinnie couldn’t very well have left him in the back seat, in plain sight.

Vinnie said he was going to let him go soon, though.

She was glad. It must have been cold in that trunk all night, and the poor guy was going to be lucky if his hands ever went back to normal, with the circulation cut off for so long. They were white now, his hands. Pale as fish bellies.

“Vin, why don’t you loosen up his hands a little?” she asked.

Vinnie jerked his head up. It was dark outside, the parking lot devoid of any other movement. This was not a city, it was a motel situated in between a cluster of small towns. No one was around, and only a handful of cars were even in the parking lot.

“I thought I told you to stay in the room,” he snapped.

She shrugged. “I wanted to see if he was okay.”

He narrowed his eyes on her. “Hell, you know I wouldn’t hurt anyone.” He glanced at the cop, shaking his head. “Will

you listen to this one? Where do they get it, huh?” He moved closer to Ang, put a hand on her shoulder. “I called a friend—an employee. Told him to go pick up the cop’s SUV and bring it on down here. He should be here any minute.”

She blinked. “You can trust this friend? ‘Cause, Vinnie, kidnapping a cop—you know? Not to mention you ain’t even s’posed to be out of Chicago.”

“I trust the men who work for me, Ang. If I couldn’t, I’d have been out of business long ago. But it’s sweet, how you worry.” He pushed her hair behind her ear.

She smiled, warming at his touch, at his soft words. “So... what are you gonna do? Just let him go? I mean, what was the point?”

He shook his head. “Don’t worry your pretty head.”

“Come on, Vinnie, don’t treat me like I don’t matter. I’m not stupid. And I don’t know what good it’s gonna do you anyway. You’re committing more crimes to get these guys to drop the charges against you. What’s to stop them from filing more as soon as you let ‘em go?”

Just then, headlights came toward them. She squinted, shielded her eyes. Then she saw the red SUV pulling into the motel lot

It pulled right up behind Vinnie’s car and a man got out. She’d seen him before once or twice, around Vinnie, but never in the office. He was a big guy, powerful build, crooked nose, and he was always wearing sunglasses. Even now, though it was still dark outside. And cold as hell. She could see her breath.

The guy got out, came over to them, took a quick look around and then in one swift and easy motion lifted the cop from the trunk and dropped him on the backseat of the SUV.

They were not going to loosen his hands. She thought it was kind of cruel.

“Watch him a second, Angie,” Vinnie said, nodding at the backseat. “I gotta have a word with my friend, here.”

She nodded, then got into the backseat beside the cop, because it was so freaking cold outside. She sat with her butt very close to the top of his head and looked down at his face. “Vinnie’s not gonna hurt you. He promised.”

The cop held her eyes, shook his head side to side. She felt bad, real bad. She glanced outside at the men, but they were involved in conversation. So she picked at an edge of the tape around his mouth and tugged it off in one swift yank.

The man didn’t cry out, even though she thought the damn tape probably tore off several layers of tissue from his lips. “Man, you must be so uncomfortable.”

“My... hands,” he croaked. “Please.”

“I really shouldn’t.” Then she shrugged. “Hell, they’re gonna let you go anyway.” Then she tugged a little blade from her jeans pocket and sliced the tape from his wrists. “You gotta fake it, though, or I’ll be in big trouble.”

He nodded, tried to speak, but his voice was just a croak.

She spotted a water bottle in the front seat and grabbed it, held it to his lips. He drank deeply. She put it back exactly where she’d found it.

“He’s gonna kill me, you know.”

“He won’t. He wouldn’t, he’s not like that.”

“He’s exactly like that, Ang.”

She blinked and stared down at him.

“Don’t help him find Jim and Tyler. Don’t do it, Angie. He’ll hurt them, too.”

“You talk too much.” She reached out and smoothed the duct tape over his mouth again. Then she re-attached the two dangling pieces from his wrists, though she didn’t make them as tight as before. “He’s not gonna hurt anyone. He was falsely accused— framed and set up. You’ll see.”

Vinnie returned to the SUV, opened the door and scanned the cop with his eyes. “Everything okay?”

“Fine, Vinnie. Am I done here?”

“Yeah. You go on inside now.”

She slid out of the SUV and Vinnie closed the door. Then the guy in the sunglasses walked around and got in the driver’s side and drove away with the cop in the back.

She sighed. “You sure he’ll be okay, Vin?”

“He’ll be fine. My friend there is gonna stash him someplace safe until after my trial, Just in case he decides to testify against me after all. Someplace where he can lock him in so he won’t need to be all trussed up like that. He’ll be fed and warm and perfectly fine.”

She studied him and pursed her lips.

“What? What’s wrong?” He closed his trunk, took her arm and led her back into the motel.

“Well... is that what you’re planning to do with Jim? Kidnap him and keep him locked up for the next three weeks so he can’t testify?”

He shrugged. “I don’t think anything that drastic is going to be necessary.”

“I don’t think anything that drastic is even possible,” she muttered.

He lifted his brows. “You don’t think I can handle your ex?”

“You don’t know him. He’s... tough. And stubborn.”

Vinnie shrugged. “I think I’ll be able to reason with him, Angie. I think once he hears what I have to say, he’ll agree to do whatever I ask him to.”

She looked at him for a long time.

He shrugged. “You’re hurtin’, aren’t you, hon? You need to do a line, maybe two.”

She closed her eyes. “God, yes.”

“Okay. Anything you want, baby. Let’s go inside.”



Kara had a towel on her head when she answered the knock on the front door the next morning. Then she stood there blinking at the arrangement of yellow roses that greeted her.

The roses lowered, revealing Jimmy Corona's smile. "Morning, Kara," he said.

She frowned, puzzled, and looked from the clock on the wall to him again. "You're early."

"I know. I couldn't wait. And Ty was just about climbing the walls. I thought maybe you'd like to go out for breakfast. If you haven't already eaten."

"I want pancakes," Tyler said, standing close beside his father.

She nodded, wishing she'd had time to get ready first. She'd decided to do her hair and makeup today, since jeans and a T-shirt hadn't seemed to have any impact on Jimmy's inexplicable attraction to her anyway. She opened the door wider so they could come inside. Tyler entered first, looking around expectantly.

"The twins aren't here, Ty," Kara explained. "But when we come back, we can pay them a visit if you want."

"Okay." He sat down in a chair. His father came inside and placed the roses, which were already in a blue porcelain vase with cherubs painted on it, in the center of the table.

"That's really beautiful, Jimmy. You didn't have to do that."

"That doesn't even scratch the surface," he told her.

She smiled and looked down at herself. She was dressed much as she had been last night, in jeans and a T-shirt, her hair in a towel.

"Go on, go finish getting ready, Kara. I really should have called."

She nodded. “There’s coffee made. And O.J. in the fridge, if you guys want a drink. Just help yourselves.” She headed up the stairs, almost forgetting not to run. She didn’t stop at the bathroom but instead tapped on Selene’s door. “Hey, you in there?”

“Meditating,” Selene called back.

“I’m sorry, honey. Jimmy and Ty are here and I’m nowhere near ready.”

She heard movement, then the door opened. Selene smiled when she saw the towel on Kara’s head. “Where’d you put ‘em?”

“In the kitchen. Thanks, hon, you’re a doll.” She turned and started for the bathroom.

“Take your time, sis. They’re not going anywhere.”

Kara nodded but didn’t slow her pace. She yanked the towel off her head, combed the snarls out of her hair, then put in a handful of mousse, scrunching the way Edie had shown her. She grabbed the hair dryer and wafted warm air over it. In five minutes her hair was done. Edie would be proud. As a former model, Edie had taught Kara more than the art of beauty—she’d also taught her how to achieve it with speed.

She flipped open her makeup case and gave herself the once over. When she finished and looked in the mirror, she was happy with the results. And for a moment she thought about what a change that was from the way she used to feel when she looked into a mirror. “Thanks, Edie,” she whispered to the mirror. Then she smacked on some lip gloss and headed into her bedroom.

She picked out a pretty blouse—but not a fancy one—tossed her T-shirt into the hamper, grabbed socks, a pair of suede walking shoes and her denim jacket. Then she headed back down the stairs, where Tyler was telling Selene excitedly that he was going to get to ride a pony today.

Jimmy stood up when she entered the room, blinking at her as if he’d never seen her before. “Wow.”

Kara lifted her brows, looked down at her clothes.

“How do you *do* that?” he asked.

“Do what?”

He shook his head slowly. “Never mind. You look great, Kara. Beautiful, as always.”

“A far cry from last night, huh, Jimmy?” Selene asked.

Kara sent her a frown, but she only returned a wink.

“Last night?” He looked at Kara again. “I thought she looked great last night, too.”

“Oh, yeah? Ponytail, no makeup, T-shirt and all?”

He looked at Selene a little oddly. Kara rolled her eyes. “Let’s get going, huh? We’ve kept Ty waiting long enough for those pancakes.”



They were sitting at the unimaginatively named Big Falls Diner in the center of the village, when Tyler looked up, widened his eyes, and said, “Dad, look! It’s Santa!”

Kara followed Ty’s pointing finger. Santa Claus was straightening the big throne like chair on the round pavilion, a few yards from the giant Christmas Tree, just outside the diner.

“I’ve gotta talk to him. I’ve *got to!*” Tyler slid out of the booth, grabbing his crutches and hurrying toward the exit.

“Ty, wait! I don’t think Santa’s open for business yet.”

“Duh, Dad. He’s wearing the suit, isn’t he?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

A woman opened the diner’s big glass door to come in, and Tyler almost mowed her down hobbling out past her, belatedly calling, “Scuse me,” over his shoulder.

Jimmy grabbed the door, held it for the newcomer, and apologized. “I’m sorry, ma’am.”

“Don’t be silly!” she replied, smiling as she watched the little boy making his way across the street. “Some things are

just too important to wait.”

“Tyler, will you wait up!” Jimmy shouted, as he headed outside after his son.

Kara gripped his arm to slow him down. “It’s okay. Let him be. It’s Santa.”

Jimmy looked at her, shook his head, then watched as Santa spotted the little boy hurrying toward him and smiled and ho-ho-hoed in the jolliest possible way.

“Oh, Santa! I’m so glad you’re here!” Tyler said when he reached him.

The red-suited, full bearded fellow crouched down and said, “I’m glad you’re here too, Tyler,” with a glance over Ty’s shoulder and a wink at Jimmy.

Ty said, “I wrote you a letter. But I want to make sure you got it, cause it’s super important this year.”

“I’ll bet it is. Well, my boy, I get so many letters that I probably don’t remember off the top of my head. Getting older, you know. And my list is home at the North Pole. So you’d better tell me now, just in case.”

Tyler crooked a finger. Santa leaned closer, and Ty whispered into his ear. As he did, he pointed. He pointed right at Kara, and Santa looked her way too, and she could’ve sworn his lip quivered just a little bit behind his snowy white whiskers. Her heart melted, and her eyes met Jimmy’s, tried to read what was there. But it was a mystery to her.



Tyler didn’t cry or complain about going to PT once all morning. Not even when they were on their way to the clinic, though Jim had fully expected he would. Once there, Tyler refused to let Kara stay in the waiting room, insisting she come into the treatment area with them. And while he did his exercises, struggling through them without a whimper for the first time ever, Kara kept bringing up the ponies. “Only another half hour, Ty, and then we get to see the ponies,” she’d

say. “Just another fifteen minutes, Ty. I wonder if she has a brown one. I like brown ponies best. What color do you like?” And, “Maybe we’ll have to get you a cowboy hat, Ty. If you’re going to ride ponies, you really ought to have a cowboy hat, don’t you think?”

Every time it got tough, every time it hurt, every time Tyler floundered, she was there. Kara Brand was reading his kid as well as he did, and jumping in to distract him or soothe him at all the right moments. And then, finally, it was over. Tyler was red-faced, sweating, but dry-eyed and smiling. He hurried ahead of them to the pickup, and Jim put a hand on Kara’s arm to slow her down.

She turned to look up at him. He sighed, shook his head. “You can’t possibly know what you did for him today, Kara. These sessions... they’re usually hell. He’s never managed to get through one without getting angry and frustrated, without crying and begging to stop. It’s like a miracle.”

She lowered her head. “I’m just glad it was easier on him this time,” she said.

“I know you are.” He stared at her, at a loss for words.

She put a hand on his arm. “Let’s get him to the farm, Jimmy. He’s really earned it.”

He nodded, not sure how to make her understand the magic she’d performed today. And then they got to the farm and the magic multiplied tenfold. Tyler was in heaven when Barbara Jean Collins led the way to the pasture where a half dozen miniature horses grazed by the edge of a stream. She was a solidly built woman, dressed in bib overalls and a big flannel shirt.

She looked down at Tyler. “Do you know how to whistle?”

He nodded, puckered up his lips and blew. The resulting sound was faint and mostly air. Barbara Jean patted his shoulder. “Okay, pal, we’re gonna have to work on that whistle. Meanwhile, let’s try one together, huh?”

Tyler nodded. Barbara put two fingers to her lips, and when Ty whistled again, she did, too.

The little animals' heads came up, then they trotted right to her—and to Tyler since he was standing right beside her.

Jim watched, his heart swelling as his son's face lit up and the woman led him from one animal to the next, introducing them as Corky and Snuffy and Baby Jane and Rusty and... he lost track of the names after that. He watched Tyler point to the one he liked best, Rusty, and then Barbara nodded and took that horse by its halter, leading it into the nearby stable with Tyler right on her heels.

“You guys find a comfy spot and take a break,” Barbara Jean called back to Jim and Kara. “Ty and I are gonna have a lesson in saddling a horse. We'll be back in a flash.”

Jim nodded, even though it was against his instincts to let anyone, particularly a strange woman, take his son out of his sight

“It's okay,” Kara whispered.

He looked down at her. And he knew when he met her eyes that she was seeing right through him. That uncanny empathy of hers again. She couldn't just read his son, he realized. She could read him, too.

“Mom's known Barbara for fifteen years. She's a good woman, Jimmy. Raised three sons of her own.”

He nodded. Kara took his hand and led him to a bale of hay by the fence, and they sat down on it to wait.

A few minutes later the red-brown mini-horse with the shaggy cream-colored mane came plodding out of the stable with Tyler on his back, and Barbara Jean leading him. Tyler had never in his entire life looked the way he looked right then.

Jim stood up, not quite aware of doing so, and Kara stood beside him. And as Tyler rode past, laughing and waving, the sunshine gleaming in his hair, Jim put an arm around Kara's shoulders and pulled her close as he tried to swallow the lump in his throat.

“I'm riding, Dad! Look at me! I'm riding a real pony!” Jim waved again, unable to speak. And then he looked down at

Kara. Her eyes were fixed on Tyler as he rode, and he thought she might have been as moved as he was. And he knew then that he needed this woman in his life. His son needed her. And he was going to do whatever it took to make her a part of their lives. Permanently. Kara wasn't just too good to be true. She was far too good to let slip away.



Vinnie had gone out and he wasn't back yet. He'd been stingy this morning. Given her just a little sniff, and it hadn't been nearly enough. Angela was nervous, damned emotional, and that wasn't a way she enjoyed feeling. She'd been through every suitcase Vinnie had brought along, but she couldn't find a thing. And dammit, if she didn't do a couple of lines soon, she was going to pull her hair out.

She tried to go back to bed but was too restless to sleep. So she got up and hunted some more. By the time Vinnie came back, she'd torn the lining out of his suitcases, stripped the motel room's bed and shoved the mattress off.

He came in the door, looked at the mess around him and shot her a dangerous glare.

"I'll clean it up. Dammit, Vinnie, where's the stuff? You said you brought some, but you barely gave me enough for a buzz this morning. Where is it?"

Lips thin, he tugged a tiny bag from his pocket and slapped it down on the dresser. Angela lunged toward it, but he gripped her shoulder. "Not so fast. First, you listen, because you're working for me today. And if you don't do a good job, you won't be getting another sniff, baby. Understand?"

"I'll do whatever you want," she promised. She couldn't keep her eyes on him, though. She kept darting looks at the stuff on the dresser. "You know I will, Vin, I always do."

He nodded and let go of her. "You're going to clean this mess up, fast. Then I want you to take a shower. Put on some of the clothes I bought you. Something nice, so you don't look like a ten-dollar whore. Fix up your hair. Slap some makeup

over the circles under your eyes. I want you to look respectable. You got it?"

By then she'd already had a hit. She straightened, sniffing and rubbing a knuckle over her nostrils. "Got it." She bent again, but he grabbed her straw out of her hand before she could do anymore.

"You've had enough."

"Can I just put it in my purse for later?"

He shook his head firmly. "No way. I say when and I say how much. Get used to it, Ang."

"Okay, Vinnie." She watched him pocket the cocaine.

"I'm gonna get us some lunch. Have this mess cleaned up by the time I get back."

"I will."

"Don't answer the phone and don't go out. Don't talk to anybody, you got that?"

She nodded and leaned back against the dresser. "You gonna tell me where you were this morning?"

"Doin' some research, sugar. You're gonna get to see your boy today. So you make sure you do yourself up extra pretty for him." He glanced at his watch. "I'll be back in a half hour. Lock up behind me."

She nodded and he left. When he opened the door, she noticed the Do Not Disturb sign hanging from the knob on the outside. He must have put it there before he left. She locked the door as he'd told her. She didn't think about the rest of the day, about seeing her son for the first time in more than four years. Part of her sort of hoped things would get in the way, that it would never happen. Something would come up, and Vinnie would get called back to Chicago. Or maybe Jim would pack Tyler up and head somewhere else.

She kind of hoped so. She'd gotten used to being without her son. It stopped hurting after a while. At least, it stopped hurting when she was high, and she was high most of the time.

Her life was just fine without a kid cluttering it up. She didn't need that kind of responsibility again.



VIDALIA WAS ADDING mulch to the more delicate plants in her flower bed to protect them during the winter months, when they would lie dormant. Selene had taken one of her so-called weed walks through the meadows out back. She would no doubt return with a basket of stalks, roots and snips. She would know all their folk names and medicinal uses and she would brew teas that tasted remarkably good and actually seemed to work.

Vi didn't mind Selene using nature's gifts for easing bouts of sinus or nervous energy or a bad stomach. But the other things the girl did with those weeds didn't sit well with her. In fact, she was downright worried about her youngest daughter. She had stuffed a pair of pillows with some wild herb or other and given them to the twins to keep away nightmares and ensure they had only sweet, happy dreams. Then there was the time she'd stuffed flowers into a tiny drawstring bag and told Mel it was for protection.

And there was more. Tarot cards, crystals all over her bedroom and all those books she was always reading about folk magic and shamanism.

It was worrisome, that's what it was. The girl was meddling in places she ought not to be, and Vidalia felt more and more certain she needed to step in and do something about it. Lordy, while the rest of them talked about Christmas, Selene referred to the holiday as the Winter Solstice and insisted doing so wasn't the least bit disrespectful to the Lord.

She was worried about Kara, too, what with Jimmy Corona back in town with that precious boy of his. Oh, that child could tug every one of Kara's heartstrings. The girl was a pushover for any child, much less one with troubles of the kind that boy had. A motherless baby with braces on his legs. Wouldn't have mattered if his daddy had looked like a billy

goat, much less the handsome devil he was. Lord God Himself couldn't have sent anyone more likely to make her Kara fall head over heels.

The question was, was this Corona fellow worthy of her? Would he treat her the way she needed to be treated? Or would he break her heart? Of all the girls, Kara was the most sensitive, the most tender-hearted, the most easily wounded. She was also the most selfless, giving and caring of the bunch. It would take a special man to make her happy, and Vidalia Brand intended to see to it she got one.

And if this Jimmy Corona jerked her girl around, he was going to find out he'd woken up a sleeping mama tiger. With big, sharp claws.

She yanked a weed harder than she'd intended, pulling up a good-size hunk of topsoil with it, and told herself to calm down.

“Excuse me?”

Vidalia looked over her shoulder, irritated at the intrusion, and saw a woman's head perched atop a broomstick body. Hell, even that yellow, lifeless hair kept the broomstick image intact. Her face looked older than Vi's own, dry, drawn, unsmiling. The woman needed twenty pounds to qualify as skinny.

Vi stood slowly, brushing the soil from her hands and forcing a friendly smile. “Can I help you with something?”

“I'm... looking for Mrs. Brand,” the woman said.

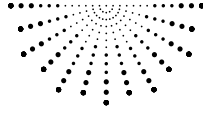
“Well, you've found her.” Vi extended a hand. “You can call me Vidalia.”

The woman shook her hand, her grip cold, damp and weak.

Vi had to resist the urge to wipe her hand on her jeans when the girl released it.

“I'm Angela Corona,” the stranger said. “They told me in town you might know where I can find my husband, Jim, and our son. Tyler.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



Colby didn't know how long he'd been lying there. And as for how badly he was hurt, it wasn't possible to assess. The pain was an all-encompassing orb that contained him within it. Pulsing, blood-red, blinding pain.

But he was alive. The pain proved it, and for that he loved it. Dammit, he wouldn't have been if it hadn't been for Corona's drugged-out ex. Thanks to her, he'd been able to get free.

Vinnie's thug had parked the Blazer near the edge of a steeper-than-hell drop-off, gotten out long enough to drive a screwdriver blade through the gas tank. Then he'd put it in Neutral and given it a push.

Colby had had to work fast and even then he almost hadn't made it. He'd jerked his wrists free and wrenched the door open, flinging himself out of the car just before it had gone over the edge. He'd hit hard, and he'd tumbled, unsure whether his would-be killer had seen his escape. And then his head had crashed against something hard and he'd come to rest, barely clinging to consciousness. He'd managed to open his eyes, to look around him, but all he had seen was thorny brush. And then he'd heard the Blazer explode when it hit bottom.

No wonder the bastard hadn't been worried about removing the duct tape. Hell, there wouldn't be a body left to examine in a wreck like that.

Thank God for the little drug addict, he thought. At least he was alive.

And then he'd sunk into oblivion.

Now he was awake and fighting through the pain. It took a long time, it seemed, for him to manage to move. First one limb, then another. Movement gave the pain a focus, it seemed. When he moved his hands, it screamed in them. His legs, too. His back. His head. Everything.

It didn't matter. He had to get up, get moving. Get the hell out of here, wherever here was. He struggled to his feet, hands on a boulder to help him, probably the one his head had struck. Damn.

Looking around, he saw no one. But his vision was far from dependable. The ground seemed to swell and rise toward him, then recede again like an uneasy sea. Dizziness sickened him. Hell. There were trees in one direction, a steep drop in another, open space in a third. Probably the road.

He headed for the trees. Best to stay concealed in case Skinny Vinnie or his drone decided to check on the job they thought they'd done. Almost as an afterthought, he checked his pocket for his cell phone, was relieved to find it still there. And getting a signal—not a strong one—but maybe enough. He began punching the keys...but before he finished, his vision blurred and he had to start over.

He figured he got about a hundred yards and accurately entered six digits before he collapsed again.



Barbara Jean seemed moved by Tyler's reaction to the miniature horses. Kara thought it must be clear to her, as it would be clear to anyone with a pair of working eyes, how important this was, what a major event this was in Tyler's life.

They all trooped into the barn, standing by while Tyler helped Barbara remove Rusty's saddle, blanket and bridle,

then brush him down. Barbara turned to Jimmy and Kara. “How long you gonna be in Big Falls, Mr. Corona?”

“Jim.” He glanced down at Kara, seemed to be considering before he answered. “I don’t know. It depends. But I do know it’ll be three weeks at the very least.”

“And Ty here has PT—what?—once a week?”

“Twice a week,” Jim told her.

She nodded. “Well, you can consider this a standing date, then.”

“Oh, Barbara, we’d be taking advantage,” Jim said.

Barbara shrugged and nodded toward Ty. He was singing to the pony as he brushed him. “Frankly I don’t see how you can *not* do it. But if it makes you feel any better, I can charge you for the time. Tell you the truth, I’ve been considering doing something like this for a while now.”

“I didn’t know that,” Kara said.

Barbara nodded. “Been reading about programs where these miniatures are brought right into hospitals for sick kids—kids with cancer, burn victims, all sorts of different problems. And so far it looks as if it makes a heck of a difference in those kids’ lives. So I’d been playing with the notion, kind of mulling it all over, and then you called.” Barbara smiled. “Now that I’ve seen the results firsthand, I can’t come up with a single reason not to pursue this.”

“You’re an angel, Barbara.”

“Seems this state’s full of angels,” Jim muttered. Then he called to his son. “Hey, Ty, what do you think about us doing this after every PT session while we’re in Big Falls?”

“Really?” He hugged Rusty’s neck. “Oh, Dad! That would be so cool!”

Jim sighed and his hand closed around Kara’s.

She swallowed the lump that came into her throat. “Let’s get Ty home,” she said. “Look at him, he’s tired out. You can see it in his eyes.”

“I can. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised you can, too.” He crossed to his son, whose head now rested against the pony’s side. “Time to go, Ty. But we’ll be back. Day after tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay, Dad.” He stroked the pony’s nose, then reached for his crutches, which were leaning against the side of the stall.

“You did a good job today, Ty,” Barbara told him. “I think Rusty really likes you.”

He smiled tiredly and Jim scooped him up. Kara scrambled to gather up the crutches, noting that Tyler didn’t even argue with his dad about being carried. When Jim slid his son into the truck, Kara climbed in beside him.

Tyler leaned up and wrapped his arms around her neck just as Jim was getting in the driver’s side. “I love you, Kara,” Tyler said softly.

Kara’s eyes filled and she looked into Jimmy’s. He’d frozen behind the wheel, keys halfway to the ignition switch. She knew he could see the tears brimming in her eyes, but there was nothing she could do to prevent them.

“I love you, too, Ty,” she whispered.

He released her neck but snuggled close beside her for the ride back to Big Falls and fell asleep before they’d gone a mile.

Jimmy looked over at Kara. “What do you say we go on a real date tonight? Just you and me.”

She blinked at him. “What about Tyler?”

“Can we get one of your sisters to watch him?”

Kara nodded. “I did tell him he could play with the twins later on. And I think Maya would love to have him.” She shrugged. “Okay.”

Jimmy didn’t come inside when he dropped Kara off at home. She wouldn’t let him walk her to the door, not with Tyler sleeping soundly in the pickup by then. She promised to ask Maya about babysitting and call him only if it was a problem. Otherwise, she would expect him at seven.

She watched him drive out of sight, then went to the door and walked inside. Maya, Selene and Edie were at the kitchen table waiting for her.

Probably waiting to grill her about her day with Jimmy, she guessed, and then painted a smile on her face and reminded herself that her family loved her and only meant well.

“Looks like someone called a family meeting,” she said, half joking. “Maya, would it be terrible of me to ask you to watch Tyler tonight while Jimmy and I go out for dinner?”

Maya looked at the others, who shrugged as if helpless. Then she said, “It’s not terrible of you to ask at all, hon. I’d love to have Ty. He can sleep over if he wants.” She shrugged. “I mean, unless your plans change.”

“Which they might,” Edie put in.

“We don’t have the whole story,” Selene said. “There’s more going on here than meets the eye.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Kara asked. “Where’s Mom?”

At that moment her mother came into the kitchen, met Kara’s eyes and immediately lowered her own. Something was wrong, Kara realized. Something big. “What’s going on?”

“Sit down, daughter.”

She didn’t even consider arguing with her mother. She pulled out a chair and sat, then waited, knowing that whatever it was, it was going to be bad. There was nothing wrong with Caleb or the twins or with Wade. Edie and Maya wouldn’t be sitting there, grim-faced but calm, if there was. “God,” Kara said, rapidly ticking off possibilities in her mind. “Has something happened to Mel? Or Alex?”

Her mother shook her head. “It’s about Jimmy and Tyler.” She drew a deep breath before plunging on. “A woman came by here today, Kara. Claimed she was Tyler’s mother and asked if I could tell her where to find her husband and her son.”

Kara felt as if she'd been punched in the belly. "He told me Ty's mother was dead. He... why would he lie to me about something like that?"

"Kara, don't think the worst," Selene said, getting to her feet. "We don't have his side of the story yet."

Kara got up slowly and moved past them all, needing the solitude of her room before she let the tears flow. "I knew all along he was too good to be true. God, I was so stupid to let myself think... to hope... "

She ran then, tripped halfway up the stairs and almost fell on her face. Then she got her footing again and hurried the rest of the way to her room. She closed the door, turned the lock, and sank onto her bed to hug her pillows and cry. She couldn't think, couldn't reason, couldn't even begin to plan how she was going to handle this. Not yet. Right then all she could do was cry her heart out.



"Is Kara ready?"

Jim stood just inside the door in the kitchen and wondered what he'd done to make Vidalia Brand look as if she would like to skin him alive. Come to think of it, Maya had been acting oddly, too, when he'd dropped Tyler off a few minutes ago.

Vi opened her mouth to reply, but before she got a word out, Kara came into the room, and he took a moment to drink in the sight of her. She looked great, as she always did. Her hair was curly again tonight and it bounced when she moved. She wore a skirt that was long and loose and flowed like a floral-print breeze around her long legs, with a pale green sweater that only hinted at what hid beneath it. He thought she was wearing more makeup than usual. Especially around her eyes.

Her mother gaped at her, apparently too distracted by her to remember what she'd been about to say. "Don't tell me you're still going," she blurted.

Kara squeezed her mother's arm, met her eyes and passed some silent message to the woman. Vidalia pursed her lips, shook her head and spared Jim one last glare before she stomped to the door. "I've got to get back to the Corral," she said. "We'll talk in the morning, daughter."

"Good night, Mom."

Vi moved past him without a word and left the house.

Jim looked again at Kara, his eyebrows raised. "Is she angry with me for some reason?"

Kara lowered her head, not meeting his eyes. "Is it okay with you if we skip dinner tonight?"

He frowned at her. Something was wrong. "Whatever you want to do is okay with me, Kara. Did you have something else in mind?"

"Yeah. Something else." She swallowed hard. "We need to talk, Jimmy."

He bit his lip and moved closer to her. "Kara, what's wrong? Clearly your mother is angry with me. And you..." He frowned and touched her chin, lifting her face so he could verify what he thought he saw there. "You've been crying?"

She closed her eyes. "I thought I got rid of the evidence."

"Tell me why."

She met his eyes now. "Not here," she said. "Too many people running in and out all the time."

She was working up to something. Something big. Hell, he'd screwed up somewhere along the line and he'd better figure out how. And soon, so he could fix it.

"Come on, then." He took her arm, led her out of the house.

"To where?"

"To dinner. Just as planned."

"But I—"

"Trust me on this, Kara, okay?"

She sighed but nodded and let him help her into the pickup. He saw her noticing the picnic basket on the seat between them, the mini cooler in the back. But she remained silent—maybe brooding?—for the entire ten-minute drive.

When he pulled to a stop by the falls, she shot him a look.

“I’d planned a... special evening.” He got out of the truck and took the picnic basket with him. He noticed she didn’t get out right away, but he decided to give her a minute to gather her thoughts. He took the blanket and the ice chest from the back, spread the blanket on the ground. Then he took the bottle of wine from the picnic basket and stuck it into the ice he’d brought along. He hoped it wasn’t too chilly out here for her.

He heard the pickup door, looked up to see her coming toward him. She stood for a moment, staring out at the falls. So he walked up beside her, slid an arm around her shoulders and took in the view, as well.

“I never get enough of this spot,” she said. “There’s something about the sheer power of a waterfall. You can feel it thrumming right in the middle of your chest.”

“Can you?”

“Mmm. Close your eyes and try.”

He closed his eyes but only briefly. He was more interested in her than in the falls, beautiful though they were. She stood there, eyes closed, face turned toward the thundering cascade. Some of the mist gathered on her cheeks, dampening them as she seemed to inhale the scent and sound and feel of the place.

Then she opened them again and turned to look at him. “Mom had a visitor at the house today.” She drew a breath, seemed to square her shoulders before she went on. “A woman named Angela. Said she was your wife, Tyler’s mother.”

Jim drew back in reaction to that blow. His gut clenched tight, as did his fists. “Was she alone?”

Kara blinked, apparently surprised by the question. “I tell you a woman shows up claiming to be your wife and all you can think of to ask is if she was alone? Jimmy, you told me she was dead.”

“I told you we’d lost her,” he said. He turned quickly and strode to the area he’d set up for what he’d intended to be a romantic evening. “You assumed she was dead and I let you. And I’ve been kicking myself for it ever since. But for the record, Kara, she’s my ex-wife.” He yanked the wine out of the ice chest, crammed it back into the picnic basket and picked up both of them. “Grab the blanket.”

Kara did so, then ran to keep up with him as he carried the other items into the truck. “Jimmy, don’t you think you owe me an explanation?”

“I owe you more than that. Hell, a lot more.” He took the blanket from her and crammed it into the truck, then held the door open. “Get in.”

She got in. He went around to his side and started the vehicle moving.

“Jimmy, please tell me what’s going on.”

He glanced sideways at her, pushed a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry. Kara, dammit, I’m so sorry I wasn’t honest with you from the beginning. It’s just... my marriage to that woman is not something I’m proud of.”

“But why?”

He closed his eyes. “It’s a long story. She’s trouble, Kara. She hasn’t seen Tyler since she left us four years ago. She hasn’t wanted to see him. He doesn’t even know who she is.”

Kara lowered her head. “I don’t understand. If she doesn’t want him, then why is she here?”

“That’s what I’d like to know.” He pressed harder on the accelerator and soon was turning into the driveway that curved uphill from Vidalia’s farmhouse to Maya and Caleb’s recently built one, higher up the hill. He jumped out of the truck and ran to the door, knocked once before flinging it open.

Maya and Caleb looked up fast, and Maya frowned. “Back so soon?”

“Where’s Tyler?” he asked, scanning the living room.

“In the playroom with the twins,” Maya said, pointing.

“Is something wrong, Jim?” Caleb asked.

But Jim was already striding through the house in the direction Maya had pointed. He didn't think he drew a breath again until he burst into the playroom and saw Tyler on the floor, making motor noises as he drove a toy truck along the floor. Ty looked up with a smile. “Hi, Dad.”

Jim scooped his son up and hugged him hard.

“I thought you was goin' on a picnic with Kara,” Tyler said.

“I missed you.”

“Already?” Tyler's face fell. “I don't have to go yet, do I, Dad? We were gonna have popcorn and watch Rudolf.”

He kissed Tyler's cheek, ruffled his hair and set him back down. “You go ahead. I'll be right outside if you need me, all right?”

“Okay, Dad.”

Jim turned to see Kara standing in the doorway staring at him. He nodded at her inquisitive look. “Yeah. We can have that talk now. Just one more thing first.” He pulled out his cell phone and dialed his chief. When Chief Wilcox picked up, he said, “Ang is in Big Falls.”



They sat on the porch swing as the sun went down. Jimmy still seemed nervous, watchful. Kara had lost her grip on her righteous indignation and her anger at having been lied to. Now all she felt was fear, because if he was this upset over his wife— ex-wife, she corrected herself—appearing in town, then there must be a good reason. Jimmy Corona was not a stupid man. He was a cop, for God's sake. And he'd been afraid when she'd told him about Angela's visit. No cop got that scared without a reason.

He took her hand in his and she looked into his eyes. “Marrying Angela was a huge mistake,” he told her. “But she

gave me Tyler, so it's a mistake I'd make all over again. Except this time... I'd keep him safe."

Kara frowned. "Safe? From his own mother?"

He nodded, leaned back in the swing, closed his eyes. "She liked to party, liked to have fun, never wanted kids. She resented getting pregnant. Resented having to give up her fun to carry a baby to term. But she did it. And I thought... I thought she would keep on doing it. I thought once she held our child in her arms, she'd see what was really important in life."

"You thought a baby would change her."

He nodded. "God knows nothing else did."

"But it didn't work."

"No. She was worse than ever after Tyler was born. And one day while I was at work, she got high and tried to take him out for a walk. He was a month old. We lived in a fifth-floor apartment and the elevator wasn't working that day. She fell, crashed down two flights of stairs, took him down with her."

"Oh my precious little Ty," she whispered, her hand going involuntarily to her heart.

He drew a breath, an unsteady, stuttering breath, as if just the memory was more than he could bear. "He was all busted up. We almost lost him. But the lasting damage was to his spine. That's why he's wearing the braces, suffering through PT twice a week, and waiting for yet another operation."

"I'm so sorry, Jimmy."

"I divorced her, naturally. Gave her the option of surrendering parental rights to Tyler or going up on charges for possession and neglect. She signed him away like he was nothing. She never wanted him to begin with. And we didn't see her again. Oh, I knew, though. She was still using, sliding further into the gutter with every month that passed. Last I knew, she was selling herself on the streets for drug money." He looked at Kara intently. "I didn't know she was using. I never would've left her alone with my son if I'd known." Then he shook his head slow. "Maybe I just didn't want to know."

She stroked the back of his lowered head. “Why is she here?”

“I busted a man in Chicago for dealing in child pornography. He’s a wealthy pig, made his fortune in legitimate porn. We got a tip and raided his home. Found the evidence and made the arrest. But this guy has money and apparently powerful connections. The evidence vanished. Just disappeared from the evidence room.”

She frowned, searching his face, her heart in her throat

“Angela showed up at my door before I left Chicago, begging me to change my testimony against this guy. Says he’s the love of her life. He’s got her convinced he’s going to scrape her out of the gutter and make her fantasies come true. Fact is, I’m convinced he only took up with her to get to me. After the evidence vanished, the only thing left to put this guy away is my testimony. Mine and Colby’s, that is. Our chief thought it best we both get out of town until the trial.”

“You think this man is with her? That he’s come down here after you?”

He nodded. “Last night I learned that both he and Angela had fallen off the radar. Today she shows up here.” He shook his head. “No way is it a coincidence.”

She nodded slowly.

“And Colby’s missing.” He shook his head hard. “I thought he’d just taken off. He was a little pissed at me over... something. But now that I know they’re in town...”

She blinked and sucked in a sharp breath. “Do you think they’ve done something to him?”

Jim closed his eyes. “God, I hope not.”

He turned to face her, took her hands in his. “I know none of this gives me a reason for misleading you before, Kara. I just—hell, it’s just easier to say she’s gone and let people draw their own conclusions than to admit the truth. That I left my son in the care of a drug addict who damn near killed him.”

“She was his mother, Jimmy. You can’t take responsibility for what she did. No one can, no one but her.”

“I don’t agree with that. But that’s beside the point, Kara. I shouldn’t have lied to you.”

“You didn’t exactly—”

“I did. I knew what you assumed and I didn’t correct you. I’m sorry. I can’t tell you how sorry I am that I hurt you like that. You don’t deserve it.”

“Given the circumstances, I think I can forgive you.”

He smiled a little, but then his eyes turned solemn again. “Not that it matters at this point. I can’t risk them catching up to us. I’ve got to take Tyler and leave town.”

She put a hand on his shoulder. “I’m not sure that’s the best thing here.”

He lowered his head. “It makes no sense to think all Skinny Vinnie wants is for me to pull my testimony against him. What would stop me from changing it again as soon as conditions changed? No, he’s up to more than that. I don’t want to leave Big Falls—or you—but I have to put Ty first.”

“So do I,” she told him. “Come on. Jimmy, you know me well enough to know I wouldn’t suggest anything that would put you or Tyler at risk. What I want doesn’t even enter into it. Just hear me out, okay?”

After a moment he nodded. “You’re right. I do know you well enough to know that. Okay, so what are you thinking?”

“Just this. If you take Tyler anywhere else, what’s to stop these two from tracking you down again? And then there would be no one but you to watch over him. What if they get to you? What if they do something to you, make you disappear the way they maybe did to Colby? What happens to Tyler then? He’d be all alone.”

Jim lowered his head. “I won’t let that happen.”

“You might not have a choice. But here—here there are tons of us. I can call Mel. She and Alex will drop whatever they’re doing to get back here to help, I know they will. Alex

is one of the top P.I.s in the country, Jimmy. He's good at what he does. And Mel is no slouch. Besides that, here you've got Caleb and his father, Cain. A lawyer and a retired senator, with all the power and influence that go along with that. You've got Wade, the toughest guy I know. You've got Mom and Maya and Edie and Selene."

"I can't ask you all to—"

"You don't have to ask." She shook her head. "Hell, you won't be able to stop them from getting involved in this once I tell them. And I *am* going to tell them. And you've got me, too. I'd do anything for Tyler. I... I love him, Jimmy."

He stared at her as if considering what she said. Thank God, she thought.

"If this goon is out on bail, awaiting trial—" she said.

"He is."

"Then he isn't supposed to leave the state, is he?"

"No."

"The authorities know he's here somewhere. They'll be hunting for him here. Let us help keep Tyler safe while they do. If you go elsewhere, they won't know where to look for the guy. But if you stay here and he's really around looking for you, then he'll stay, too. And they can get him back behind bars where he belongs."

"I don't know..."

"We can have people watching Ty twenty-four, seven, Jimmy. If you go off alone, who's with him when you're sleeping? Or in the shower? You can't do this alone. Not the way we can do it here."

"I just... I can't believe your family would really do all that."

She smiled a little. "It's a Brand family tradition. When one's in trouble, we all come running. Hell, if things get scary, I can call in the Texas branch of the family."

He smiled, and she saw some of the tension leave his eyes. “And how many of those are there?”

“Eighteen, not counting the kids. Let’s see, there’s a sheriff, a martial-arts expert, a Comanche shaman—”

“Okay, I get it.” He lowered his head. “You’ve convinced me. If your family really is willing, then...”

“Her family is more than willing,” Maya said from somewhere behind them.

Jimmy swung his head around. So did Kara. Maya was standing near an open window, her husband close beside her.

“Did I mention,” Kara asked, “that my family is also terribly nosy, snoopy, rude and intrusive?”

Maya nodded hard. “We are, Jim,” she said.

“They really are,” Caleb agreed.

“Because we love each other.” Maya slid the window closed and came out through the door, Caleb at her side.

Caleb said, “Jim, everything Kara told you about the Brands is dead-on accurate. No one’s gonna get within ten miles of your boy with us on the job. I guarantee it.”

“Come on, Kara,” Maya said. “Let’s call Mel, then we’ll fill in the others.”

Kara looked back at Jimmy.

Caleb said, “Go ahead, sis. I need a minute with Jim anyway.”

Jimmy nodded, telling her with his eyes he would be fine. She had no doubt he would, but she also knew Caleb wasn’t going to pull any punches. And nothing she could say would be likely to dissuade him.

Sighing, she went inside with her sister. As the door swung closed behind them, Kara heard Caleb’s voice, speaking low. “If there’s anything else you’re keeping from her, pal—”

“There’s not”

“There had better not be.”



Only there was, Jim thought. There was one very big thing he was still keeping from Kara Brand.

He'd been forced to say goodnight to Kara with most of her family watching, and though the entire situation had been explained to them and they had wholeheartedly embraced Kara's plan, Vidalia still looked at him as if she'd like to take him out to the woodshed with a switch. Maya seemed undecided. Edie, blatantly suspicious. Wade and Caleb watched him like bulldogs watching a steak. Only Selene and Kara looked at him with complete understanding and concern. And even Selene seemed to wax uncertain every now and then.

They all seemed to adore Tyler, though. And hell, Jim couldn't blame them for being protective of Kara. If they knew what he was really doing with her, they'd probably run him out of town without thinking twice.

By the time the family was through questioning him and offering opinions and making plans, Tyler had climbed into his lap and fallen asleep.

Jim had been watching Kara, paying close attention all evening to try to assess the extent of the damage he'd done. But he was damned if he could see any sign of any in her eyes.

He'd been craving a moment alone with her, but in the end he gave up on it. He said his goodnights with the entire clan watching him and then carried his sleeping son out to the pickup. He would just have to try to get some private time with Kara tomorrow. He'd made too much progress with her to risk screwing it up now, especially if he was sticking around here in Big Falls after all.

He shifted Tyler onto his shoulder so he could reach for the pickup door, only to see a hand grip it before he could.

Kara had come out behind him, and he hadn't even heard her. Hell, he'd better snap out of this habit of being lost in his thoughts.

She opened the door, and he laid his son gently on the seat, then fastened the seat belt around him, stepped back and closed the door softly.

He turned and leaned against the truck. “You never got any dinner, Kara.”

“You didn’t, either.” She shrugged. “Anyway, it’s not like I could think about eating with all this.”

Jim wanted to know where things stood with her, how bad a setback this had been. He could happily strangle Angela for showing up now of all times. Ruining his plan when it had been going so damn well. God, he hoped Colby was all right. He’d had phone calls from the Oklahoma state police, the county sheriff’s office and the Tucker Lake-Big Falls PD. They were coordinating with Chief Wilcox in Chicago and conducting an all-out search for the missing cop. There wasn’t a hell of a lot more that could be done on that score.

Kara looked tired. There were faint circles under her eyes that hadn’t been there before. He decided to touch her just to see if she would still allow it. He put his hands on her shoulders, then slid one inward, to move over the curve of her neck.

She surprised him by stepping closer, wrapping her arms around his waist, leaning her body into his. She rested her head on his shoulder and she whispered, “I’m so sorry you’re going through all this, Jimmy.”

He held her, one hand cupping her neck, his fingers just starting to thread into her hair. “You’re sorry? Kara, you don’t have anything to be sorry about.”

“You could have told me, you know. From the beginning, I mean. You didn’t have to keep all this from me.”

“I know that. I know. I’m the one who owes you the apology. I just hope... I haven’t messed this up.”

“Messed what up?”

She was still in his arms, still resting against him, so he couldn’t see her face. He wished he could, so he could try to

read whatever might be in her eyes and be sure she was asking what he thought she was asking.

He had nothing to go by except the feel of her in his arms, her warm breaths on his neck, the stars twinkling overhead. Hell, no, the stars had nothing to do with this. “Kara, I... I think there’s something special between us. I think you feel it, too, don’t you?”

She raised her head, stepped back slightly, looked into his eyes just the way he’d been wishing she would. Only, she was the one doing the searching, the probing, trying to read what was in his. He hoped she saw what he was trying to show her and nothing more.

“I feel—” She dipped her head suddenly. He thought he saw color flooding into her face.

“Don’t be afraid to tell me what you feel,” he said softly.

She raised her eyes to his. “I’m not afraid. Not really. It’s just... I’m not sure what I feel. It’s too soon for it to be... as big as it seems.” She drew a breath. “And I don’t want you worrying about my feelings anyway. Not right now, when you’ve got so much else to contend with.”

“I want to worry about your feelings, Kara.”

She shook her head. “Tyler comes first.”

His heart knocked against his rib cage. He hooked a finger under her chin, tipped it up and pressed his mouth to hers. She kissed like an angel. Like a fragile, timid angel, hungry for something she couldn’t begin to understand.

When he lifted his head, he said, “I’m feeling things, too, Kara. The same things you are.”

“It’s hard for me to believe that.”

“Why?”

She shrugged, turned in his arms and leaned back against his chest, tipping her head up as if to search the stars for an answer. “You were always the guy I fantasized about. The one I knew I could never have. Way out of my league.”

“I was too shallow back then to know a good woman from a bad one, Kara. Believe me, I know the difference now.”

“That doesn’t matter so much, though. I mean, you can’t decide who you’re attracted to. It just happens.” She swallowed hard. “Handsome men aren’t usually attracted to me. I keep thinking this is just too good to be true. And then when Mom said your... your wife was in town, I thought that was it. I was right, it *was* too good to be true. You were married.”

He shook his head slowly. She wasn’t looking at him, but at the stars. He was looking down at her, though. She had no idea just how beautiful she was, did she? “That hurt you. I hurt you. I’m sorry, Kara. I swear, I’m going to do my best not to let that happen again.”

She closed her eyes.

“I want you in my life. In Tyler’s life.”

Her eyes popped open, and she turned her head, staring at him in what looked like shock.

“I know it’s too soon for that, but it doesn’t seem like it is. It makes perfect sense to me. You and me and Tyler—we make sense, Kara. Don’t you think?”

She licked her lips nervously. “I... it doesn’t feel like it’s too soon to me either,” she said. She spoke slowly, haltingly, thinking her words through before speaking them. “But it is. We both know it is, Jimmy. I mean... there are so many things to think about, to talk about.”

There were, he knew that. But Tyler adored this woman, and she would do anything for him. Nothing else mattered. Nothing. He’d work through whatever problems there were. “I know.”

“No,” she said. “I don’t think you do.” She met his eyes. “I don’t want to leave Big Falls, Jimmy. I love it here. It’s my home. My family is here, my new business. I’m just starting to make my own way here. To find my footing. And you, your life is in Chicago. Your career, your home, your friends. It might as well be on Mars. A big city. God, I could never—”

“Okay, okay. I’m moving too fast and I’ve got your head spinning. I’m sorry, Kara. I’m sorry.” He ran a hand through her hair, saw the panic taking hold in her eyes. “Take a breath.”

She did. Then released it in another rush of words. “And then there’s your ex-wife. A drug addict, for God’s sake, involved with a criminal. I mean, I don’t know if I could handle having a person like that in our lives.”

He smiled. “I like when you say ‘our lives.’” She didn’t smile, though, so he wiped the smile off his own face. “I’m not dismissing your concerns. They’re real and they’re valid. But Angela is one thing you don’t have to worry about. She’s not a part of my life or Tyler’s.”

“But, Jimmy, she’s his *mother*.” She drew another deep breath. “Maybe she just needs help. Maybe she could get clean, go to rehab, change her ways.”

“She doesn’t want to change.”

“A child needs a mother, Jimmy.”

He met her eyes. “I know that.” Which was precisely why he was here, he thought. But he didn’t say it aloud and he hoped to God it didn’t show in his eyes. “I’ve dumped too much on you,” he said. “After the scare of learning Skinny Vinnie might be in town and then all this...” He shook his head. “You know, chances are Vinnie isn’t any threat at all to Tyler. Hell, I can’t even be sure he’s a threat to me. Maybe Colby met a girl and took off for a fling. It wouldn’t be the first time. Vinnie and Ang might have just come down here to try talking me into changing my testimony again. Maybe even offering me a bribe this time.”

Kara nodded. “But you don’t really believe that, do you?”

His lips thinned. Damn, she was a little too insightful. “It’s possible.”

“But not likely. If he wanted to offer you a bribe, Jimmy, he could have done it over the phone.”

He nodded. “I hate that this is happening now. That it’s having a negative impact on what’s been growing between

us.”

“It’s not,” she said. “Nothing’s going to have any impact on you and me but you and me. I won’t let it.”

“But you just said—”

“I changed my mind.”

He pulled her close and kissed her again. “You’re one special woman, Kara Brand.”

“I never thought so. But you’re starting to make me feel like one.”

Hell, he thought as he hugged her close. He was a real bastard. Because she *was* special and she deserved a hell of a lot more than this. A man who wanted her only because she’d be the perfect mother for his son. A man who didn’t really love her. Who wasn’t capable of loving her.

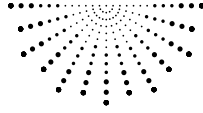
She deserved so much more.

But Tyler deserved a woman like Kara. And even Kara agreed with him—Tyler came first. He’d be good to her, he promised himself. He’d treat her like gold, give her everything she could ever want.

Except love, a little voice inside whispered.

Hell, love wasn’t all that important anyway. He’d loved Angela. If that wasn’t proof that love didn’t matter, he didn’t know what was. Tyler mattered. Tyler was the *only* thing that mattered.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Jim was prepared to spend the night sitting up, watching the house. It wasn't like he was going to be able to sleep anyway, with Ang in town up to God only knew what and that slimebag Vinnie more than likely with her. And Colby missing. Damn, he wished he knew where his friend was. He'd tried calling his cell phone again, just as he'd tried every hour or so since Colby had left. But it was no good.

He should be out there. He should be searching for Colby himself. But dammit, he couldn't leave Tyler and he couldn't drag his son along. Not while there was any risk at all. So he had to settle for phoning the chief for an update.

"Stay put, Corona," Chief Wilcox told him. "We've got officers combing three counties for Benton. His photo and a the tag number and description of the Blazer are with every law-enforcement agency in the area, and tonight they made TV news, as well."

"Still—"

"Still nothing. We've circulated photos and information on Vinnie and Ang as well. Not for the press, though. We don't want to tip them off too fast. But trust me, Corona, we've got this covered. We're gonna find Benton one way or another. And you leaving your kid alone and putting yourself at risk isn't going to change the outcome anyway. So sit tight."

He nodded, hating that his chief was right. "Okay."

"You secure there?"

Yeah, as long as I don't sleep, he thought. Aloud he said, "Yeah, we're good." He would see about getting some better locks on this place tomorrow. For now he had every door and window closed and locked. The bedroom where Tyler slept had only one window, and he'd moved a two-hundred-pound hardwood armoire in front of it for added security.

He'd left Tyler's light on, the bedroom door open. He never moved far enough away to break his line of sight to his son. They'd be all right.

"I'll talk to you in the morning then," the chief said.

Jim said good-night and disconnected. Then he kept his lonely vigil over his son for another hour and a half without incident, sitting in a hard-back chair he'd dragged in from the kitchen so he wouldn't get too comfortable and nod off. The chair was tipped back on two legs, propped by his feet on a coffee table. His side-arm was in his lap. He thought he probably looked like an over-reactive drama king, but he'd rather look like an idiot than risk an unexpected visit from Vinnie Stefano.

Around ten a knock on the door startled him into sitting up straight, feet and chair legs hitting the floor at once. A key scraped in the lock. He came to his feet, gun in his hand, barrel down. His forefinger moved without conscious command, nudging the safety off.

The door swung open and Kara Brand stepped inside. She stopped and eyed him, then his gun, then him again. She'd changed clothes, was dressed more casually now in jeans and a sweater, a warm coat. She nodded at him as she dropped her house keys back into her coat pocket. "Good," she said, eyeing the gun in his hand. "I was afraid you'd think I was overreacting." Then she reached outside the door, retrieving a shotgun from where she'd leaned it.

He felt his eyes widen but said nothing as she hefted a satchel in her other hand and dropped it just inside the door. Then she closed the door and locked it

"I didn't expect to see you again until tomorrow," he told her, not quite sure what to say. This was not a side of Kara

Brand he'd seen or even suspected might lurk underneath her tender surface.

She shrugged and brought the shotgun across the room, took a seat on the sofa and leaned it nearby. "You probably aren't going to like this any better than Mom did, but I'm here to stay."

He tilted his head to one side. "So what's not to like?" He crossed the room and picked up the satchel she'd dropped, then carried it up the stairs and put it in the second bedroom. Colby's stuff was still in the first one, and Colby was coming back.

He paused to look into Colby's room, bit his lip, then forced the worry away and headed down the stairs again.

"I take it you didn't bring the shotgun to keep me in line."

She smiled just a little. "Not likely."

He met her eyes, and a spark passed between them. She was frisky tonight. He liked that. But then she broke the contact, hefted the gun and tossed it to him. He caught it easily, knowing even before he checked that it wasn't loaded. Kara was too intelligent to toss a loaded shotgun.

It was a nice old gun, a classic twenty-gauge Ithaca, pump action. Held five shells. Black barrel, rich glossy hardwood stock. It had been freshly cleaned, still smelled of gun oil. He nodded his approval and tossed it back to her. "What did you bring for ammo?"

"Slugs. Hollow-points. Someone comes sniffing around you or Tyler, I don't plan to play games with birdshot."

There was a hint of ferocity in her eyes that he had never seen before. "You're full of surprises, you know that?"

"You didn't think I had a mean bone in my body, did you?" She shrugged. "Most people don't."

"You know how to use that thing?"

Her smile spread wider. "My mama made sure her girls could take care of themselves, Jimmy. Every one of us learned to shoot by the age of ten. And Brands never miss." She gave

the gun a half pump, which opened the chamber, and leaned it against the arm of the couch. Then she set a slug in front of her on the coffee table. With the gun in that position, she could slam the slug directly into the chamber, jerk the action upward again and fire. It would save a step. She knew what she was doing.

He pursed his lips as he thought about the possibility that Vinnie might actually show up here. The nightmare image of a shoot-out with Tyler and Kara Brand—sweet, shy, giving Kara Brand—in the middle of it, flashed through his mind. The thought made his stomach convulse.

“Kara, um, I’m not real sure I’m comfortable with this.”

“No, I didn’t think you would be once you gave it some thought.” She looked toward the stairway. “Which bedroom are you using?”

“I’m staying in Ty’s room or on the sofa, close enough to hear him.”

“That’s a good idea. I was going to if you weren’t.”

“I put your things in the second bedroom. Colby’s been using the first.”

“Good, I wouldn’t want to put Colby out,” she said as if there was no question about whether he was coming back. “But maybe after tonight I can stick a cot down here.”

“No.”

She met his eyes, didn’t argue. Didn’t ask why not. Maybe she knew deep down that he’d be too damn distracted if she was sleeping that close to him.

“I was thinking... tomorrow we should put some better locks on this place. And maybe we can start looking for a dog.”

“A dog?” He’d just been marveling at how much her thoughts mirrored his own—right up to the part about the dog, which he hadn’t even considered.

“We need a good dog,” she said. “I know Ty wants a puppy, but I’m hoping we can take him to the pound and

convince him to fall for an adult dog. One that will bark if anyone comes around.”

“I thought I told you the chances they’re going to try anything are slim.”

“Which is why you’re sitting in the dark with a forty-five in your lap, right?”

He shrugged.

“So chances are slim,” she said. “We do whatever we can to make them even slimmer.” She nodded toward the window. “Caleb’s parked outside, just so you know. He’ll be there for three hours, then Wade comes and takes over from one until four. Edie’s taking the four-to-seven shift.”

“They don’t have to do all that”

“They want to do all that. The shifts will get shorter once Mel and Alex get back. They’re due in tomorrow morning, by the way. So have you called someone back in Chicago to find out where things stand?”

He glanced at the clock. “Did that as soon as I got Ty settled into bed. My chief says they’ve got every cop in three counties on this. They all have photos of Colby, as well as Ang and Vinnie’s mugshots. Colby’s face showed up on the TV news tonight.”

“Maya told me. She saw it.”

He nodded, still uneasy. “Kara, if this guy is dangerous, I’d really feel better keeping you out of the line of fire.”

“I know that. But Tyler’s more important, don’t you think? And the more of us here watching him, the better.”

“Still... “ He sighed and tried another tack. For some reason he just wanted her safe in her own home, away from him—far enough away that Angela’s sickness and Vinnie’s filth couldn’t touch her. “There’s more than just that to consider, Kara.”

She was walking up the stairs now, so he followed. She stood just inside the bedroom door, eyeing the place. It was a usable room, clean, freshly painted. It had been his own room

as a kid. It made him feel odd to see her standing there in what had been his bedroom. She moved to where he'd put her bag on the bed, bent to unzip it and yanked out a bundle that included fresh sheets.

“What else is there to consider?” she asked him as she tossed the bag aside and began to make the bed.

He got on the other side to help her. “Tyler. He’s...he’s getting attached to you, Kara. If you seem to be moving in with us...”

She lifted her eyes to his. God, they were pretty. “I’ll make sure he knows from the beginning that it’s only temporary, Jimmy. I promise, I won’t let him get his hopes up for anything more.”

“It’s probably already too late for that,” he told her. He swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. “God knows, I’ve already built my hopes pretty high that there will be something more. How can I expect him to do any different?”

She looked at him, her eyes wide with surprise. Then he swallowed hard, lowered his head and told himself that was the wrong thing to say to get rid of her. But hell, he didn’t want to get rid of her. Not really, not down deep.

They got the sheets on the bed and he straightened. “This was my room. My entire childhood, this was my haven.”

“Really?” She looked around.

He nodded toward the closet. “I used to pretend that was a fort. Sometimes I slept in there, but only with the door open.”

She went to the closet, opened it and looked inside. “I don’t blame you. It’s not very big.” Jim moved to stand beside her, laid his hand over hers on the door. She lifted her eyes to his.

“It means a lot, you coming over here like this. Your family...” He stopped there, shook his head. It really did mean a lot. He didn’t have to pretend at all, he realized, his throat getting tight.

“We care about Tyler. And about you, Jimmy. We wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.”

He couldn’t take his eyes off her face. She was sincere, right to her soul. She meant every word she said. He couldn’t think otherwise.

“I, um... have blankets and pillows in the car,” she said. “And another bag, just a small one.”

“I’ll get them for you.”

She nodded and they walked downstairs together. The phone was ringing before they reached the bottom. Jim hurried across the room to where he’d left his cell phone on the coffee table and yanked it up, knowing it had to be something important for anyone to call at this time of the night. And when he looked at the panel and saw the chief’s number on it, he was even more certain.

“Corona,” he said into the phone. “What’s up, Chief?”

“They found the Blazer, Jim. We were able to trace his cell phone’s ping to narrow down the search and an eagle eyed deputy spotted it.”

It was bad. He knew it was bad. The chief never called him by his first name. “Colby?” he asked, standing motionless.

“We don’t know yet. The Blazer took a plunge into a deep ravine. It burned. They only identified it by a license plate that got knocked free on the way down. There’s a crew out there now trying to find any sign of anyone inside, but with a fire that bad... “

“Where?” Jim asked. Kara was beside him, her hand on his shoulder, her face searching his as the chief told him where Colby’s Blazer had been located.

When he hung up the phone and related what the chief had told him, he thought Kara was going to burst into tears. Instead she set her jaw. “Colby wasn’t inside,” she said. And she said it firmly. “He wasn’t or they’d have found something, some sign.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“You have to go,” she told him.

He closed his eyes, feeling as if his heart was being torn right in half. “I can’t leave Tyler.”

“Jimmy, Caleb is here. I’m here. Nobody is going to get near that boy with me around. I swear you can trust me to keep him safe.”

He frowned as her words wormed their way deep inside him.

“I’m not Angela, Jimmy. I’d step in front of a freight train for that child.”

More amazing than the power of her words was the fact that he believed them, he thought. He believed her, trusted her, in a way he had thought he would never trust any woman ever again. He trusted her with his son.

Amazing.

He took enough time to jot his cell phone number on a pad by the phone and then went out to find his best friend.



Kara wasn’t sure how she was going to sleep in the room that had been Jimmy’s, much less live under the same roof with him, without giving in to what she was feeling.

She’d never been with a man. Not... intimately. And she was afraid to admit that to him, even a little bit ashamed of it. It seemed so backward in this day and age to be a virgin at twenty-three. She wanted to be with Jimmy. And she thought he wanted to be with her, too. But she was afraid—so afraid of him. He was making her believe things she had always thought were impossible. Making her think there was suddenly a chance she could win the heart of the boy of her high school dreams. The man of her grown-up dreams, now. She was scared half to death, because if it wasn’t real, it would kill her.

Maybe it was already too late to worry about that. Maybe she’d already let herself fall. She looked out the window and

saw Jimmy talking to Caleb on his way out to join the search for his friend. And just how could she be thinking about her own problems, her own hopes and fears and silly little-girl dreams, when hell was breaking loose all around Jimmy and Ty? It was selfish of her. She needed to focus on what was important. Keeping Tyler safe, praying for Colby's well-being. That was all. Whatever happened—or didn't happen—between her and Jimmy Corona wasn't important. Not now.

She walked through the house, checking every window to be sure the locks were in place, checking the back door to make sure it was locked, as well. Then she went to Tyler's bedroom and stood looking in on him for a long moment. Her heart swelled. Jimmy was worried about Tyler getting attached to her. She wondered if he realized just how attached she was becoming to Tyler. To both of them.



Jim found the spot, off a side road surrounded by forest, within a half hour. It wasn't hard to find. The entire area was packed with emergency vehicles, police cars and a giant crane with its nose out over a drop-off. As he got out of his pickup, the crane growled and strained, and slowly the burned wreckage of the Blazer rose from the depths. Spotlights followed its progress. He winced when he saw the thing, almost doubled over from the pain that clutched his belly. Hell, no one could have survived a crash like that, much less the inferno that had followed.

A hand clapped his shoulder. "You Corona?"

He turned to face the man with the county sheriff badge pinned to his chest and nodded because he didn't trust himself to speak.

"We don't think he was inside," the sheriff said. "No sign of a body. And there should have been something. Some trace. Of course, we'll have forensics go over it to be sure. And we can't be sure he wasn't thrown from the vehicle on the way

down, but we've got dogs working the slope. If he's there, we'll find him."

Jim swallowed hard. "Suppose he got out before it went over?"

"Slim chance, but I suppose it's possible."

Nodding, Jim looked around. "I'd like to start searching these woods."

"I'll get you some men. It would be easier by daylight"

"I don't want to wait. If he's injured... "

The sheriff nodded. Jim got the feeling the man presumed Colby was a goner and was just humoring him, but he didn't care. Within ten minutes searchers were fanning into the woods. Jim searched using a borrowed flashlight. He strained his eyes until they watered and walked until he had no idea where the hell he was. He searched every clump of deadfall, every pile of brush, every shrub and weed patch and fallen log.

He searched until the tiny flicker of hope he'd felt began to fade away. And then he got an idea. Maybe a stupid idea, but hell, it couldn't hurt to try. He'd have tried anything by then.

He pulled out his cell phone, dialed Colby's. The techies couldn't locate it any more narrowly than they had by its ping, because Colby didn't have his location services activated on his damn phone, the paranoid shit. But still, this was a low tech idea.

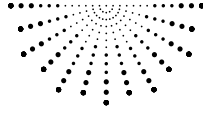
He hit send, then lowered the phone from his ear and listened to the woods around him.

And he heard it. Small, faint, distant, but there. Colby's cell phone, playing the old cavalry bugle charge. He followed the sound until it stopped, then he hung up and dialed again. And again, working his way closer every time.

Then his flashlight beam found a lump on the ground, and he ran closer, dropped to his knees, fear like an ice-cold weight in his chest as his fingers fumbled around Colby's neck in search of a pulse. When he found one, he damn near cried.

He shouted instead. “I found him! He’s alive. Get some paramedics out here!”

CHAPTER NINE



It was nearly three in the morning when Jimmy returned home. Kara surged to her feet when she heard the car in the driveway, saw the headlights painting the house walls before they went dark.

“Easy,” Caleb said. He’d come inside to sit with her after Jimmy had left, and when Wade showed up to relieve him, he’d decided not to go home. Wade had been brewing coffee nonstop—in fact, he was putting on a fresh pot when the car pulled in, but he heard the vehicle, too, and quickly joined them at the front door. “It’s Jim,” Caleb said.

“God, I hope...” Kara bit her lip. She didn’t need to finish the thought. All three of them were dreading the news Jimmy might bring, the devastation he might have encountered when he’d gone out there tonight.

Kara unlocked the door and pulled it open as he came up the front steps, shoulders slumped, head low. He looked exhausted.

“Jimmy?”

He lifted his head, met her eyes, then glanced past her at the two men who stood behind her in the doorway. He had to see the questions in their eyes.

“He’s alive,” he said.

“Oh, thank God.” Kara put her arms around him. It wasn’t planned—it was instinctive. She hugged his neck and he hugged her waist, right there in the open doorway.

She felt the looks Wade and Caleb exchanged behind her, and a rush of self-consciousness slid through her. She released her hold on Jimmy, but he didn't reciprocate. Instead he shifted to the side, keeping one arm around her waist, holding her close beside him as he walked into the house.

"You look wrung-out," Wade said. "You want coffee?"

"Thanks, Wade. That would be great."

Nodding, Wade went to the kitchen. Jim walked through the living room to the open bedroom door and peeked inside at Tyler, who slept soundly. He sighed, then turned to move back to the sofa, still holding Kara beside him as he sank onto its cushions. Caleb took a seat in the chair across from them, and Wade returned, handed a hot mug to Jim, then sat in the rocker.

Jim sipped. Then he talked. "They found Colby's Blazer in a deep ravine, up on a side road north of town." He wrinkled his brow. "Devil's... something or other."

"Devil's Drop," Wade said. "How the hell did he survive the plunge?"

"He got out before it went over. I don't know how—he was unconscious when we found him in the woods, and by the time the E.R. docs finished with him, he'd had enough drugs to keep him incoherent for a while." He lifted his head. "He'll probably have to stay in the hospital for a couple of days. It could have been a lot worse. The Blazer exploded on impact. It's burned black, completely gutted. They wouldn't have even known it was the vehicle we were looking for, except that one of the tags came loose on the way down."

"Thank God he got out," Kara whispered.

"Do they know what happened? How he wound up over that drop?" Caleb asked.

Jim shook his head. "No skid marks. It's a dirt road, so the tire tracks are good. It's too dark to be certain of anything, but we had spotlights. It looks to me as if the Blazer drove straight ahead, then turned right to veer off the road, through the grass

and over the drop-off. No signs of veering out of control or fishtailing or sudden braking.”

“How badly is Colby hurt?” Kara asked.

“Aside from a solid blow to the head and a couple of broken ribs, not too badly. The doctors say he’s gonna be fine. He’s got a concussion but no sign of anything more serious. They said we should be able to talk to him in the morning.”

“That’s good news,” Wade said.

Jim nodded. “For now, we’re not saying anything about finding Colby. The press is going to get that the vehicle was found and that it will take forensics teams a week or more to try to determine whether any human remains burned with it.”

Caleb nodded. “If this was an attempt on his life, there’s no point giving his attacker a reason to try again.”

“Exactly. We booked him into the hospital under a false name.” He sighed, shaking his head. “It’s not gonna stay quiet long. Too many cops know, the paramedics at the scene know. People tend to talk. They’ll tell their wives, best friends, and it’ll get around.”

“Yeah,” Caleb said. “But out-of-towners aren’t going to be as tuned in to the local grapevine. They won’t hear for a while.”

“I’m counting on it. Meanwhile, now that every cop in three counties is involved, they aren’t going to get far.”

“Even though he hasn’t been conscious long enough to identify his assailants?” Wade asked.

Jim nodded. “There was a sticky residue around his wrists, ankles and face. One piece of duct tape still on his sleeve. He was definitely held against his will. This accident was either an escape or attempted murder. Colby’s a cop—Chicago cop, but it doesn’t matter. Cops don’t like people messing with their own. Stuff like this goes down, they close ranks. They’re on this.” Jim drew a breath, sighed. “Frankly I feel better about things than I have in a long while.”

“That’s saying something,” Wade said.

Jim nodded, then lifted his head. “Thanks, you guys. This was above and beyond, coming out here like this. I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you.”

Wade sent him a smile. “Don’t worry. We’ll think of something.”

“You don’t need to stay. There’s a State Police unit outside for the night,” Jim said. Wade got to his feet and Jim did, too. The two shook hands, and then Caleb repeated the gesture. When they left, Jim followed them to the door to thank them again, then remained there and watched as they drove away.

He locked the door, then he turned to Kara. She was standing close to him. He pulled her into his arms and held her so tight she felt truly cherished. “I really think everything’s going to be okay,” he told her. “I really do.”

“I know it will,” she said, resting her head on his shoulder. There was so much on her mind. A thousand questions whirled around inside her, eager to escape and have their answers. But this was no time for any of that. He’d been through enough today. “You should get some sleep, Jimmy.”

“So should you,” he told her. “I’ll climb in with Ty. I need him close tonight. So rest easy. Don’t lie awake worrying or listening for things to go bump, okay?”

“Okay.”

He stroked her hair and looked into her eyes. “I’m really, *really* glad you were here tonight.”

She smiled a little. “I’m glad I was here, too. I like being here.” She leaned up and pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Good night, Jimmy.”

“Night, Kara.”

She went up the stairs and felt his eyes on her all the way.



Kara slept for five hours, then bounded out of bed wide awake and incredibly upbeat. And maybe that was because Colby had

been found and Jimmy was sure things were going to be okay now. Or maybe it was because she was finally letting herself be convinced that his attention to her, his tenderness toward her, came from more than just a casual interest.

She showered, dressed, fussed a little with her hair and barely-there makeup. Then she headed downstairs and felt joyously domestic as she cooked pancakes and sausages in the functional kitchen, brewed fragrant coffee. And she felt pretty—and suspected that had to do with Jimmy Corona’s constant, convincing attention over the past few days.

When she felt eyes on her and turned from the frying pan to see him leaning in the doorway, arms crossed, watching her, she knew he liked what he saw.

She let her smile come, though it was a little self-conscious, a little nervous. “Good morning.”

“Morning,” he said. “The whole house smells so good my mouth is watering. Sausage?”

“And pancakes.”

“Tyler loves pancakes.” .

“I know. That’s why I made them.” She turned her attention back to the pan, rolling the sausage links with a fork. The burner beside it held a griddle, pancakes bubbling on one side, ready to flip. “Is he up yet?”

“Not yet. Won’t be long.” He crossed the room to stand beside her, looking over her shoulder at the food. Then he reached around her to pick up a spatula, used it to flip the pancakes. The action brought him very close, his body rubbing against hers, his face close and bristly, his arm encircling her.

She could have easily closed her eyes and leaned back against him. But she managed not to.

“I could get used to this, Kara.”

She lowered her head a little, then started when first his breath and then his lips whispered across her neck.

“I like having you here when I wake up.”

“I... I like it,too.”

“Yeah?”

She turned to face him. His body was still very close, touching hers. She brought her gaze to his and asked, “Did you love your wife, Jimmy?”

He blinked. Clearly those had not been the words he’d been expecting to hear. “I did. I loved her a lot. She lied to me, cheated on me and damn near killed my son.”

She nodded. “I didn’t think you were the kind of man who’d marry a woman he didn’t love.”

He lowered his gaze a little too quickly, and a flutter of alarm came to life in her chest. She pushed it down and swallowed her fears. “And what about since then? Have you... dated a lot of women?”

His frown told her he wondered why she was asking so many questions. “No. Hardly any, as a matter of fact. I’d pretty much decided I didn’t need anyone again. But then I came back here and saw you again, Kara. And everything changed.”

“Did it?”

He nodded firmly. “What’s wrong?”

Hell, she didn’t know what was wrong—aside from the fact that she was falling and falling hard. For him, for Tyler, for this whole dream he’d planted in her mind. It was growing too fast, unfurling skyward like Jack’s bean stalk and carrying her hopes into the clouds as it grew. She was afraid to climb to the top, afraid she would find one giant heartbreak, instead of a dream come true.

But she couldn’t very well tell him all that.

“Nothing’s wrong,” she said. “I was just curious.”

He nodded but seemed to be studying her. “I think you’re worried. Maybe a little unsure of me. You shouldn’t be, Kara. Maybe... maybe if I tell you my plans for the day, you’d feel better.”

“You have plans?”

He nodded. “Our dinner by the falls got ruined last night. And I had such big hopes for that. I’ll make it up to you tonight, I promise.”

“You don’t have to apologize for that. You were worried about Tyler. And I’m not going to feel save leaving him with anyone but us. Even my family. I just... want him within reach at all times until we’re sure that creep who hurt Colby is behind bars.” She looked up at him, saw something like admiration in his eyes. “So if you’re planning to try again with that picnic by the falls, I think we should bring him with us.”

“I agree completely,” he said. “I was thinking of something else entirely. Later in the day. My first errand today is going to be to see your local police chief, Earl Wheatly.”

“I thought your first stop would be to visit Colby in the hospital.”

He nodded. “You’re right. That’s where I’m meeting Wheatly.”

“To talk about the case,” she surmised.

“Among other things.”

She blinked and searched his face. “What other things, Jimmy?”

“Last night, while we were in the hospital waiting room, Chief Wheatly told me how impressed he’d been with my work out there. My observations about the tire marks, the duct tape residue, all of that.” He shrugged. “He offered me a spot on the Tucker Lake-Big Falls Police Department.”

The fork she’d been holding fell to the floor. “Are you serious?”

“I’m very serious.” He drew a breath, sighed deeply, slid his arms around her waist. “To be honest I’ve been thinking about getting Tyler out of Chicago for a while now. My job there is too demanding. I’m away from him too much of the time, and there’s always a fair chance I might not make it home to him.” He looked toward the bedroom. “The change in him since we’ve been here in Big Falls is amazing. He’s happy, Kara. It’s the first time I’ve been able to look at my son

and see that he's truly, honest-to-God happy. I can't take that away from him."

She nodded slowly. "You'd do anything for him, wouldn't you?" She asked the question softly, already knowing the answer.

"Of course I would. Wouldn't you if he were yours?"

A smile tugged at her lips. "I would, even though he's not mine."

His eyes moved over her face, and she wasn't sure if they were searching or caressing. It felt like a little of both. Out of the blue, he leaned down and pressed his lips to hers for a long, slow, wonderful kiss that left her head spinning and her heart pounding.

She lowered her eyes, wishing to heaven she could ease her doubts. But she felt as if she had more of them than she'd had before.

He reached past her to flick off the burners, and she realized she'd been so distracted the food had been in danger of burning.

"And as an added bonus, I'm going to get that fence put up for you today." He said it quickly, releasing her and turning to a cupboard to take down a handful of plates.

She arched her brows. "All in one day?"

"I thought I'd see if Wade wanted to come over and help out. Our State Police guard is only going to be outside by night, so the more sets of eyes on Ty by day, the better." He set the table while she scooped the last of the pancakes onto the platter nearby. She brought the platter and a smaller one holding the golden-brown sausage links to the table while Jimmy opened the fridge for margarine, maple syrup and orange juice.

"Maybe Tyler should spend the day with me," Kara said.

She saw the way Jimmy stiffened just a little bit, halfway through filling a juice glass. He didn't look at her, just seemed

to shake himself before finishing the task. “He won’t be a problem with me this morning.”

“You’re going to take him with you to the hospital, to your meeting with Chief Wheatly?” she asked, watching him carefully now. “Have you even talked to him about this mother of his, Jimmy?”

“No. He... he only knows she left us. Nothing more.”

“Then you don’t really want him around, maybe overhearing your conversation do you?” She shrugged. “Besides, I’m going to be at the Corral most of the day. We’re doing inventory. Maya and the twins will be there. And Edie and Sally. Ty can ride the mechanical bull and play with the kids and the dog. The place will be closed to the public. He’ll have a blast.”

Jim drew a breath, lifted his head.

“You do trust me to take care of him, don’t you?” she said.

“Sure I do.” He turned and met her eyes. “I really do, Kara.”

“It’s okay to be honest with me, you know I understand. After what a woman you loved and trusted did to your baby, it’s no wonder you have a few scars. But Jimmy, I’m not a drug addict. And I don’t lie. Especially not to you. And besides all that, there’s nothing I wouldn’t do to protect that little angel.”

“I know that. I know. And any other woman would have been insulted and angry at me for even hesitating.” He ran a hand through her hair. “It’s been a long time since I’ve trusted anyone with Tyler’s well-being.”

“You trusted him with Maya the other night.”

“That was before I knew Vinnie and Ang were in town.” He gave his head a shake. “But even with that, it’s different with you. I do trust you. It’s just a little tough to get used to the idea, you know? My knee jerk reactions need revising. I’ll get there.”

“I know.”

“Okay, how about this?” he said. “Take him with you to the Corral this morning while I go into town. I’ll meet you there around lunch-time. I’ll bring pizza, enough for everyone. Then I’ll head back here to work on that fence and bring him with me.”

“Sounds great,” she said.

“Good. Thank you for understanding.” He reached for her, and she thought he was going to kiss her again. But just before he pulled her close, a little voice interrupted them.

“Hey, you guys didn’t have breakfast without me, didja?”

Kara smiled and stepped easily away from Jimmy to bend down to Tyler. He wasn’t wearing his leg braces, had scooted out to the kitchen on his backside instead.

She scooped him up and rubbed noses while tickling him until he giggled. “I made pancakes. And after that you and I are going to spend the morning together while your dad takes care of some business. How does that sound?”

“Are we going to see the ponies?”

“Nope. Ponies are tomorrow. After PT. Today we’ve got other fun things to do. And my mother will be there and—”

“Gramma Vi?”

“Did she tell you to call her that, Ty?” He nodded. “Well, she only asks people she really likes to call her Gramma Vi.”

“I never had no gramma before. I think it’s cool.”

She set him in his chair and pushed it up close to the table. “The twins are going to be there, too. And your dad’s bringing pizza later.”

“Alllll *right!*”

Kara took a chair and felt Jimmy’s gaze. She turned to see him standing there, looking from her to Tyler and back again, pensive and deep in thought for a long moment. Then he saw her watching him and seemed to snap out of it. He took a seat and dug into the stack of pancakes.



Jim came out of the hospital feeling very good about things. Colby was awake, still hurting and a little groggy but much more himself than he had been before. Enough to ID Vinnie as his abductor and the man who gave the order to have him killed. He also gave a good description of the thug who'd shoved his Blazer over Devil's Drop with him still inside.

What surprised Jim was Colby's insistence that he would have been killed if not for Ang. She'd felt sorry for him and sliced through the tape on his wrists. It was enough to save his life. He also insisted she was unaware of Vinnie's plan to have him killed.

Vinnie and Ang were being hunted by every cop in Oklahoma. They'd have to keep their heads down. Any attempt they made to get to him or to Tyler would get them nailed. Colby was under police guard in the hospital, even though as far as anyone knew, he'd died in that fiery crash at Devil's Drop. It was a load off Jim's mind. He'd feel better once Vinnie was caught and locked up, but this was a good start.

After he'd seen Colby, he'd spent some time with Wheatly. The chief promised him a job as soon as he was ready, provided it was within the month. He had a slot opening up that would need filling. Jim didn't intend for it to take that long. Hell, when this notion of accepting the chief's offer had first occurred to him, he hadn't intended for the new job to last more than a year. In a year, he'd thought, he would have convinced Kara to leave this town and he could get back to his life in Chicago.

But something had changed inside him when he'd seen Kara with Tyler this morning. It had been changing right along. He loved her. And he loved her family too. It would be wrong for him to expect Kara to leave her mother, her sisters. That was no way to treat a woman who was everything his little guy could ever want or need in mother. A woman who was, even now, making Tyler's fondest dreams come true.

Hell, everything inside him was changing. And when he'd told Kara how happy Tyler was here, happier than he'd ever been, he'd realized it was the truth. And now he didn't know what the hell his long-term plan was anymore.

Except for one thing. He was going marry Kara Brand. And that plan, he thought, was going well. He didn't think she would turn him down.

He drove back to downtown Big Falls, and parked the pickup in a public lot that took up space behind the local businesses, hoping it wouldn't be spotted there. This had to be a surprise, and it wouldn't take long. He locked the pickup and hurried into the local jewelry store. It was dim and smelled of pine and cinnamon. Glass cases lined three sides, all of them filled with glittering, sparkling things.

"Well, well. This *is* a pleasant surprise," said a slender salt-and-pepper-haired man with a neat beard and a suit with a bow tie. He came from behind the counter and extended a hand. "Mr. Corona, isn't it?"

Jim took the hand he offered, surprised. "I'm sorry, do I know you?"

"No, no, we haven't met. But you know how small towns are. Everyone knows everything. You've been pointed out to me once or twice. I'm Barlow, by the way. Milton Barlow."

"Well, Mr. Barlow, I hope the small-town gossip mill isn't going to get wind of the purchase I'm going to make here today. Because it's a surprise."

"For Miss Brand?"

Jim lifted his brows. "Wow, everyone around here really *does* know everything, don't they?"

"Rest easy, Mr. Corona. No one will hear about this from me. So what are you in the market for? A tennis bracelet, perhaps? We just got in some earrings that are absolutely—"

"A ring," Jim told the man. "An engagement ring."

Milton Barlow's jaw dropped. He quickly snapped it shut again, clapped his hands together and blinked fast, like he had

a rush of tears to blink away. Then he turned and hurried toward the back of the shop, calling, "Follow me."

Amused and a little puzzled, Jim followed. The man opened a door and ushered him through it into a cozy office. "Now, you just sit here. That way folks who pass on the streets won't glimpse you through the windows. God knows, that would get the speculation started. When do you plan to ask her?"

"Tonight," Jim said.

"Good. Good. Any longer and I can't guarantee she won't hear about it before you do."

"Well, all due respect, Mr. Barlow, but how am I going to pick out a ring from in here?"

Barlow smiled. It was a big, wonderful smile, accompanied by him clapping his hands under his chin, hunching his shoulders and closing his eyes. "Trust me," he said. "I know that girl. Kara comes in here, oh, once every three or four months. Makes up some excuse, you know. Buys a gift for one of her sisters or her mother, that dear woman. But she always spends time looking at the diamond rings."

Jim lifted his brows. "She does? Any particular ring?"

Barlow's eyes popped open and he nodded hard and fast. "Oh, yes. One particular ring. I'll show you!" Then he spun around and all but skipped out of the office.



The door opened and Jimmy came in, pizza boxes stacked in his arms. His eyes, when they met Kara's, were warm and kind. Then they slid to where his son sat on the floor, braces off, Selene held her hands over his legs, palms down, moving them every now and then.

"It's okay," Kara said, moving close to him and keeping her voice low. "He said his legs were hurting him. Selene's into all sorts of alternative healing."

He lifted his brows. “What exactly is she doing?”

“Reiki.” She shrugged. “I figured it couldn’t hurt.”

He lifted his brows, tipped his head to one side.

“Hi, kiddo. What do you think? Is it working?”

“It really is! This magic stuff is for real!”

He smiled and Kara read his face. “I know what you’re thinking,” she told him. “Placebo effect.”

He shrugged.

“A few years ago I might have agreed with you, but not now. I’ve seen too much. Selene—she has something.”

“I believe you. To tell you the truth, I don’t care what it is. I’m all for anything that makes him feel better.”

“That’s good,” Selene called. “Cause I have a few suggestions I want to run by you. But we’ll save those for another time.”

From the back Vidalia called, “I smell pizza!”

Then she and Maya came out of the store room, Maya wiping her hands on a dish towel, Vi heading straight for a table to begin taking the upturned chairs off it. Jim carried the boxes to the table and set them in the center. Then Selene came over, carrying Tyler in her arms.

Ty sent his father a look and said, “I should put my braces back on.”

“Oh, it can wait until after pizza,” Selene said. “Can’t it, Jim?”

Jim nodded. “Sure. A few minutes longer won’t hurt.”

Selene put Tyler in a chair, and the twins clambered up into the seats on either side of him. Kara went behind the bar to retrieve paper plates and napkins, then turned to find Jim standing behind her.

“Any problems?”

“Not a one,” she said. “Ty’s a doll.”

“Yeah, he’s a con man, too. I can see he’s got the whole crew eating out of his hand.”

“Hey, he did that his first day in town.”

He smiled at her. “And how did your morning go?”

“Fine. Enjoyed it immensely. How about you? How did your morning go?”

“Terrible,” he said.

She had opened the cooler to take out soft drinks, but she paused there. “Why? What happened?”

He lifted a hand to her face, caught a wisp of hair between his fingers and smoothed it slowly. “I missed you.”

She felt the blood rush to her face. “Jimmy, be serious.”

“I am serious.” He held her eyes for a long moment, until she turned away, unable to bear the intensity in them. “Other than that, it wasn’t too bad,” he went on. “But I’ll tell you more about that tonight.” He reached past her to grab colas from the cooler and carried them back with him to the table.

Kara joined him there and tried to eat. The man was sweeping her off her feet, and she had no doubt it was exactly what he intended.

“Hey, you guys having pizza without us?”

Everyone looked up at the shout from the doorway. Melusine stood there, arm in arm with Alex. Kara hadn’t seen her sister in weeks and she jumped up and ran to hug her hard.

“Oh, Mel, it’s so good to see you!”

Mel hugged her back. “Same here, kid.” She moved to the table to hug her mother and each sister in turn, then she turned to stare down at Jim. “You haven’t changed much,” she said.

“More than you would even believe,” he replied, rising. “Hello, Melusine.”

“Jim, this is my husband, Alex Stone. Alex, this is Jim Corona, former high school hunk and current cop with the Chicago PD.”

“Not exactly current,” he said, turning to shake Alex’s hand.

“No? What, you turn in your badge or something?”

“I’m on leave. Thinking about making it permanent.”

Kara blinked up at him, her questions in her eyes. Jim sighed. “I was going to tell you later, Kara. But I can’t wait. I spoke to Chief Wheatly this morning. I told him to hold that job on the local PD for me. I’m planning to take it.”

She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Jimmy, I.... I mean, just like that? Shouldn’t you give it some time before making such a drastic decision?”

“The decision is made.”

He was serious. About her. About them. He wasn’t playing around. He’d mentioned the job offer this morning, but she’d never thought he’d just up and accept it this fast. Suddenly everything turned upside down. Her head spun as she recalled telling him she would never leave Big Falls. My God, had he done this because of her?

“I... excuse me, I need to—” She got to her feet but knocked the chair over in the process. Then she hurried to the ladies’ room.

Kara leaned on the sink and stared at her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes were wider than normal, her face perhaps a little pinker.

The bathroom door swung open, and she looked without turning, using the mirror to ascertain whether Jimmy had followed her in.

He hadn’t. It was Mel. She stood just inside the doorway, hands on her hips. “So you want me to kick his ass or what?”

“Right. The first guy to look more than twice in my direction since I don’t know when, and all I want is for my big sis to chase him away.”

Mel lifted her brows. “You’re exaggerating. Lots of guys have looked in your direction.”

She rolled her eyes. “Until they get hurt, at least.”

“You’re not a klutz anymore, Kara. Stop thinking like one.” Mel came closer, nodding slowly. “So you want this thing to work out with him?”

“Yeah. I do. It’s just... hard to believe it’s real.”

“Maybe for you it is.” Mel put a hand on her sister’s shoulder, holding her gaze in the mirror. “I gotta tell you, sis, it’s not all that surprising to anyone else.”

“Isn’t it?”

Mel shook her head. “Why would it be? You’re gorgeous, smart, single, hardworking, kind. What’s been tough for us to swallow is that men haven’t been swarming the place trying to steal you away from us for years now.”

Kara made a face, knowing full well why. She’d been clumsy, self-conscious, shy, hiding inside a shell where she felt safe from the world.

“Jimmy probably thinks I’ve lost it.”

Mel smiled. “He wanted to come in after you. I asked him to let me do it. Told him we had a lot of catching up to do anyway.”

Kara nodded. “He’ll come in before long if I don’t come out. Probably thinks he did something wrong.”

“You think?” Mel looked toward the door. “So what’s the deal with him anyway?”

“I wish I knew.” Kara turned and leaned back against the sink, facing her sister full-on. “He shows up back in town and starts paying attention to me.”

“Normal behavior.”

“He seems to be getting awfully serious awfully fast.”

“And that’s a problem because...?”

Kara thought about that for a long moment and couldn’t come up with an answer. Then the door opened again and the man himself stood there. “My turn yet?” he asked.

Kara drew a breath, squared her shoulders, faced him and nodded. Mel sent her a questioning look, but she said, "It's okay, Mel. Give us a minute."

"All right."

Mel left the room, patting Jimmy's shoulder on the way out as if to offer encouragement. Kara pushed off the sink and walked to where he stood. She expected him to talk to her, to ask her what he'd said wrong, to question whether she was all right. But he didn't do any of those things. Instead he slid his arms around her waist and pulled her to him and kissed her as if he'd been starving for her.

Everything inside her turned molten. Her nervousness, her questions, everything just burned away at his touch, his taste. Nothing remained but sensation, desire, a wanting and yearning she had never felt before. Knots tied themselves in her stomach while butterflies rioted in her chest. She was breathless and overwhelmed. He held her tighter than he ever had.

When he lifted his head away, her legs were shaking so hard she didn't think they would hold her. His arms around her loosened and she whispered, "Don't let go, Jimmy. If you do, I might fall."

She glimpsed a relieved smile just before he folded her into his arms again. He held her gently, as if she was cherished and fragile. "I'll never let you go if you don't want me to."

"Really? And we'll just live out our lives in a ladies' room?"

He laughed softly. It rumbled in his chest, beneath her head. "I've been dying to kiss you all day. Sorry I let it get the best of me." His hand stroked her hair. "You okay?"

"Okay? I wouldn't exactly describe it as okay, no. I'm..." She lifted her head, met his eyes, then lowered hers quickly.

"Turned on?" he asked with a waggle of his eyebrows. She felt the blood rush into her cheeks. Jim caught her face in his hands and tipped it up so he could meet her eyes. "Don't be

embarrassed, Kara. I need to hear that you want me as badly as I want you.”

Her self-consciousness was quickly replaced by amazement “I... I do,” she admitted. “But it’s new to me, Jimmy. I’m not... I mean, I’ve never... “

He blinked three times and then his face changed. He didn’t release her, but she sensed him pulling back in some other way. “Kara?” When his prompting didn’t result in a reply, he went on. “Kara, you have... you’ve been with other men, right? That’s not what you meant just now.”

She forced herself to look him in the eye. “I’m a virgin, Jimmy.”

He stared at her, shaking his head slowly.

“That doesn’t mean I don’t want to. I mean, I do.” She paused, then said, “You’re disappointed.” He was probably used to experienced women. She’d probably be terrible in bed, nowhere near able to satisfy a man like him.

“Disappointed?” He seemed to shake out of his state of wonder and he folded her into his arms once more. “No, Kara. Feeling a little guilty, wondering why your family hasn’t run me out of town on a rail for the impure thoughts I’ve been having about you. Hell, if they knew, they probably would.”

“Don’t feel guilty. I’ve been having the same thoughts.”

“Oh, I seriously doubt that.” There was heat in his eyes as they skimmed her head to toe. “Mine are pretty detailed.”

She tried not to blush, felt her face heating anyway and kept her eyes averted. He was searching her face, reading her eyes, she was sure of it. Then he pulled her close and kissed her softly, deeply, on and on and on. Then he hugged her, burying his face against her neck.

Kissing her neck again, he whispered, “I’ll never push you, Kara.”

God help me, she thought. I kinda wish you would.

He released her as if reluctant to do so. “I should go. I have to get to that fence before our special evening.”

“Splash some cold water on your face, beautiful. Your family will lynch me if they see you looking like you’ve just been ravished.”

She smiled. “Okay.”

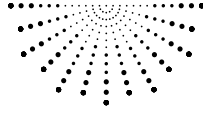
“I’m going. Taking Ty back to the house. See you later?”

“Soon,” she said.

“Not soon enough.”

He leaned close and kissed her gently, then he turned and left the room.

CHAPTER TEN



He put Tyler in the truck and drove back to the house —her house, where she was kind enough to let him stay free of charge while he did his best to seduce her, deceive her and use her for his own ends. He wondered if she'd intended to live in the second story, while having her daycare facility on the ground floor, and he thought that wouldn't really be enough room for a family of three. They'd probably have to buy another place, either for her center or for their home.

He sure was starting to think as if this was a done deal, wasn't he?

Tyler was completely involved in the coloring book he'd brought from the bar with him. He had a giant box of crayons between his knees, and was concentrating so hard on his picture that he had a little furrow between his brows.

Sighing deeply, Jim told himself he was not a *complete* bastard. He was giving Tyler the mother of his dreams. And giving Kara a son she already adored. And, hell, he intended to do his best to make her happy for the rest of her life.

Okay, not the rest of her life. The next fifteen years or so. Just until Tyler grew up. Still, that was a lot to offer, right?

Wrong, idiot. It might be a lot to offer if she knew that was all she was being offered. But what you're pretending to be offering is a lot more. You're making her believe in a big fat lie.

Why the hell did she have to be so damn *good*? It made it tough not to feel guilty. Pretending to love her, pretending to want her so badly he could barely keep his hands to himself...

He shifted in his seat. Okay, so maybe the wanting part wasn't *quite* make-believe. But he was human and she was gorgeous. And good. And yeah, it was a shame to play such a nice, decent girl the way he was playing her. And yet if she wasn't a nice, decent girl, he wouldn't want her, anyway. She wouldn't be good enough to be a mother to his son, and that was what this was all about

So he had to play her. Sweep her off her feet, convince her he had fallen madly in love. He thought he'd accomplished a major part of that. Clearly she wanted him. Wanted him badly. He'd been amazed at the instant and powerful responses he'd managed to elicit in her. She responded so easily when he touched her. A fine sheen of sweat broke out on her smooth skin, and her heart pattered rapid-fire against her chest. And her breathing quickened and her eyes... Hell, he had to break this train of thought and break it now. He was having enough trouble focusing without...

She was a virgin. She'd never been with another man. He would be the first to show her how good it could be. And yet he knew he would have to be careful, gentle, take it slow. Because he didn't want to hurt her or frighten her or...

Damn, he was doing it again.

He pulled into the driveway of the house and shut off the engine, then carried Ty straight to the backyard and got to work on the fence. He needed physical labor and lots of it.



By the time they finished inventory, Kara was wrung out, coated in a layer of sweat and dust and sure she looked hideous.

“Good grief,” she said, “I don't even want to pass close to Jimmy and Tyler looking like this.” She sniffed herself. “Do I smell?”

“You can always come home and shower there, daughter,” Vidalia said as she pulled the bar’s door shut and turned the lock. Then she hung a sign on the hook, eye level on the door. It read Closed for Inventory.

“Maybe I will.”

“Up to you. You want to be deceptive, that’s your call.”

“Deceptive?” Kara shot a look at her mother, then sought help from Selene. Alex and Mel had already gone home—they’d be using Mel’s old bedroom while they were here in town. Maya had taken the twins and gone home, as well. They’d been cranky and tired and needed a nap.

Only Selene, Vidalia and Kara remained. And Selene’s helpless shrug was no help at all.

“In case you haven’t seen it for yourself, Kara, that man is falling fast and hard. It’s not fair that he never sees you with dirt under your nails until it’s too late.”

Kara rolled her eyes. “You think it might put the brakes on him a little?”

“Nope. He’s got the bit in his teeth, that one. Still, it might make you a little more sure of him if he likes you just as much dirty and tired as he does bright-eyed and fresh-faced.”

“What makes you think I’m not sure of him?”

Her mother just looked at her as if she had said something utterly stupid.

“I swear, Mom,” Selene said. “Sometimes I think you’re as psychic as I am.”

“Psychic schmychic. I know my daughters. If that’s not doubt I see in her eyes, then it’s the best imitation I’ve ever seen. So what is it, Kara? You think he’s just playing games?”

“No. I think he’s dead serious. I’m just not convinced it’s for the reasons he wants me to believe.”

“Such as?” her mother asked. She was keeping pace beside her as Kara left the saloon to the parking lot in front.

Kara shrugged and unlocked her car. In her mind she heard her doubts, but she wouldn't voice them now to her mother. "Never mind, Mom. It's just that I'm not used to this kind of attention."

"High time you got used to it, child. And don't go thinking you have to settle for the first man bright enough to pay you any, either. There will be others."

Not for me.

The thought whispered through her mind so firmly it startled her. She gasped at the power of it, the trueness of it. It resonated with such validity that she didn't doubt for one moment that it was absolutely correct. And it was a revelation for which she'd been unprepared.

"I'd better go."

"Coming to the house to shower?"

"Nah. I have a house of my own now. I'll use it."

Vidalia nodded in approval.

She got into the car and drove. It was only five minutes to her home, and when she pulled into the driveway and got out of the car, she heard the sound of a hammer falling repeatedly, coming from the backyard. Wade's pickup was parked along the roadside, so she knew he was out there helping. The sounds of work never stopped as she walked to the front door of the house and went inside. She moved past the living room, into the big playroom with the huge doors, and looked out its large windows. Wade was out back. So was Jimmy.

Jimmy.

It wasn't a cold day. The temperature hovered around fifty-nine and the sun was beaming down from the western horizon. It would get a lot cooler once it set, but right now it was warm enough that Jimmy had stripped down to a tank-style undershirt and his jeans. His skin was damp and she watched for a few minutes as he swung a hammer.

Then she glanced at the clock and raced upstairs. Twenty minutes later she was clean, dressed in fresh clothes, sporting

a still-damp pony tail and stirring a pitcher of sweet tea. She poured two tall glasses full and carried them out the back door and into the yard.

When he heard the creak of the door, Jimmy turned from his work, met her eyes and smiled. “You’re back.”

“Uh-huh. You’ve been busy.” She crossed the backyard, handed him the iced tea and forced her eyes to leave his long enough to look at the fence that surrounded the backyard. “It looks great.”

“Just about done,” he said. He put the glass to his lips and drank, tipped his head back to drain the glass. His neck was corded and moist, and his Adam’s apple moved with every swallow. She thought about putting her fingers there. Or her lips. He lowered the glass and caught her looking. His eyes held hers, dark and intense.

Wade cleared his throat and she turned. “That for me?” he asked, nodding toward the glass she still held.

“Oh. Sorry, Wade. Here.” She handed it to him and then felt someone tugging on her blouse.

Tyler stood there smiling up at her. “I helped,” he said. “It’s a cool fence, isn’t it, Kara?”

“It’s a beautiful fence, Tyler. You did a great job.”

He beamed, clearly proud. Jim patted his shoulder. “I don’t know that we could have got it done without him. You, Wade?”

“No way. We’d have been another two days at least.”

Tyler lifted his chin.

“I would have brought you a drink, too, Tyler,” Kara said. “But I only had two hands. You want to come inside and get one?”

He looked up at his father.

Jim said, “Go ahead, Ty. I’ve just got one more board to put up and we’re done anyway. I’ll be right behind you.”

“Okay.” Tyler took up his crutches and walked beside Kara back into the house.

She felt Jim’s eyes on her all the way inside, then she heard him say to Wade, “Let’s get this last board nailed on, pal. I’ve got things I’d rather be doing.”

A little shiver whispered up her spine, and she wondered what surprises the night would hold.



Two hours later she held the front door open while Jimmy dragged a huge Douglass fir tree into the living room. Tyler was so excited he was bouncing up and down. He’d looked at just about every tree in the lot before finally settling on this one. This was the special evening Jimmy had planned.

He couldn’t have come up with anything better.

“Okay,” Jimmy said. “Where are we standing this bad boy?”

Kara shrugged. “What do you think, Ty?” Tyler was standing in the center of the room. “How ‘bout right here? In the middle?”

“We can do that,” Kara said. “Unless you think it would be better near the windows. So the lights show from outside. Hmm. I don’t know. Which is better?”

“By the windows!” Tyler said.

“By the windows it is.” Jimmy took the tree stand he’d purchased on the way home and started to fix it to the bottom of the tree, while I moved a chair and end table away from the big window to the left of the front door. And minutes later, he had the tree standing there, straight and majestic.

“It’s the best tree ever,” Kara said, and then realized Jimmy had said it at the same time. He looked her way, smiling in a way that made her heart flutter.

Tyler was sitting on the floor now, digging through one of the boxes of decorations his “Gramma Vi” had sent over.

She'd said there were still more in the attic if they needed them. He pulled out a glitter coated reindeer, and held it up by its string. "Which one is it, Dad?"

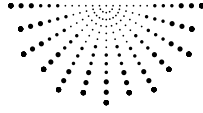
"Prancer," Jimmy said. Then he leaned closer and took another look. "Nope, sorry. That's Dancer. Dancer for sure."

"Hello Dancer. Wanna hang on our tree?"

"Ah-ah, lights first. Then ornaments," Jimmy told him. And he began unwrapping the strings of lights they'd picked up in town. Once they were unwound, he said, "Let the decking of the halls begin!"

Kara found a radio station playing holiday music, and joined in the fun. But every now and then, she got a huge lump in her throat and just stood still and watched as Jimmy lifted Tyler up to hang ornaments in the glow of the lights. The smell of pine was so heady, and the tears in her eyes, nothing but joyful.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



“*Y*ou’re so beautiful tonight, in the lights from the Christmas tree,” Jimmy said.

Tyler had fallen asleep admiring the tree, and he’d carried him in to bed. Now they were dancing together in the tree-lit living room to the country Christmas music wafting softly from the radio.

She lifted her head from his shoulder, let her cheek brush his on the way up, then met his eyes. “This is the most beautiful evening, Jimmy. It’s like a dream. It’s almost... it’s hard to believe it could be real.” She threaded her fingers into his hair. “Tell me it’s real, Jimmy.”

“It’s real.” He kissed her lips, then her cheek, snuggling her head down onto his shoulder again. When she brushed her lips over his neck, she felt him shudder.

“I’ve loved you since I was sixteen, Jimmy Corona. Do you realize that?”

He stopped moving, pulled his head back and blinked down into her eyes. For a moment she didn’t think he could find words—and she wondered if she’d said too much, gone too far.

But then he ran a hand through her hair and said, “You’re so special, Kara. So honest and open. No pretense, no games.”

“I don’t have any reason for pretense or games,” she told him. “Do you?”

He stared into her eyes for a long moment, then blinked as he noticed something beyond her. “Wow,” he whispered, and he turned her so she could see what he did.

The full moon had risen over Big Falls, and spilled its silvery light in through the windows, drenching them both in moonlight.

“Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?” she whispered.

“Never.” The tone of his voice made her look at him. His eyes were focused on her, not on the moon. “Never in my entire life. Probably never will.”

And then suddenly, he dropped down to one knee in front of her. He took her hands in his and looked into her eyes. “Kara, I know it’s only been a few days, but I don’t need any longer than that to know you’re the only one for me. And Tyler knows it, too. We want you to be in our lives. I want you to be my son’s mother. I want you to be my wife.”

Her heart seemed to jump into her throat and flutter there. “I don’t... I can’t believe this.”

“Marry me, Kara.” He held something up—a box. He opened it and the moonlight spilled down on the pear-shaped pink diamond she’d been admiring for the past several years. She couldn’t believe her eyes.

“How... how did you know?”

“The jeweler was very helpful. Even knew your size.” He took the ring from the box. “Will you wear it, Kara? I swear to God I’ll do my damnedest to make you happy. I’ll never ask you to leave Big Falls if you don’t want to. Be my wife. Be Tyler’s mom.”

She felt as if her world was spinning out of control, and could hardly breathe. And yet she heard herself saying, “Yes, Jimmy. Yes. Of course I’ll marry you.”

His fingers deftly slid the ring onto one of hers. Then he bent over her hand and pressed his lips to it. He lifted his head, looked into her eyes. “Thank you, Kara. Thank you.” And he kissed her.

But he hadn't said he loved her.



He had an odd feeling with her. The uncharacteristic urge to cradle her, to protect her. As if she was fragile or weak or in danger. After he'd popped the question, he held her in his arms for a long time. They danced, and stared out at the moon climbing ever higher in the sky. "I hope you won't make me wait too long to marry you," he said. Because it was essential he move on to this part. More than essential.

"I'd marry you tonight," she whispered.

That was exactly what he needed to hear. "I don't think your family would forgive me for that one. But do you think we could get away with Saturday?"

She looked up quickly, her eyes widening. "That's only three days from now."

"Yeah." He smiled at her. "If I can stand it that long." He sighed and dug deep for the gumption to tell her the truth. All of it. "But wanting you to the point of distraction isn't the only reason I'm in a hurry, Kara. I have to be honest with you."

She tipped her head to one side. "I didn't say we had to wait until we were married to..."

"You're a virgin. That's an amazing thing. Sacred. I'm waiting."

"Wow. You're... you're a special man, Jimmy. You know that?"

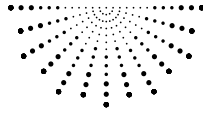
He shook his head. "I know Vinnie and Ang are probably running for cover about now. And they aren't likely to try anything. But they think they killed Colby. That means I'm the only thing standing between Vinnie and a prison sentence. There's still a chance Vinnie will try to make sure I can't testify against him in court."

She blinked, lowering her head. "And if something happens to you, Tyler would have no one left."

“No one but his birth mother. I want you in our lives. I want you there legally, on paper, with my wishes recorded somewhere. There’s no one else I would want Tyler to be with.”

She nodded. “That means the world to me, Jimmy.” Pursing her lips, she nodded. “Okay,” she told him. “I’ll marry you on Saturday.”

CHAPTER TWELVE



“*Saturday?*” Vidalia Brand sat at the head of the table and looked at Kara as if she’d suddenly announced she was running for president. “You want to get *married* on *Saturday?*”

“Isn’t it cool, Gramma Vi?” Tyler said, practically bouncing in his chair.

“Yes, it’s very cool, Tyler. Are you through with your breakfast?”

“Uh-huh. It was real good. Does this mean you’ll be my *real* gramma?”

Vidalia’s tight expression eased into a smile. “Son, you can consider me your real gramma now. How’s that?”

“Cool!”

“Now why don’t you take the twins to play in the toy room, hmm?”

“Okay!” He got out of the chair, put his crutches under his arms, then made his way through the house to the giant play room off the living room, calling the twins to come with him on the way.

“I’ll go keep an eye on them,” Caleb said, taking each of the twins by the hand and leading them after Tyler. He paused beside Kara, gave her a “hang tough” kind of a look, then nodded to Jimmy. “Welcome to the family, Jim.”

“Thanks, Caleb.”

Vidalia drew a deep breath and pressed her palms to the table. “All right then, let’s dispense with the nonsense and get to the truth here. What’s the big hurry?”

“Mom—” Kara began.

“No, no,” Jim said. “It’s a legitimate question. Vidalia, I promise you, there’s nothing shady or sneaky going on.”

“No?” She shot a look at Kara. “You can’t be pregnant. He hasn’t been in town long enough so you’d even know if you were.”

“Mother!” It was Maya this time, reprimanding her mother in a tone usually only heard from Vidalia herself.

“I’m not pregnant. We haven’t even—” Kara bit her lip, shook her head. “It’s nothing like that. Mom, Tyler needs me. We’re living in the same house anyway, and he’s facing surgery in a couple of weeks. We don’t want anything big or fancy. A simple ceremony on the back lawn is fine. I don’t need anyone here other than my family. We can call the justice of the peace—that’s still Hugh Matthews, isn’t it?”

“We will call Reverend Jackson, young lady. Not the justice of the peace. And you’ll be married in the church, assuming it’s not already booked for Saturday. You’re a foot too tall to wear my wedding gown—”

“She can wear mine,” Edie said, jumping to her feet. “Oh, we’ll play with it a little, make it different enough so it’s your own. Maybe run into town and pick you up a new veil and tiara.”

“I’ve still got my tux in the closet,” Wade put in. “God knows I’ll never find another use for it.”

Vidalia sighed. “Are you absolutely sure this is what you want?” she asked, her eyes probing Kara’s.

Kara felt as if her mother could see things no one else could. And she was not comfortable with the probing, searching stare. “I am. I’m sure, Mom.”

Vi held her gaze for a long moment, then finally lowered her head. “All right,” she said. “If it’s what you want, we’ll

make it happen!” She lifted her head again, and this time she pinned Jimmy with a steely stare. “You’d better make my daughter happy, young man. Or you’ll have me to answer to.”

“I promise to do my best,” he said. Then he pushed away from the table. “We should get cracking. We need to get the license before we take Ty in for his PT today.”

“Once that’s done, bring Kara to our place, Jim,” Edie said. “We’ll get to work on the dress tonight.”

“I’ll phone Reverend Jackson,” Vi said. “My goodness. You girls are going to be the death of me.”



The time flew past. Kara made time to spend with Tyler but found herself so busy there was almost no time for her to spend with Jimmy. Especially *alone* with Jimmy. And there was just as little time for her to wallow in her doubts and worries. Thankfully other worries faded rapidly, as well.

There had been no further trouble from Vinnie or Ang, no sign of them still being anywhere near Big Falls. Colby improved, but not fast enough. He’d be spending the weekend in the hospital, but might be out by Monday. She could tell Jimmy was relieved that things were going as well as they were—he was relaxing more and more. And the more relaxed he became, the more attentive he grew.

He smiled whenever he looked at her. He treated her as if she was made of rare and fragile crystal. He was thoughtful and kind and seemed to love spending time with her. Why was she looking for trouble where there was none?

But dammit, why hadn’t he said he loved her?

She spent Friday night at her mother’s to keep to the custom of the groom not seeing the bride on the day of the wedding. And she awoke Saturday morning with such a nervous stomach that even the smell of breakfast made her ill.

“Lookin’ a little green around the gills, sunshine,” Vidalia said. “Perk up, girl, it’s your wedding day.”

Kara smiled in response to her mother's teasing. Vi had set her worries aside, determined, it seemed, to embrace events and celebrate them rather than fighting the inevitable. If Jimmy screwed up, that would be soon enough for Vi to wreak vengeance. Until then, Kara thought he was safe from his mother-in-law's wrath.

Selene turned from the kitchen range with a steaming mug in her hands and brought it to the table, setting it in front of her sister. "Here, hon. Special blend. Mint for the tummy ache, chamomile and valerian for the nervousness and some honey to make it taste good."

Kara didn't for one minute doubt her sister's tea would help. Selene had a knack for things like this.

She'd no sooner finished her tea than Edie and Maya were bustling through the front door with Edie's recently remodeled wedding gown in their arms. They'd added a bowlike bustle to the back, with a trailing train that hadn't been there before. It glittered with hidden sparklies.

"Ready to get ready?" Edie asked.

"Not even close. The ceremony isn't until ten."

"That only gives us two and a half hours!" Maya clapped her hands together. "Let's go, chop-chop!"

"I'll go run your bath," Selene said, smiling in that mysterious way she had. "I've got special wedding-day bath salts ready to go. You're gonna smell so good, Jimmy's eyes will pop." With that Selene trotted up the stairs.

The morning wore on—slowly, unlike the past two days had. Kara bore up well. Several more cups of Selene's calming brew helped. Her sisters did her hair, her nails, her face. They fussed over her and sang love songs in perfect harmony as they did.

And finally she slid into the gown. The girls wouldn't let her near a mirror until they'd declared her finished.

Then Mel marched her up to the mirror.

Kara looked at her reflection. A princess looked back at her. Beautiful, graceful and glowing. Ringlets tumbled from the up-do and fell to frame her face. Tears welled up in her eyes as she looked at the other faces around her—Mel and Maya crowding over one shoulder, Edie and Selene leaning in over the other.

“You’re beautiful.”

“Perfect,”

“Oh, God, I think I’m going to cry already!”

“Someone get the camera.”

A throat cleared and they all turned. Vidalia stood in the doorway. “You girls have kept me at bay long enough. Let’s see how you’ve done.”

The four stepped away, and Kara turned slowly to face her mother. Vidalia took an openmouthed breath, blinking rapidly. “Oh, my,” she whispered. One hand fluttered to her chest, and she repeated herself. “Oh, *my*. You look like an angel come down from heaven, Kara Brand.”

Kara smiled and tried to keep her eyes dry. “My makeup’s gonna smear, Mom.”

“If these girls didn’t use waterproof makeup, they haven’t learned a thing from the last three Brand weddings.”

“We did, Mom,” Maya told her.

Vidalia wrapped her in a gentle hug and sniffled before she stepped away. “Well, that’s enough of this nonsense. Let’s get ourselves over to the church.” Then she snapped her fingers. “Oh, wait. One more thing.” She stepped out of the room and returned with a box, wrapped in white and silver paper with a red velvet bow.

“Mom, what did you do?” Kara asked.

She smiled. “Open it and find out.”

Kara opened the package, letting the paper and box fall to the floor as she pulled out a fur trimmed white velvet cloak. “Oh, Mom... “

Edie took it and moved behind her to drape it around her. She arranged the loosely fitting hood, and everyone oohed and ahed.

“Thank you, Mom.”

Vidalia looked pleased and proud. “Now you’re a proper Christmastime bride,” she said.

Kara took one last look in the mirror and met her own eyes. They were still filled with doubts, still lacking conviction. She thought maybe that look would fade later. Once she was married and she saw for herself that everything was all right. Once Jimmy told her how he truly felt about her. He would, she thought. He would say the words she’d been longing to hear. Today, of all days, he would say them.



Jim stood in front of the mirror, straightening his borrowed black bow tie over and over again. Then he noticed his son standing right beside him, staring at his reflection with the same intense, impatient look on his face, trying to straighten his own.

A mirror image, only smaller.

His heart swelled and any doubts still plaguing him about the wisdom of what he was about to do melted away. Kara Brand would make Tyler happy. She would be the mother his son had never known, fill the terrible void in his young life. That was all that mattered. All that would ever matter.

There was a knock at the door. He knelt to tug Tyler’s tie straight for him. “Now run a comb through that hair, pal. I’ll go get the door.”

“Okay, Dad.”

Jim smiled at Tyler’s serious expression as he began taming his wavy hair and went to the front door. He turned the locks, opened the door, fully expecting to see his future brothers-in-law, who’d planned to meet him here so they could all head over to the church together.

But it wasn't Wade or Caleb or Alex who stood there on the step. It was Angela. His blood chilled and his skin went cold. What the hell was she doing here today of all days?

"Hi, Jim." Her eyes skimmed down him and her brows drew together. "Why all dressed up?"

"I'm not doing this with you, Ang. Not today."

"Doing what with me? You don't even know what I came for."

"I don't *care* what you came for. You need to leave. Now."

"No. I want to see Tyler. Is he here?" As she spoke, she leaned to one side, trying to get a look around him.

Jim stepped out onto the front step, pulling the door closed behind him. "You surrendered all your rights to Tyler. You're under court order to stay away from him for his own protection, Angela. Beyond all that, you're wanted by every cop in the state right now."

"Wanted? Why would I be wanted? I haven't done anything."

"No?" He narrowed his eyes on her. "You're running with a fugitive. That's aiding and abetting, Ang. And don't think you're going to shirk your share of the blame for what your boyfriend did to Colby."

She blinked rapidly. "Your... partner?" Averting her head, she said, "Why, what happened to him?"

"Like you don't know? Someone shoved his car off a cliff with him in it. It hit the bottom and burst into flames. That's what happened to my partner."

He watched her face go dead white, felt a little guilty for dumping it on her like that. Colby had insisted she'd had no idea what Vinnie's plans were for him. But Jim hadn't really believed that. As for letting her believe Colby was dead, well, he didn't have a hell of a lot of choice in that. "You've got no business being here."

"But—"

“No buts. Get out of here. Go back to Chicago before a cop comes along and slaps a pair of handcuffs on you.”

She sighed, lowering her head. “Walk me to the car and I’ll go.”

He frowned, not liking the suggestion. His police protection was only here by night. His instincts kicked in, and he scanned the area, the car that sat in the driveway—a late-model Ford, mid-size, dark blue, nothing fancy but out of her price range. He didn’t see anyone else around. “Where did you get the car, Ang?”

“Vinnie bought it for me. I drove it all the way here from Chicago just to talk to you. That’s all I want, Jim. Just to talk to you. Two minutes.”

“I thought all you wanted was to see Tyler.”

“I want that, too, but if you won’t let me...” She sighed. “Jim, I have a chance to start my life over. And I’m trying hard to change, I swear I am.” She sniffled. “I tried to help your friend. I did. And I left Vinnie. I left him, Jim. You were right.”

He softened just a little. Hell, he’d loved this woman once. She was the first and last woman he’d ever loved. But God, he didn’t want her complicating his life just when things were going so well. Especially for Tyler. He took her arm and started walking her toward the car.

“I’m going to do this on my own, Jim. Get clean, get a job. You’ll see, I’ll make it work.” She sighed. “I don’t want to tell Ty who I am. I’m no mother, we both know that. I’d just like to see him, that’s all.”

He nodded slowly. “You get clean, Angela, you do the things you say you’re going to do, and I’ll make that happen. But you’ve gotta be clean, you understand? I don’t want him anywhere near you when you’re using. And I won’t have him within a mile of a man like Vinnie.”

She stared up at him. “You’ll really let me see him?”

He nodded. “I’m not made of stone. You show me you’ve really changed and I will.”

They were at the car now. She stood near the passenger door, her hand on the handle. “Thank you, Jim.”

“Yeah, thank you, Jim.”

Jim whirled at the deep, sarcasm-laden voice that came from behind him, but not in time. The tire iron caught him upside the head before he could even blink. His vision exploded. He went to his knees, struggled to stay conscious, but then the second blow landed and he went over onto his side.

“Vinnie, stop it!” Angela cried. You’re gonna kill him!”

But the blows kept on coming. Then she shouted, “Vinnie, there’s a car coming. Come on, you’re wasting time.”

Vinnie swore, gripped his arms, and dragged over the driveway, then around toward the back yard. “Go get the kid,” Vinnie repeated. “Then we’ll see.”

God, no. They were going after Tyler. No, it couldn’t happen! He had to stay awake, had to get up, had to...

“Will you fucking die, already, Corona?” A boot connected with his ribs, then his head. And blackness descended.



Kara paced in the church’s tiny rectory, counting off steps across the room. Nine. Nine steps. But she’d traversed it so many times by now that she thought she’d clocked nine hundred.

“Honey, they probably had a flat tire... or something,” Maya said.

“Or maybe he’s just not coming.” Kara closed her eyes, tried to quell the doubts in her mind, but there was no silencing them. Not now.

“Of course he’s coming,” Maya told her. “Mom’s on the phone right now, trying to get hold of someone. And you know the guys were going over there so they could all come to the

church together. They'd have let us know if anything was wrong."

The full male contingent of her immediate family, Kara thought. What would they do when Jimmy told them he'd changed his mind? The idea of them going to get him hadn't been to force him to show up. They'd wanted to make him feel a part of the family, surrounded by the rest of the men. An exercise in male bonding, she'd supposed.

Or maybe she shouldn't have believed that lame explanation. Maybe her brothers-in-law had sensed, as she had, that Jimmy didn't love her. That this marriage was based on something else entirely. Probably they'd known from the start—maybe men could see that kind of thing in other men. And most likely they would bring him here on the end of a shotgun barrel if necessary.

She didn't want him like that, though.

From beyond the rectory door she heard her mother cussing at the telephone. Her mother never cussed. Especially not in church.

"It's enough, it's just enough already," Kara said. "He's a half hour late. He's not coming." She reached behind her for the zipper, intending to get out of the gorgeous gown so she wouldn't have to keep pacing back and forth in front of its reflection. It was a sorry, sad reminder of her ridiculous little fantasy.

She couldn't reach the zipper, though, and she sent a desperate look over her shoulder. "Someone get me out of this thing."

"Kara, don't. Just give it a little more time," Edie said.

Kara turned fully and glared at her. "Isn't it obvious to anyone but me? He's not coming!" She hated the tears for burning in her eyes, forcing their way out.

"That's it," Mel barked. "I'm going over there. If this joker thinks he can get away with pulling this kind of crap on *my* sister—"

"Something's wrong."

Everyone fell silent as all eyes turned to Selene, who'd been keeping the twins occupied by playing Chutes and Ladders with them on the pastor's desk.

"What is it, Selene?" Maya asked. "What are you sensing?"

Selene met her eyes, then her gaze slid to Kara's. It was grim and dark. "I don't know, but I know it's not what you think. Something's... wrong. Big and dark and wrong. I think we need to go over there."

Kara felt the blood drain from her face. Guilt swamped her. She'd been pacing and feeling sorry for herself and becoming increasingly angry at Jimmy. What if something had happened to him? Visions of a car accident on the way to the church, of flaming wreckage, suddenly swirled into her mind and terrified her. "What about Tyler?" she whispered. Then she bunched her skirts up in her fists and headed for the rectory door, flinging it open, racing down the aisle of the church, past the pews all draped in pine garland and white roses, toward the tall red double doors that stood at the far end.

Before she got there, the doors opened. Caleb stood there, and the look on his face stopped her in her tracks. She stood four feet from him, her skirts in her hands.

"Caleb, what's happened?" Kara asked, barely aware of her mother and sisters gathering around her, touching her, holding her.

"Jim's been hurt. You'd better come with me, hon. We need to get to the hospital."

"Hospital?" She pressed a hand to her chest and started forward on wobbly knees. "What happened? Is he all right?"

Caleb took her arm and led her through the wreath-decked double doors as the others followed. "We don't know. We found him unconscious in the backyard, just inside the gate. Looks like he took a severe beating."

She frowned. It made no sense to her stressed, overwrought mind. Poor Tyler, he must be scared half to death.

Then she lifted her gaze to Caleb's as he opened the passenger door of his car and held it for her. "How bad?" she whispered.

"We don't know, honey. We just don't know. Wade took him to the E.R. and I came right over here."

"Where's Alex?" Edie asked.

Caleb sent her a look. "With the police out at the house."

"Police?" Everything in Kara went icy cold as things began clicking into place in her mind. "Police, Caleb?"

He nodded. "Kara—" He drew a breath, closed his eyes. "Kara, we can't find Tyler."

Her knees buckled. If Caleb hadn't been there, she'd have fallen to the ground.

Her mother was quick to come to her aid, as well, pulling Kara's arm around her shoulders, taking her from Caleb's strong arms and easing her onto the seat of the car. Then she turned and took charge, and Kara was so very glad Vidalia was the way she was. She needed that right now.

"Mel, get over to that house and get to work on this with your husband. It's what you two do, after all. Maya, you take the twins home and get on the phone. I want you to phone everyone we know and get them to call everyone they know to help search for that little boy. Selene, go with her. Get a change of clothes for your sister and bring them to the hospital. Edie, you may as well come with us, since Wade's at the E.R. already." Then she nodded to Caleb. "Get us to the hospital, son, and don't dawdle about it."

Then she got into the front seat beside Kara, closed the door and wrapped her hand around her daughter's.

Kara looked up at her mother, tears in her eyes. "We have to find Tyler."

"By the time we get to the hospital, half the town will be out looking for him, honey. And we'll join them, too. But you have to see Jim first, don't you think?"

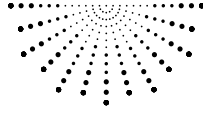
"I... " She lowered her head, shaking it slowly. "I'm so torn, I don't know what to do."

“That’s why I’m here, child. You just do what I tell you until your head stops spinning and you can decide for yourself again. You have to see him—he may be able to tell us something to help us find the boy.”

Kara closed her eyes as Caleb hit the gas. The car lurched forward, spitting gravel in its wake. She saw her sisters behind them, all of them in motion. Maya was explaining things to Reverend Jackson as she gathered the twins in her arms. Kara turned again to her mother, saw the worry in her eyes. “We’ll find him. We will find him,” she whispered, needing to hear someone—her mother, the strongest woman in the world—confirm it for her.

“Damn straight we will,” Vidalia Brand said. “And heaven help any son of a gun who lays a finger on that child until we do. *No one* messes with one of Vidalia Brand’s grandchildren.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



“Aren’t we almost there?”

“Stop whining, kid,” Vinnie snapped. “We’ll be there when we get mere.”

Vinnie wasn’t real happy with Tyler, Angela thought. But he hadn’t kicked or screamed or cried so far, and she hoped he wouldn’t

“So my dad’s waiting there already? Why did he leave?”

“Like I told you,” Vinnie said, “it was an emergency. We’re supposed to bring you to him.”

“At the church?”

Angela looked at the boy sharply. “That’s where you were going all dressed up, I’ll bet. To the church.”

“Course it is. You gotta get dressed up for a weddin’.”

She shot a look at Vinnie.

“I’m gonna be the ring-bear!” Tyler tugged at his bow tie yet again. He hadn’t stopped chattering or fidgeting since they’d put him in the car. She wished he would quit already. He was giving her a headache.

“Do you guys know Kara? She’s the lady my dad’s gonna marry. And then she’ll be my new mom. Just like I asked Santa for. And it ain’t even Christmas yet!”

Ang winced a little. Hell, it wasn’t as if being a mother was her life’s ambition. Especially not to a disabled kid who never shut up. She’d never wanted him. God, the months of

struggling to stay clean while she'd carried him just so he wouldn't be born messed up. She'd slipped a few times. She was only human. But it hadn't hurt him any. She tended to think the bastards who told women to stop living during pregnancy were overdramatizing things. No smoking, no drinking, no drugs. Hell, they didn't even want you taking over-the-counter stuff, aside from those horse-size prenatal vitamins. Her pregnancy had been hell. And in the end, all those months of suffering hadn't mattered—he ended up all screwed up anyway. But it still jabbed her a little to hear Tyler refer to another woman as his mom.

Her buzz was waning. She needed another hit.

“And Mrs. Brand—Vidalia—she'll be my real grandma. I never even *had* a real grandma before. And I'll have all kinds of aunts and uncles, and two cousins and—”

“That's real nice, Tyler,” Ang said. He was buckled up in the backseat. She figured she could manage a hit without him even noticing. She reached for the little compact case on the seat between her and Vinnie, but Vinnie covered her hand with his own.

“When I say. Understand?”

She thinned her lips, angry now.

“And as soon as the weddin's over I'm gonna ask for a puppy. Dad will prob'ly say no, but Kara won't. She loves animals, just like me. So I bet she'll get me a puppy. And then everything will be perfect.”

Angela turned in her seat, looking back at him with a frown. He wore braces on both legs and couldn't walk without those ugly, cumbersome crutches. In what universe did that qualify as perfect?

“I have to go to the bathroom. Are we almost there?”

“Let's stop for a break,” Vinnie said. “I have to call your dad anyway and make sure my directions are all right.”

“I don't think they are, mister. I think we must have gone way too far by now.”

He was smart, Angela thought. They'd been driving for forty-five minutes. Frankly she'd had enough of it herself. Vinnie pulled into the parking lot of the motel where they'd been holed up for the past three days. Vinnie had barely let her stick her head outside the door of their room. He said the police were looking for them. She thought he'd been making things up just to keep her under his thumb, until she'd spoken to Jim.

Poor Jim. Vinnie didn't have to hit him as hard as he had. She hoped he'd be all right

"Let's go inside," Vinnie said. "I'll give your dad a call, make sure things are on schedule. Don't worry about a thing, kid."

"I'm scared I'll miss the weddin'," Tyler confessed, unbuckling his seat belt, opening his door. Angela got out her own door and headed straight to the room—she had stashed away a little supply of her own and she was damned if she was waiting to use it.

"Angie, what's-a-matter with you anyway?"

She looked over her shoulder to see Vinnie rolling his eyes, then he opened the back door and helped Tyler get out and up onto his crutches. "There's no way your dad would start things without you, kid. Besides," Vinnie added with a look at his watch, "it's not even time yet Don't worry."

"Okay."

He walked beside the boy toward the motel room. Angela stopped watching them and finished unlocking the door. Then she went inside, straight to the bathroom. She slammed the door and locked it behind her. Tyler had to go, he'd said. But hell, he could wait. This would only take a minute.



Kara ran through the closest entrance to the emergency room, ignoring that its doors were clearly marked as being for E.R. patients only. She looked left and right, spotted a desk and

headed for it, still clinging to her skirts. She heard the stampede of footsteps behind her—Edie and Cal and her mother. “Jimmy Corona,” she barked at the nurse there. “Where is he?”

The woman blinked at her, probably unused to seeing women in bridal gowns racing frantically through her emergency room. Before she opened her mouth to speak, Wade was there, gripping Kara’s shoulders, turning her to face him.

She searched his eyes, desperation and fear clawing at her chest “Where is he, Wade? Is he all right?”

“They’re still working on him. Already stitched him up, then took him down to X-ray. Going to run a CT scan and then they’ll know more.”

“Is he conscious?” she asked.

“No.” Wade blinked, lowering his head. “You look so beautiful, Kara. I’m damn sorry your special day got ruined. If the guys and I had arrived five minutes sooner—”

“Don’t blame yourself,” she said. Then she pulled free of his embrace because a man and a woman in white appeared, pushing a stretcher along the hall and into a room. She glimpsed just one hand—one strong, tanned hand lying still on the white sheets—and she knew it was him. “Jimmy!”

She raced toward him even as they pushed him into a treatment room. Hesitating in the doorway, she sought permission from the faces that surrounded him. A nurse eyed her gown and her eyes turned sympathetic. “You must be Kara,” she said. “Wade Armstrong told us you’d be coming.” She returned her attention to Jimmy. She was taping leads to his chest. “Come on in, hon,” she said without looking up again. “Sit with him a while. Use the call button if you need us.”

“But—but... do you know anything? How is he?”

The male nurse who’d been adjusting the IV line, glanced her way. “The doctor still has to look at his films. We don’t

know much yet. He's been restless. Muttering. Nothing coherent. You sit with him, talk to him. It can't hurt."

As the two left the room, she moved slowly toward the bed. He lay on his back, his clothes were missing—from the waist up at least. A sheet covered his chest, but his arms lay outside the covers. The leads they had fastened to his chest were connected to a monitor that beeped in a slow, steady rhythm.

There was a huge white bandage plastered to one side of his head. His face was paler than she had ever seen it, except for the purpling bruise that ran from one side of his forehead down to and including his cheekbone. His chest was all taped up.

She swallowed hard, leaned closer, lifted a trembling hand to touch his bruised face. "Oh, Jimmy."

She heard a throat clear. "Excuse me. Mrs. Corona?"

Kara straightened and turned to see a blond woman with a stethoscope draped around her neck over a white lab coat "We didn't get that far," Kara told her. "I'm afraid it's still Miss Brand. But please call me Kara."

"I'm Dr. Miller." The woman held out a hand and Kara took it. "I can't tell you how sorry I am that your wedding day was so thoroughly ruined. Are you all right?"

"I'll be fine. It's Jimmy I'm worried about. How is he, Doctor?"

The doctor looked past her at her patient. "The films don't look bad. There's no sign of any serious damage, but that doesn't give us the whole story. We aren't really going to know anything for sure until he wakes up."

"Is he... is he unconscious or is this—" she could barely say the word. "—coma?"

"The EEG reads nicely. It's not coma. Not yet. He could go deeper or he could come around. No way to predict it. We can really only wait and see." The doctor sighed. "I'll give you a few minutes with him. But then I need to examine him again. All right?"

“Thank you, Doctor.”

Dr. Miller left, closing the door behind her. Kara went to the bed. She leaned over it, putting her lips close to Jimmy’s ear. “Wake up, Jimmy. Wake up right now. Tyler’s in trouble. He needs you. And I need you, too.”

She cupped his face with one hand. “Wake up, Jimmy. Come on for Ty.”

It didn’t evoke a reaction.

Closing her eyes, she fought back a tide of disappointment.

“It’s okay. I just want you to know I’m here. We’re all looking for Tyler. We’re going to find him, I promise you that. We won’t give up.”

Sighing, Kara got to her feet. She had to clear out, give the doctor room to work. And she had to go looking for Tyler. She kissed his cheek, then turned and walked to the doorway.

“Kara?”

She froze near the door, then turned back around. Jimmy was peering at her, eyes barely open and squinting as if the light hurt them. His brows drew together and he opened his eyes a little further. He seemed to take in her appearance, the dress, and then he closed his eyes again in what looked like anguish this time. “You look—you’re beautiful. I’m so sorry...”

“Don’t apologize,” she said as she hurried back to his bedside. “I know it wasn’t your fault. Jimmy—” She sat down in the chair beside the bed and gripped his hand in both of hers. “Do you remember what happened?”

“They... they took Tyler.” He scanned the room. “Angela and Vinnie took Tyler. I need a phone.”

“I’ll get you one. But I need to ask you something first.”

He drew a breath, nodded. “I owe you so much. Ask me anything, Kara, and I’ll tell you.”

She nodded. “Why you did you really want to marry me?”

His brows drew together. “Kara, believe me when I tell you there’s not another woman in the world I would rather have as my wife.”

She nodded. “Because there’s nothing in the world as important to you as Ty. And I’m the best choice for him.” She lifted her head, met his eyes. “It’s okay, Jimmy. I know. I’ve known all along, somewhere inside. This is about Tyler. Not about anything you might... feel for me.”

He searched her face. “You were willing to go through with the wedding even believing that?”

She didn’t answer. Instead she crossed the room and picked up the cordless telephone. “Here. Make your calls. The doctor said she would be in momentarily to examine you, and Chief Wheatly is next in line. Now that I know you’re all right, I’m going out to join the search.”

She turned and started for the door, almost tripping over her skirts, having forgotten their presence.

“Kara, please. Please don’t go. I need to get out of here, I need to search for my son. But I don’t imagine the chief is going to let me until I give him the full account of what happened this morning. And there are things you need to hear, too.”

She heaved a sigh, so disappointed she could barely hold her head upright. She had so wanted to think her misgivings were completely off target. She’d expected him to deny it all, to tell her he loved her. But he hadn’t done those things. Instead he had only confirmed her worst fears.

Dr. Miller entered, saw him awake in the bed and smiled. “Well, I hope those sharp, clear eyes are a good indication of what’s going on behind them,” she said. “Good to meet you, Mr. Corona.”

“I’ll stop in to say goodbye before I leave,” Kara told him and she left the room.

Jim threw back the covers and had his legs over the side of the bed before the doctor uttered her first protest.

“No use arguing, Doc. I’m a police officer. My son has been abducted by a felon, and I’m going after him.”

“I don’t blame you. Can I at least check your pupils? Maybe get a BP and a quick listen to your heart first?”

“No.”

“You have thirty-six stitches in your head, Mr. Corona. You’re lucky you didn’t fracture your skull.”

“Very lucky. I know. But since I didn’t, I have to leave.” He looked down at the trousers he wore and remembered they were part of the tux. The tux he’d been wearing to marry Kara Brand. And now she knew the truth—that he didn’t love her—and it made his stomach hurt to realize how deeply he had hurt her.

She didn’t deserve that. She’d been nothing but wonderful to him and Tyler. He felt like an assassin.

“Where’s my shirt?” he asked the doctor.

“I’ll give you your shirt after I check your vitals. Deal?”

He sighed and rolled his eyes but agreed.

The doc made quick work of it, which he appreciated. Then she turned and opened a large plastic bag that had been sitting on the floor, dug out a white shirt and tossed it to him. He caught it and she nodded. “Reflexes are okay.”

“Sneaky, aren’t you? You have a release form I can sign, Doctor? If you do, bring it now, ‘cause in another thirty seconds I’ll be out of here.”

She nodded. “All right, have it your way.” She yanked his chart off the door, flipped it open, scribbled something on it and drew a big X. Then she handed it to him, along with the pen. She set the bag with the rest of his belongings on the bed beside him.

He scribbled his name beside the X and handed it back to her. Then he pulled on his white shirt. He dug around in the plastic bag for his shoes and socks and she left him alone. But when he bent over to pull on the socks, he was hit with such a rush of dizziness he wound up on his knees on the floor.

And then Kara was there, on her knees, too, gripping his shoulders, helping him to get up again. He met her eyes. They were wet. She'd been crying. Hell, he'd made her cry. She was no longer wearing the wedding gown. God it had just about knocked him out of the bed when he'd glimpsed her in it. Such a powerful image, Kara Brand as his bride. She wore jeans now and a small green sweater.

"You should stay here until the doctor wants to let you go," she said.

"Right. You wouldn't if it was your kid."

"He *is* my kid."

He lifted his head. She blinked, those huge green eyes swimming.

"At least, I'd like for him to be."

She pushed him until he sat on the bed, then she knelt and pulled his socks onto his feet. When she got them on straight, she added the shoes, even tied them for him. "I love him, Jimmy." She couldn't seem to meet his eyes. "And you don't have to marry me to ensure I stay in his life. You really don't."

He didn't even know how to respond to that. The local chief of police came in before he could think of a way.

"Jim. Sorry we're meeting again under these circumstances. I want you to know we're doing everything we can to find your son."

Jimmy nodded, getting to his feet. "I need to be out looking for him. But if you can ride with us to the house, I'll fill you in on the way."

Chief Wheatly said, "I need to take my own car, but we can talk at the house. I've been in touch with your Chief Wilcox in Chicago, and he's already brought me up to date on a lot of this. Have Stefano or Angela contacted you since they took him?"

"No. But I haven't been at the house, and I left my cell phone there, so I don't see how they could."

Jimmy started for the door a bit unsteadily. But then Kara was beside him, sliding an arm around his waist, holding him. She was strong and sure of herself and loyal and determined.

She wouldn't let him down.

For a minute he wondered just why the hell he *didn't* love her. There must be something seriously wrong with his head, and it must have been wrong for a while now. Any normal, sane man would have fallen head over heels for this woman.

As they made their way out of the hospital, Wade came up and handed Kara his keys. "Take my pickup. We'll meet you out there."

"Thanks, Wade."



Kara glanced at the faces surrounding her, saw the love and the strength in each of them. Jim seemed to be avoiding their eyes. He was uncomfortable, and she knew he felt guilty for leading her on the way he had. She'd left his room barely containing her tears, but she'd managed it. Just long enough for Selene to find her and hand her the change of clothes she'd brought.

Selene had taken one look at her and seen the emotional firestorm about to erupt in her, Kara knew she did. But she'd been wise enough and kind enough to say nothing. She'd only given her a hug and pointed to the nearest restroom.

Kara had gone in there to change and lost her battle. She had a full-blown breakdown in ladies room, closing herself in a stall in case anyone came in to witness it. Her dream was shattered. Her heart broken. And yet she still loved him. She loved Jimmy Corona in a way she had never loved any other man, and always would. And she loved Tyler.

Deep down she'd known all along what was happening. She'd chosen to ignore it. Pretended not to see it. But she couldn't lie to herself anymore. Jimmy didn't love her.

When the storm of tears had finally subsided, she'd thought maybe she could get through the next few hours. She'd splashed cold water on her face and reminded herself that her feelings were not important—not now. Now all that was important was finding Tyler. Getting him home safe and unharmed. It was that focus that had allowed her to face Jim again.

She remained in control, exerting an iron will over her emotions as they walked out of the hospital to the parking lot. Kara didn't ask if Jim needed her to drive. He was still having trouble walking, to say nothing of driving. That he even managed to climb into the pickup without help surprised her.

As soon as she put it into gear, he started to apologize again, but she put a stop to it in short order. "Don't," she said. "Don't waste time on what's happened between us or why it happened, Jimmy. Not now."

"But I need to explain—"

"No," she said. "Look, Jimmy, I'm barely holding it together here. I don't want to wallow in this. I need to focus on Tyler."

He was studying her face for a long moment, before he nodded. "Okay."

"Tell me about Tyler's mother. Tell me about Angela. Everything about her."

He licked his lips, lowered his head. "She's a drug addict," he said. "But you already know that. I think she probably was through most of our marriage, though I didn't know about it until it was too late. I was busy with my work, my career. I didn't like to party. She did. So she partied without me. Had affairs. I thought I loved her. Hell, I did love her. I thought a baby would fix things. Give her something to focus on. Settle her down. And at first I thought it had worked."

"But it didn't?"

He shook his head. "I was wearing blinders. She was using cocaine, right under my nose. I should have known, should

have seen it. Maybe I did know, deep down and was just in denial.”

She lowered her head. “I can’t quite swallow that, Jimmy. You wouldn’t knowingly subject Tyler to that.”

“I wasn’t the greatest father back then, Kara. If I had been, I’d have known he wasn’t safe with her.” He lowered his head, shaking it slowly. “Then I got a call at work one day. My son was in the trauma ward and my wife was in custody. She’d decided to take him out for a walk while she was high. And you know the rest.”

Kara had to force her eyes from his tortured face to focus on the road.

“And what happened to her after that?”

He shook his head. “She and her lawyer made a deal with the D.A. She agreed to sign away all parental rights to Tyler in exchange for probation and community service. The alternative would have been jail time. The D.A. said it was my call. I opted to take the deal.” He sighed. “Up to now she’s stayed away. Kept her promise not to interfere or try to see him. Until she took up with Vinnie Stefano. Now she’s letting him use her to get to me.”

“That man is dangerous,” Kara said. “And he didn’t have any qualms about having Colby killed. As far as he knows, he succeeded, and you’re the only one left who can put him behind bars.”

She turned to look briefly at him, and he met her eyes. “Yeah. He probably intended to kill me this morning. I think they guys showing up were the only reason he didn’t. Ang saw them coming, so they grabbed Tyler and booked.”

She nodded, but kept her eyes on the road. “How could Vinnie convince her to go along with this? Using her own son this way?”

“He’s been filling her head with promises. She thinks he’s her knight in shining armor, riding in to save her, make her life like something out of a storybook.”

“No one can do that for her. It’s something she has to do for herself.”

He was silent for a moment, and when she glanced at him again, she found him staring at her. She looked away.

“I imagine he’s feeding her all the cocaine she wants, as well. She’d do just about anything for him so long as he dangles the right bait.”

“At least Tyler’s with his mother,” Kara said. “She won’t let Vinnie hurt him. She’ll... she’ll make sure he’s okay.”

“The last time Tyler was with his mother, she damn near killed him,” Jimmy said, his tone grim. “Not every female is kind to children, Kara. I know it’s hard for you to comprehend, but the maternal instinct isn’t universal. Some animals eat their young. If she was hard up, I don’t have any doubt she’d trade Tyler for a line of coke. He’s not safe, not with her. He never was.”

She tried to hide the horror from her eyes as she drove them back to the house. And then it was shoved to the back of her mind when she arrived there.

“Good Lord, look at all this.”

There were vehicles lining both sides of the street. Unmarked sedans, police cars and SUVs with bubble lights, vans marked with official seals. There was yellow tape strung so haphazardly it looked like a Halloween prank the day after, though she was sure the men who’d put it up had some sort of rhyme and reason.

There was nowhere to park the car, so she had to drive past. It was a solid thirty yards before she found a spot along the roadside to pull over. And she was concerned about Jim’s ability to walk all the way back to the house.

Sighing, she shut the truck off and opened the door. Jim’s hand on her shoulder stopped her from jumping down, and she turned to meet his steady gaze. “I’m sorry I hurt you, Kara.”

She shook her head. “You shouldn’t be thinking about anything now except Tyler. The rest... the rest can wait”

She got out, then hurried around to his side of the vehicle, intending to help him. He was already out, though. And, putting an arm around her shoulders, he walked back to the house as if he wasn't hurting with every step.

There were police everywhere. Some were flicking brushes over the railing on the front steps and the doorknob. Others were taking plaster impressions of tire marks from the driveway. Another was photographing something on the ground, and it was only when they got closer that Kara saw what it was. A blood trail, where something had clearly been dragged. And that something, she realized with a sickening feeling, had been Jimmy.

"They never touched the door or the railing," Jim said, moving right into the throng. "You won't find any prints." He pointed. "I came out this door, walked with Angela to her car—a late model Ford Taurus, dark blue—there." He moved to the new spot, watching the ground, careful of where he stepped. "I was facing her, talking to her, when he came up behind me. I spun around, and he clubbed me with something. I'm pretty sure it was a tire iron."

"God," Kara whispered, clutching her stomach. She wasn't close enough to Jimmy anymore to be heard, but someone heard. Hands clutched her shoulders, and she turned. It was Edie, and Selene stood beside her. "It's too awful," Kara whispered, and though she fought it, a sob racked her chest.

Her sisters held her, then drew her farther away from the police. She glimpsed Wes speaking intently to Chief Wheatly. She saw a van creeping along the road looking for a spot to stop. It had a TV news logo on the side and a satellite dish on top.

"The press." Then she sniffed and nodded. "But that's a good thing, isn't it?"

"Come on, Kara. Jim's tied up with the police right now anyway, and we have to talk."

Kara frowned up at Edie but didn't argue as her sister tugged her away from the crowd to a small grove of trees.

where Alex and Mel waited. The others were still with Jim, trying to be of help.

“Okay,” Alex said. “Here’s what we know. The police aren’t releasing any of the intimate details to the press, just your standard Amber Alert—Tyler’s photo and description, along with the names and descriptions of his abductors and the suspect vehicle. The last thing they want is a P.I. snooping around, but I was here before them, so I got the freshest information. Turns out Billy Turner drove by here this morning and saw a strange car in the driveway. Dark blue, late-model Ford, Illinois plates.”

“That’s the same car Jim described,” she said. “I don’t suppose he got the plate number.”

“No. But it shouldn’t be too tough to track them down. Neither of them have any personal link to our area, so it stands to reason—”

“Wait a minute. How do you know they don’t have any connections here?”

Alex shot a look at Mel. Mel pursed her lips, lowered her eyes. “I was concerned about you, hon. I...we started to run a background check on Jim.”

Kara blinked, stunned. “Mel, you shouldn’t have done that.”

“The hell I shouldn’t. You’re my sister. And clearly I was right in my assumption that he had a few skeletons in his closet.”

Kara shook her head. “You’re like a bulldozer, you know that? It was my business, my call. You should have asked me.”

Mel sighed. “I’m not used to asking permission to protect my family. Anyway, we turned up the marriage, the maiden name of his ex. So we went ahead and ran a check on her, as well. The woman’s a train wreck.”

“Yeah, that much I know. We all do—Jim was honest about that”

“Eventually,” Mel muttered.

Alex shot her a quelling look. “She’s had numerous arrests, including minor drug offenses, prostitution, but nothing to suggest any friends or relatives in Oklahoma.”

“So what good does that do us?” Kara asked.

“They have to be staying somewhere,” Alex said. “If we work on the assumption that Vinnie has no connections here either, that leaves a hotel, motel, something like that. Those kinds of places take license plate numbers down when people check in. So do campgrounds. We can start checking anyone who checked in with Illinois plates. In fact, we’ve already started—Maya’s making calls from the house.”

“Won’t the police be doing the same thing?” she asked.

“Probably,” Alex said. “And they’ll probably find them. But I think it would be a good idea for us to be there if and when they do track them down. This guy’s dangerous. An armed standoff with Tyler as a hostage would not be in the boy’s best interests.”

Kara shivered. The image was too much to even consider. Her stomach heaved and she turned away, gripping her belly and doubling over. She vomited in the bushes. Alex swore, and Mel gripped Kara’s shoulders, held her hair back.

“Kara?”

She heard Jimmy’s voice, closed her eyes and wished she could stop retching, but she couldn’t. A second later his hands replaced Mel’s on her shoulders. “Kara, are you okay?”

Finally under control, she nodded, tried to straighten. Alex handed her a handkerchief and she wiped her mouth.

Jimmy was searching her face, and his own looked helpless. She said, “Don’t. Don’t waste a minute worrying about me. You’ve got more man enough on your plate right now. I’m fine.”

He shot a look past her at Alex. “She should be home. I don’t want her going through all this and I can’t take care of her—”

“You don’t need to take care of me.”

Her words brought a wounded look to his face. “Please, Kara. Go to your mother’s. You’re wrung out. You look ready to drop.”

She drew a breath, ready to argue with him. But then it occurred to her that she could help Maya track down the lowlife animals who were using a small child the way they were. “What’s happening, Jimmy? What are the police doing?”

“Everything that can be done. They’re organizing volunteers to search the woods, bringing in dogs to try to pick up Tyler’s scent, setting up roadblocks.” He looked her up and down. “There’s nothing you can do here, Kara. Ty’s gonna need you when he gets back. And if he sees you falling apart... “

She nodded. “I’ll go home.”

“Have some of Selene’s special tea. Maybe some chicken soup or something to settle your belly.”

“Call the minute you hear anything.”

“I’ll drive her,” Selene said. Her eyes said more, but the look in them was for Kara alone.

Jim nodded. “I’ll check in on you.” Then almost as if on impulse, he pulled her into his arms and hugged her close. “Thank you, Kara.”

“For what? I haven’t done anything.” But God, his arms felt good around her just then, even though she wouldn’t let herself melt into them or embrace him in return. She wished she could stay wrapped in those arms forever. If only he loved her.

“You don’t know what you’ve done,” he said. “I’m glad you’re here with me. I wouldn’t want to go through this without you.”

She couldn’t say the words that wanted so badly to be said. That she loved him. Always would. Instead she said, “He’ll be okay, Jimmy. I know he will.”

He walked with her out to the road, put her into Selene's little car and closed the door. Then he stood there and watched until Selene had driven them out of sight.

When she couldn't look back at him any longer, Kara finally turned to her sister.

Selene had that look in her eyes. That intense, almost eerie look she got sometimes. "What is it, Selene?" Kara asked.

Selene blinked and glanced her way, saying nothing.

"You know something," Kara blurted, reading her sister's expression. What is it?"

"I don't know."

"Come on, Selene, spill. You've got an inkling. A feeling. Something."

Selene nodded. "Yeah. I don't think it would be a good idea to let the police be the ones to find him. When Alex was saying what he said, I saw... something. A flash. But there was shouting and gunfire, and I had a terrible feeling about Tyler."

"Any idea where he is?"

Selene shook her head. Kara reached for the cell phone on the dash. When Maya picked up, Kara asked her if she'd found anything yet

"No. None of the local motels or inns have anyone registered with Illinois plates. And I've checked almost all of them."

"There can't be many."

"A dozen. At least within twenty miles. Maybe we'll have to look farther."

"Keep trying, Maya."

"I will. How are you holding up?"

"I'll be fine. Don't worry. Listen, I have to go. Love you, sis."

"Love you, too, Kara."

She disconnected and turned to Selene. “They’d have to be pretty stupid to put Illinois plates on a hotel registry,” she said slowly. “I mean, they had to know we’d be looking for them that way.”

Selene nodded. “You’re right. And it’s not like anyone checks. You just write the information in the book and they hand you a room key.”

“So chances are Maya’s phone calls are useless. The only way we’re going to know for sure is to drive to those motels and look for that car ourselves. I just wish I knew where to start.”

“Well then let’s find out!” Selene pulled the car off onto the shoulder of the road, sending up a cloud of dust. She reached past Kara to open the glove compartment, and from it she took a small velvet drawstring bag. “Grab the map and get out,” she said.

Kara didn’t question. She knew better than to question her kid sister. She rummaged in the glove compartment for a map of the area and got out of the car. Then she went around to the front, where Selene was already standing, and she unfolded the map on the hood of the car.

“No, no. Spread it on the ground. I don’t want the car’s electronics interfering. Right here.” Selene pointed.

Kara laid the map on the ground, just off the side of the road. The wind kept catching it, so she gathered four small rocks and placed one at each corner to keep it from blowing away.

Selene knelt on the ground in front of the map and opened the drawstring bag. She drew a chain from it, and as it emerged, Kara saw the crystal suspended from its end. “Selene?”

“It’s a pendulum,” Selene said. “I’ve been practicing with it. Pick a spot on the map where a hotel or motel is.”

“Here,” Kara said, pointing. “There are three west of town, right off the highway.”

“Okay. Now just think about Tyler. Put his face in your mind, and I will, too.”

Nodding, Kara thought of Tyler. His beautiful silky hair. His dimples, so like his dad’s. The mischievous twinkle in his eyes. As she watched, Selene held the pendulum perfectly still, suspended over the portion of the map Kara had indicated.

At first nothing happened. The crystal just hung there, motionless. But then slowly, almost imperceptibly, it began to move. The motion was so slight at first that Kara thought she might be imagining it. But she wasn’t. It moved faster, its arc growing larger, until it was swinging back and forth, from side to side.

Selene snapped the chain and caught the crystal in her hand. “That’s a no,” she said. “Tyler isn’t there. Where else?”

Kara swallowed hard and racked her brain to think of other hotels and motels within driving distance. She pointed to another spot on the map, and Selene repeated the entire process, getting the same answer again.

And again Kara searched her mind, thought of a motel east of Big Falls and pointed. Selene let the pendulum dangle. This time the movement started immediately. There was no subtlety, no question. It swung, making a perfect and ever-widening circle over the spot on the map.

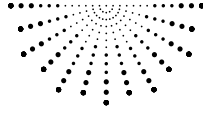
“That’s it,” Selene said. “That’s a yes. That’s where he is.” She lifted her eyes to Kara’s and probably saw the doubt there.

“It’s outside the radius of the search,” Kara said. “It’s almost forty miles away.”

“What can it hurt to drive out there and check?” Selene asked.

“Nothing. It can’t hurt anything at all.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Jim looked at the men around him. His own boss, Chief Wilcox, had flown down from Chicago and stood beside the Big Falls police chief, Earl Wheatly, and Colby had checked himself out of the hospital and joined them at the scene as well. Local officers and deputies, men he didn't know, were there, all bonding behind a single cause. His boy. His Tyler.

"We've checked every hotel and motel in the area. None have any record of them under either of their names," Chief Wheatly said.

Jim nodded. "I didn't expect there would be. Vinnie's too smart to use his own name. You'll need to go by the plates."

"Tried that, too," he said. "No Illinois plates."

Jim closed his eyes, fought off the slow-building panic, squelched it and wished to hell Kara were there. Her presence had a calming effect on him, like cool water on a fever. It bothered him, that feeling of needing her.

"Try the campgrounds then." He tried to look more confident than he felt. "They might be holed up anywhere. We should check out any abandoned houses, any homes where the families are on vacation, anything like that."

"I've got some men checking every empty house we know of, others canvassing the residents too," Chief Wheatly said.

"Okay." He walked over to the woman who knelt near the roadside with a matched set of long-eared, sad-eyed bloodhounds, both straining at the ends of their leashes. She

was a full-bodied woman with twinkling eyes, currently dimmed by a worried frown. “Any luck?” he asked her.

“They tracked your boy from the house to the driveway. Right where those men were lifting tire tracks. He was taken from here in a car.”

“I assumed as much. I’m sorry we got you and the dogs out here for nothing.”

“Oh, not for nothing. They can track your son, in a car or otherwise. For a while, anyway.” She pointed in the direction her dogs seemed so eager to go. “They took him east.”

Jim lifted his brows. He’d never worked with dogs before, had no idea their senses were that keen.

“I just need some men to follow. I’ll walk as far as I can. But it might be slow going.”

“You can’t just let them go at their own pace and follow in a car?” he asked.

She shook her head firmly. “A bloodhound on the scent will walk in front of a bus or off a cliff and be dead before he realizes it. No, Mr. Corona. I stay with my dogs.”

He nodded, then waved to some of the officers. When they came over, he repeated what the dog’s handler had said, and within a few moments the woman was heading north along the road’s shoulder, one cop walking beside her and another following at a snail’s pace in a cruiser.

If Vinnie and Ang had taken Tyler more than a few miles... Hell.

Poor Tyler. What must he be going through right now? He wondered if Angela had tried to tell him who she was. God, how confusing would that be for him? And Vinnie—if that slimebag so much as put a hand on his kid....

“Corona! Phone’s ringing!” someone shouted.

Jim sprinted into the house as the telephone jangled and glanced at the officer who manned the wiretap equipment. The phone rang again. The man gave him a nod, and Jim picked up the telephone.

“This is Corona,” he said.

“Well, hello, Jimbo. How you doing? You hanging in there?”

Jim saw a haze of red but kept his voice calm. “Missing my kid, Vinnie. Let me talk to him.”

“Sure, sure, in a second. Listen, we explained to Tyler how you got called away on an emergency and asked us to bring him along. Only, my directions to the church must have been off. So you ease his mind about that now, so he’ll be a cooperative little hostage for us and not have to be punished. All right?”

“You put a hand on him, you son of a bitch, and I’ll—”

“I don’t have to tell you what I want, do I, Jimbo? The second I hear from my lawyer that the charges against me have been dropped, you and your kid will be reunited. I’ll give you eight hours to make it happen. I don’t care what it takes. You make it happen.”

“I’ll do it. You know I will, you’ve got me where you want me.” And for the life of him, Jim couldn’t figure out what good Vinnie thought that would do. He had to know he was being recorded right now.

“Glad you realize it. Now talk to your boy and make it quick. I don’t plan to keep this call going long enough for you to trace it. And Corona—the better he behaves for us, the easier this will go on him.”

“I understand.” He found himself looking to his side, automatically seeking Kara’s face, her eyes. Damn, he couldn’t believe how much he wished she were there right now. He’d vowed never to let another woman mean anything to him. Not a damn thing. So what was going on with his head?

Tyler’s voice came on the phone. “Dad?”

“It’s me, Ty. Everything’s fine.”

“Dad! I’m gonna miss the weddin’!”

“No, no, you’re not. There was a problem at the church—a big hole in the roof. I think I tree limb fell on it. So we’re not having the wedding today after all.”

“Oh, no!” Tyler’s voice was soft. “Is Kara very sad?”

“She’s fine, Ty.”

“No way, Dad. She *must* be sad. She looked so pretty!”

Kara’s face appeared in his mind’s eye, the way she’d looked when he’d seen her before. Pale, shaken, devastated. He’d attributed it to worry over Tyler. And he still thought that was the main cause. But it took Tyler to remind him she’d also been stood up at the altar today. And she’d learned that her husband to be didn’t love her.

The woman was an angel. She didn’t deserve the hell she was going through right now. Tyler’s innocent reminder of that added a layer of pain and a ton of guilt to the burdens already weighing him down.

“It’s okay, Dad. I’ll make her feel better soon as you come get me.”

He swallowed hard and focused on his son. “And I’ll come get you just as soon as I can, hon. But it might be just a little while yet. Are they being nice to you?”

“They’re okay. Not much fun, though. And the lady—” he lowered his voice to a whisper “—she’s kinda *weird*.”

“You be a good boy, Ty. Be just as good as you can be, and I’ll come for you very, very soon. I promise.”

“I wish you could come now. Dad, Kara is still gonna be my new mommy. Isn’t sh—”

“Tyler? Ty?” Nothing. Dead air.

“He disconnected,” the technician called. “Didn’t give us enough time to trace it.”

Jim nodded, lifted his head, looked at his chief. “We have to call the D.A. Get him to drop the child pornography case against Vinnie. It’s the only way he’ll let Tyler go.”

The chief pursed his lips. "It's a child-porn charge, Corona. You willing to let him walk on that?"

God, he wished Kara were there.

"We'll get him on kidnapping. Assault. Attempted murder. He tried to kill Colby and he bashed my skull in with a tire iron. Thirty-six stitches, that's gotta be convincing. Attempted murder of two cops is no small potatoes. He'll do more time for that than he would have for the kiddie porn anyway."

Wade shot him a look. "You're kidding me."

"It's true," Caleb said. "Sick system we have, isn't it?"

"I don't like it or agree with it," Jim said. "But it's what we've got." He nodded to his chief. "Get the D.A. on the phone. We have to move on this as fast as possible. I want my kid back."

"Yeah, okay. Just one question, Corona. And.. .hell, you don't know how much I hate having to ask it." He pursed his lips. "Does Tyler realize he's been abducted?"

"No. He thinks I asked those two animals to take him."

The chief nodded. "Then he wasn't blindfolded?"

Jim felt his entire being go cold. He knew what was coming.

"Vinnie isn't stupid. He's not going to go to all this trouble to weasel out of one set of charges only to set himself up with even more serious ones. He thinks Colby's dead so he's in the clear on that. No one to testify. Which leaves you and Tyler as the only witnesses to the kidnapping."

Jim lunged at his boss and had him by the collar before he even realized he was moving. "Don't you even—"

"Ease off, Jim!" Caleb gripped his shoulders and tugged him off. Wade stood beside him, glaring at the six officers about to draw down.

The guys had his back. Hell, that was a shocker.

He released Chief Wilcox.

“I know you don’t want to face it, Jim,” Wilcox said, smoothing his shirt. “I know, believe me I know. But you can’t turn a blind eye to the truth either. There’s no guarantee that giving Vinnie what he wants is going to get Tyler out of there alive. He’s got to tie up loose ends. Which means Tyler, and then you. Hell, your boy might be safer if you stall a little. They’d have to keep him alive then. And it would buy us some time to track him down.”

Jim turned in a slow circle. “I’ve got to do something.”

“Did Vinnie give you a time limit?”

He nodded. “Eight hours.”

“Then you’ve got time. You don’t have to make a decision right now. Give it a couple of hours, Jim,” Chief Wilcox pled. “Give us time to track them down before you make that call to the D.A. All right?”

Jim pushed a hand through his hair. His pulse was throbbing in his throat and temples, and every nerve ending seemed raw. He looked at Wade, then at Caleb.

And he felt like Caleb read his mind, because he leaned closer and said, “Let’s take a ride out to Vi’s house. You can talk to Kara.”

God that sounded like the answer. “I should be looking—”

“Alex and Mel are working from there. Maya’s on the phone, working that angle. You can check and see what they’ve come up with.”

He almost sagged in relief just at the thought of getting Kara’s input on this. He sent a look at his chief. “Call the D.A. Tell him what’s going on, all of it. Tell him to have things in place, be ready to drop the charges, have the forms ready to file, everything but his signature. And have him get the fax number for Vinnie’s lawyer. I want this to go through instantly once I give him the word.”

“Okay. I’ll do it just as you say.”

Jim nodded, turned to Wade and Caleb. They both seemed to understand without a word.



Tyler frowned at the phone, then up at the man. “Hey, it stopped workin’!”

“It did?” Vinnie took the motel room phone from him, then messed with it a little. “Hmm, I guess there must be a problem on the line.”

The lady looked at the man and rolled her eyes.

“Don’t worry, kid, it will be fixed in no time. And then we’ll call your dad again.”

Tyler pouted and crossed his arms over his chest. “We could use that one,” he said pointing to the cell phone on the bedside table. The one with its battery out and sitting beside it.

“Fraid that one’s busted too, kid,” Vinnie replied. “Hey, I got some games and stuff. You want to see?”

Tyler lifted his eyebrows. “Sure, I guess.”

“Sure. It’ll be fun. And we’ll get some takeout. Angela, go get us some food, huh? You like pizza, kid?”

Tyler brightened a little more. “It’s my favorite. But I don’t like onions or green peppers or mushrooms on it.”

“Is there anything you *do* like on it?”

“Pepperoni!”

Vinnie smiled at him, seemed more friendly all of the sudden. “Pepperoni it is, kiddo. Angie, go find us the biggest pepperoni pizza you can, huh? Double cheese. And some sody pop, too. What kind you like, kid?”

“Grape!”

“Grape?” Vinnie made a face so funny that Tyler laughed out loud. “Grape then. Get us grape soda, Ang. I’m gonna teach the kid here how to play video games while you’re gone.”

“I already know how to play video games!” Tyler exclaimed.

The lady heaved a sigh, like she was irritated with him, but she grabbed a coat and went out the door.

“Hey, Tyler, wanna try something fun?” the man said.

“What?” Tyler asked.

“Let’s see if you can fit your whole body inside my suitcase. ‘Kay?’”

Tyler giggled and did as instructed. Of course he didn’t fit, not with the leg braces on, but when Vinnie helped him take them off, he fit just fine. Vinnie even showed him how he could close the lid, though he didn’t close it all the way tight. Tyler thought it was about the funniest thing in the world.

He heard the door open and he peeked out. The grumpy lady was back, but not with any pizzas. She’d only been gone a minute.

She saw him in the suitcase and he thought she was gonna have a hissy, the way her face changed. Her eyes got kinda big and her skin seemed whiter than usual. Although it was pretty white already. Dad would say she didn’t get enough sun.

She looked at Vinnie and then she was yelling, real loud. “What the hell do you think you’re doing? What are you doing, Vinnie? What are you *doing*?”

“Oh, knock it off already!” Vinnie snapped.

He sounded mad too, so Tyler cringed a little deeper into that big suitcase. It was kinda like a cave. He could pretend he was a bear and hide out there if he wanted.

Then the lid was flung back suddenly, and he hid his face.

“Get out of there, Tyler. Come on.” The lady wasn’t yelling anymore. She even put a hand on his shoulder.

Tyler climbed out of the suitcase and sat on the bed. “We was just playin’ a game,” he told her.

She nodded. “I know.” Then she glanced at the suitcase again and frowned. She bent down and picked up a envelope.

“What is this? Jesus, Vinnie, this is a one way ticket to South America.”

He eyes widened.

“Look, babe, once those charges are dropped, my accounts get unfrozen. I’ve got a guy ready to transfer everything overseas. And I’m gonna move just as fast as my money, cause you know they’ll have a whole new set of charges to file. I gotta get out while the gettin’s good.”

She blinked. “B-but... it’s only one ticket.”

“Yeah. But I’ll send for you once I get settled.”

She looked real sad, then, her eyes got all wet. “And what about Tyler? You promised me he wouldn’t get hurt.”

“Aw, I wasn’t gonna get hurt,” Tyler said, wanting her not to cry. “That suitcase is soft, and he didn’t close it all the way.”

Vinnie and the lady just stared at each other. Finally Vinnie said, “I return him, they file new charges. If they can’t find him for a while, that buys me a little time.”

She was quiet for a long time. Then she finally handed him the car keys and said, “I think maybe you’d better go get the pizza yourself. I’m not leaving him alone with you.”

“You defying me now?”

They were mad again. Tyler didn’t like it.

“You don’t wanna go,” Ang said. “Fine. I will, but I’m taking him with me.”

“Not in this lifetime, Angie.”

Tyler spoke up. “When my dad wants pizza, he calls and they bring it to us. Can we do that, maybe?”

They both turned their heads toward him. For a minute he thought they were going to yell, but then Vinnie smiled at him. “You’re a smart kid, you know that?” Then he crossed the room and opened a drawer, took out a big, fat yellow book and started turning pages. “Someplace around this town has to deliver.”

Tyler didn't mention that he really ought to put his leg braces back on. He hated them. Instead he sat where he was, on the bed. The lady got a big shopping bag out of the closet and dumped it out on the bed, and Tyler thought it looked like he was having a birthday party. There was a remote-control race car, a video-game system, a pile of games for it, some books and a lot of other stuff.

“Wow!”

“This is all for you, Tyler,” the woman said. “Why don't you pick something out and play for a while, huh?”

“Gee, thanks. And it's not even my birthday.”

“Well, it's almost Christmas, right?”

“Yeah, but I didn't ask for any of this stuff for Christmas.” Tyler grabbed the box that held the game system and started tearing it open.

“What did you ask for?” the lady asked.

“Just a mommy,” he told her.



It was the third motel they had checked, all of them located in the same little cluster. Kara was so impatient she thought her head would explode. Selene was driving her little car slowly through the motel parking lot when Kara saw it—a car with Illinois plates. Selene saw it at the same moment and sent a startled glance at Kara.

“They're here. That has to be them. They're here, we've found them,” Kara whispered. “God, Selene, you're uncanny with that pendulum trick of yours. I can't even believe it.”

“Yeah. The question is, now that we've found them, what do we do about it?”

Kara sighed. “I just have to make sure Tyler's okay. After that... we'll figure something out.”

“We don’t even know which room. And this place is huge,” Selene said.

“Pendulum again?”

“I’m not that good. Besides, by the time I get a yes or no answer to every room number in this place, it’ll be midnight.”

“Then what do we do? How do we find out which room they’re in?”

Selene shrugged. “I’m gonna go talk to the desk clerk. You stay here. If Tyler sees you he’ll give you away.” She opened the glove compartment and took out a notepad and pen. “Jot down the plate number of the car. Just in case they get away from us again.”

“Okay. But if you figure out where they are, don’t go near the room without me.”

“You think we should call Jimmy first?” Selene asked.

Kara thought on it a moment. But God, he was going through so much. “Let’s make sure it’s really them first. I don’t want to get his hopes up only to have them crushed again.”

“You really love him, don’t you?”

“Yeah. I really do.” She wished the feeling was mutual. Sighing, she gave her head a shake. “Park this thing and let’s get on with it.”

Selene nodded, pulled the car into the first available parking space, then got out and hurried into the motel office.

Kara stayed in the car, her gaze skimming the motel rooms’ doors, their windows. She strained her vision until her eyes watered. But there was no sign of Tyler.

Then a pizza delivery car pulled up in front of the row of rooms and a teenager got out with a pizza box and a paper bag. He went to a door and knocked, and Kara watched because it was the only movement she’d seen.

A man opened the door. He looked up and down the sidewalk before his gaze settled on the delivery boy. Kara

rolled her window down.

The man took the pizza and the other bag the kid carried, handing them off to someone inside the room, then he dug out some money.

“All *right!* Pizza’s here!” someone cried.

It was a child’s voice.

It was *Tyler’s* voice.

Kara waited until the door was closed, the pizza car gone, before she got out of the car. She glanced toward the office, but there was no sign of Selene yet. As an afterthought she dug a tube of lipstick from her purse and wrote on the side-view mirror, “RM. 15.” Then she put the lipstick away and started toward the room.



Jim got out of the pickup and headed for the Brand house. Before he’d gone two steps, Wade and Caleb were flanking him. He paused, because he got the distinct feeling they were holding him up, even though neither man was touching him. And it was an odd feeling.

He didn’t have close friends, other than Colby. Didn’t have family. Now all of the sudden he had an entire herd of people who, by all appearances, would be willing to give him a kidney. It was surreal.

Vidalia opened the front door before he reached it and then she was hugging him hard. “Poor man, you look terrible. We’re gonna find that boy, you mark my words.”

He nodded, but he realized when she said it that he wasn’t as certain. A bone-chilling fear had taken up residence deep inside him.

She tugged him inside then, walking beside him. He saw Edie turn around and hug her husband. She’d been standing at the counter, putting on a fresh pot of coffee. It made him ache for Kara.

“Mel and Alex are working on several possibilities,” Vidalia said. “Maya’s upstairs putting the twins down for a nap. How are the police doing? Any leads?”

“Nothing yet.” He looked around the kitchen. He didn’t see Kara, and the lead weight of longing in his belly grew heavier. “Is Kara here?”

Vidalia frowned. “Well, no, she never came home. We all assumed she’d changed her mind and she and Selene had gone back over to your place.”

“She didn’t.” He was suddenly worried.

“No doubt she’s out looking for that boy herself,” Vidalia said. “Land, but I never saw anything like the way she’s taken to that child. Not that the rest of us haven’t, but Kara... well, she’s as smitten with Tyler as she is with you, Jim.”

Another guilt arrow stabbed into his chest. It brought company; A new worry. “I don’t like that no one knows where she is.”

“She wouldn’t want you worrying,” Vidalia said, “much less diverting any time or attention from searching for Tyler to go out looking for her. She’ll call in.”

He pursed his lips and sent a look at Wade and Caleb.

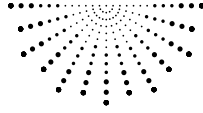
“Let’s see what Alex and Mel are working on,” Caleb suggested. “Give her a little time to call home. Okay?”

Jim nodded.

“They’re in the study,” Vidalia said.

Jim followed her in, but he couldn’t get rid of the niggling dread in his belly.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



*K*ara crept toward the motel room, but there were only the door and a large window there, curtains drawn. She was afraid she would be spotted for sure if she moved much closer. Biting her lip, she looked around at the way the place was set up. There were three blocks of rooms, two stories each, with pavement and groomed lawn in between. She eyed the room that held Tyler, memorized its position, counted the number of doors from the far end, then crept around to the rear of the building. There were windows in the back, too. Small ones, set high. One for each room, as near as she could guess.

Swallowing her fear, she began counting. When she got to the fifteenth tiny window, she crouched beneath it, then chanced a quick peek inside, quickly ducking down again. A bathroom. She hadn't glimpsed anyone in it, so she rose and took a longer look. The bathroom wasn't neat. There were damp towels piled on the floor, and clothes tossed beside them. The bathroom door was open, though, and she could see into the motel room itself. People moving around—a man and a woman.

Then she glimpsed Tyler. He was on the bed and had suddenly slid closer to the foot of it, bringing him into her range of vision. Her heart pounded as she drank in the sight of him. He looked all right. Unharmful. He wasn't wearing his leg braces and she wondered why. Maybe they thought he wouldn't be able to run away if they kept the braces from him. He'd taken off his tux jacket and tie, just wore the pants and white shirt, currently stained in red splotches that made her

heart race, until she glimpsed the pizza box near him on the bed, and realized it was just sauce.

Kara backed away from the window, barely able to catch her breath. Quickly, she jogged back around to the front of the building, where she intercepted Selene on her way back to the car.

Selene met her eyes as they drew close. “No luck with them, they don’t know... What? What is it?”

“They’re in room fifteen. Right there.” Kara pointed. “There’s a window in the back—it’s a bathroom. I saw Ty. I think he’s okay.”

Selene gripped her sister’s hands. “Thank God. What do you want to do? Should we call the police? Jim?”

“Either one amounts to the same thing. And a hostage standoff is the last thing we need here, especially after your... vision. Or whatever. Maybe we can just...spirit him away.”

“How?” Selene asked.

“Okay, well. I have an idea.”

“Why do I think I’m not going to like this?”

“Because you’re probably not. But just hear me out Ty has to go the bathroom sooner or later. He’s a kid—they go every ten minutes, right?”

Selene pursed her lips.

“So you pull the car around back. There’s more parking back there, so it won’t look odd. Leave it running. Then you and I sneak up to that window and we wait. When Tyler comes into the bathroom, we get him to unlock the window, we pull him out and we take off with him.”

Selene nodded slowly. “It’s risky.”

“As risky as having the police surround this place? Besides, who’s to say they won’t hurt him before they could get here? We can’t wait. We have to try this.”

Drawing a deep breath, Selene nodded. “Okay, let’s do it.” She opened the driver’s door and got in.



Angela was in over her head and she hated it. Vinnie had promised her that nothing bad would happen to Tyler. His plan, the way he'd laid it out to her, had made such perfect sense she couldn't imagine anything going wrong with it. They would take Tyler just for a little while. Just long enough to make Jim withdraw his testimony. When the charges against Vin were officially dropped, every i dotted and every t crossed, his lawyer would call him on his cell phone to let him know, and they would return Tyler and go back to their lives.

Vinnie had painted such a beautiful picture of the way her life would be once he was in the clear and they could be married. His home was like a Hollywood dream house—he'd shown it to her once. He had a pool and everything. And cars and money. He traveled all around the world, could buy just about anything he wanted.

It all seemed so perfect.

But now she was beginning to understand that Vinnie's promises had all been lies. She should have realized he couldn't just go back to his life if Jim pulled his testimony. And then she'd seen him putting Tyler into that suitcase. She couldn't for the life of her think of any reason why he would do something like that, unless it was just to make sure Tyler's body would fit. And that scared her. It scared her enough to make her wonder if Jim had been telling the truth about what had happened to his partner, Colby. Had the man who'd taken Colby away from there actually murdered him? On Vinnie's order? Vinnie would deny it if she asked and he would probably convince her he was telling the truth.

God, could Jim have been right about Vinnie all along?

She needed to ask Vinnie about it. But she couldn't very well bring the subject up in front of the kid. It would scare him.

She felt bad. The last thing she wanted was to cause her son more pain.

She wished she could get Vinnie alone. Maybe she was reading him all wrong. Maybe he could explain what he was doing, convince her it was all innocent. She wanted to be convinced, she really did.

Licking her lips, she watched the kid playing video games on the TV. He was pretty involved. She sighed and got up, heading into the bathroom and pulling the door shut behind her.

Then she frowned, because she glimpsed something outside.

What was that?

She crept closer to the window. Took a quick look outside but couldn't see anyone. Still, when she'd first come in she could have sworn someone was looking into the bathroom window.

Pursing her lips, she looked at the lock on the window. Maybe someone was trying to get in. To rescue Tyler.

She called to Vinnie. She had to talk to him and it had to be now.

He came in, looking at her and frowning.

“Close the door, I have to talk to you.”

He didn't. “Just keep it down. I don't want the kid running out the front door on us.”

“Hell, Vinnie, he can't even walk without those braces on his legs. Just close the door.”

Frowning, he closed the door but not tightly. She drew a breath. “I been thinking,” she said, “about what's gonna happen... after.”

“Aw, hon, I've told you over and over what's gonna happen. You're gonna be like a queen. Everything you ever wanted—”

“After you send for me. From South America.”

“And you'll have that nice apartment I got you in the meantime.”

“Yeah. Okay. But that’s not what I meant. I’m talking about Tyler. He’s seen us both. I know you’ve thought of it too. That’s why you were making sure his... body... would fit in the case. That’s what you were doing, wasn’t it?”

He lowered his head. “Just as a precaution, hon. Just in case.”

She nodded. “You can’t leave him alive, can you, Vinnie? And you’ve gotta kill Jim too, or go down for that beating you gave him. Right?”

“Angie, Angie, baby, don’t you want all the things we’ve talked about? You don’t give two shits for your ex, do you? After how mean he’s been to you?”

“No. No, I don’t.”

“And the kid, baby, that kid’s not right. His life is hell anyway. I’ll be doin’ him a favor.”

She felt angry tears spring into her eyes and lowered her head quickly. “I know. I know you’re right. I mean, I don’t think we have any choice.” She lifted her eyes again, searching his. “Do we?”

“If there’s another way, I promise—”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Vinnie.”

“You gonna be okay with this?”

She made her face hard, nodded once. “Hell, I’ll have to be.”

“That’s my good girl. Here, babe.” He handed her the case. The whole damn case. “Do a little more blow. It’ll help.” Then he left the bathroom and closed the door.

She looked at the case that held the drug she so craved. Vinnie figured she would snort a line or two and come out of the room too high to care much whether he murdered her own baby boy. Hell, why should he think any differently? She hadn’t acted like a mother since Tyler had been born.

She wanted the cocaine so bad her hands were shaking. But not yet. Soon, she promised herself. But not just yet. She

set the case down and turned to the window. Then she unlocked it and pushed it open. She still couldn't see anyone, but she whispered all the same. "I'm gonna run Tyler a bath. Then I'm gonna keep Vinnie in the other room and send him in here to take it. Get the kid out of here if you can."

She closed the window again but she didn't turn the lock. Then she brushed the tears from her eyes and returned to the case she'd left sitting on the bathroom sink. She did a line for courage. Then she took the rest with her and went back into the room.



Kara was standing to one side of the little window with her back pressed to the wall, and Selene was doing the same on the other side, when the woman's voice came softly from the bathroom.

They shot each other startled looks, not relaxing until they heard the window close again. Kara closed her eyes.

"It could be a trick," Selene whispered. "We try to get him, they end up with three hostages instead of one."

"She's his mother," Kara said. "I knew she'd try to protect him if she could. Jim didn't believe it, but... She probably finally figured out how dangerous her boyfriend is."

"Even so."

"She has a chance to do something good for her son for the first time in his life. Selene, she put him in those leg braces. She did that. No, I don't think it's a trick. I think she means it."

Kara peered into the bathroom briefly, long enough to see that water was running into the bathtub and that the latch on the window was open. Then she pressed her back to the wall again. "The window's up high. It's a long way to pull him. I don't know if I'm strong enough. I'm going to have to go in and lift him out to you."

"No, Kara, no, that's too much."

“I’m going to do it Selene, so just deal. When I push Ty out I want you to take him and run to the car. If anything goes wrong—”

“He could catch you in there! Kara, what if—”

“What if,” she repeated. “What’s the worst that can happen? He kills me instead of a little boy who hasn’t even lived five years yet? Come on, Selene, we both know it’s worth the risk. Better me than him. We get Tyler out. Period. If anything goes wrong, you take him and you go. Then call Jim and then tell him where I am.”

Tears rose in Selene’s pale blue eyes. “I’m calling him now. God, Kara, please don’t do this.”

“I’m doing it. You know damn well if it was your call, you’d do the same. I love that boy, Selene. Do this for me.”

The tears spilled over, streaming down Selene’s face, but she was tapping keys on her phone rapidly as she did. “You’d better get back out and be right behind me.”

“If I’m not, don’t come back for me. If he ends up right back in their hands, it will all have been for nothing. Promise?”

Sniffling, Selene nodded and hit Send. “I promise.” She dipped into a pocket and pulled out a little pink heart-shaped stone. “Take this. It’ll help keep you safe.”

“I’ll be okay,” Kara promised as she closed her hand around the stone. “Thank you, Selene.”

“I love you, Kara.”

“Love you, too, sis.”



Jim was sitting in the study, listening to Alex tell him all he’d been doing, which was basically the same things the police had been doing, and feeling more and more restless. Where the hell was Kara? It just wasn’t like her not to be there helping, supporting, giving everything she had to help everyone else

get through this thing. With every minute that passed he was more and more certain something was terribly wrong.

And this his cell phone chimed, startling him so much that he damn near dropped it. Jim pulled it out to look at the text message. “Kara and Selene tracked them to a motel east of here. She says Tyler’s okay, but to hurry. Let’s go.”

Then he raced to his pickup and took off, dialing his cell phone on the way.

One by one, motors roared to life, headlights flashed on, and Brands sped into action behind him.



“Look at this,” Angela said, staring at Tyler. “You’ve got pizza sauce all over you.” She wasn’t seeing the pizza sauce on his face, though. She was seeing the light in his eyes, the way they crinkled at the corners when he smiled, the deep dimples in his cheeks. He really was a beautiful little boy. She wondered why she’d never noticed before. “You should take a bath.”

Vinnie frowned at her. She met his eyes, careful to keep her own from showing even a hint of emotion. “He should be clean, Vinnie. I don’t want him going... home... with a dirty face. No one should go out like that.”

He smiled a little. “Sure. Sure, a bath is a good idea. Why not? We’ve got time yet. Go ahead, kid. Take a bath.”

Tyler pouted, but he didn’t argue. Angela picked him up and carried him into the bathroom. She set him on the toilet seat, then leaned in close to him. “I want you to sit right here. I want you to be very quiet, okay? Your friends are coming to get you, but we can’t let Vinnie know. So you have to be quiet.”

“Is it a s’prise?” he asked, whispering back at her. His eyes got big and the twinkle in them made something knot up in her chest.

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s a surprise. Now you sit here and be very quiet. Not a peep, okay?”

“Okay,” he whispered. “Does this mean I don’t really have to take a bath?”

She smiled at him. “Not till you get home anyway.” On impulse, she snatched a washcloth from the sink, dampened it and wiped the pizza sauce from his face. Then she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him awkwardly, knowing it would be the last time she would ever have the chance. “I love you, Tyler.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Really.” Releasing him, she stepped back. Then she went to the window and slid it open and didn’t look at Tyler again when she walked out of the bathroom and pulled the door closed behind her.

Vinnie looked up. “He gonna be okay all by himself?” he asked.

“Yeah. I’ll check on him in a minute or two. He’s a little shy. Hell, we’re strangers to him, right?”

He looked at the door, frowning.

“I wanted a minute alone with you, Vinnie. I wanted to ask... how you’re gonna do it.”

His brows went up. “He won’t feel a thing, I promise.”

“How?” she asked again.

He sighed, maybe sensing her hesitation. “I got some sleeping pills. We tell him it’s a vitamin or something, get it down him. Hell, we can dissolve a couple in that grape soda he keeps guzzling, for that matter. Make it even easier on the kid. Once he’s out, he isn’t gonna feel anything.”

She blinked. “And then what? Once he’s out, I mean?”

“C’mon, Angie, you don’t need to know this stuff. I’ll send you out to the car. You don’t have to see it. Okay?”

She nodded slowly. “Okay.”

He looked at the bathroom door again. “He’s bein’ awful quiet in there.”

“I’ll go back in,” she said, getting up quickly.

Vinnie put a hand on her shoulder. “No. I’ll do it.”



Kara looked through the window and saw Tyler’s eyes light up when he saw her face. She put a finger to her lips, to tell him to keep quiet, and he nodded with a broad smile. Then she put her legs through, sitting on the sill, and slid inside. It was a tight squeeze. It wouldn’t be for Tyler, though.

As soon as she was in, she scooped Tyler off the toilet seat and hugged him hard. “Are you okay?” she whispered.

“Uh-huh. I missed you.”

“Me, too. Now we have to be quiet.”

“I know,” he said. “It’s a s’prise.”

She carried him to the window. He patted her shoulder. “What about my braces?”

“We’ll get them later. Come on now, up you go.” She hefted him up, and Selene gripped him from outside and drew him easily out through the window.

Kara heard footsteps approaching the bathroom door. “Go!” she whispered urgently. “Go, Selene.”

Selene turned and started across the grass toward the waiting car. The bathroom door swung open and Kara spun around, her back to the wall.

The man who stood there had to be Vinnie. He was tall, thin and very, very angry. “What the hell is this!” Even as he said it, he reached for her with one hand while drawing a gun with the other. He shoved her, and she hit the side of the tub so hard she thought her knee cracked. Then he was at the window, pointing the gun. “Stop!” he shouted. “I’ll kill you, bitch!”

Kara launched herself at him and a shot rang out “Run, Selene! Don’t stop, run!” she shrieked.

The man hit her in the head with the gun. Her head exploded in pain, and she went down hard, her ears ringing. But she heard the sound of squealing tires and she knew Selene was away.

Tyler was safe.

The man leaned over her, swearing brutally. He gripped her by the front of her shirt and hauled her to her feet. “Some kinda hero, aren’t you? You’re gonna die for this, you realize that, right?”

“I don’t care. Tyler’s safe and you’re going to prison. That’s all that matters.”

He hit her again—with his fist or the gun, she wasn’t sure. But the lights went out, and Kara collapsed to the floor.



Jim was speeding toward the motel when he spotted Selene’s little car—the one she and Kara had been driving—racing toward him. He flashed his lights, and the car pulled over to the side.

He skidded to a stop, reversed until he was even with it, jumped out of his car and ran across the street.

Selene was already out, opening the passenger door, and then he saw Tyler as she gathered him into her arms. God, he was safe. He was safe! Jim’s knees went weak, every muscle turned to water. He managed to go to his son, took him from Selene and held him hard.

“Dad! You’re squishing me!”

He eased his grip a little, kissing his son’s face, hugging him, rocking him back and forth. “You’re okay. Thank God, thank God, you’re really okay.”

“Sure, I’m okay. Why’s everyone keep saying that?”

He pressed Tyler’s head to his shoulder and met Selene’s eyes. And the look in them made him go cold. “What happened?” he asked. “Where’s Kara?”

“I didn’t want to let her do it, Jim.”

“Do what? Where is she?” Suddenly the ice-cold fear was alive again, clutching his heart in its frigid hands.

“Kara slid in through the bathroom window to get Tyler out. She handed him out to me, but that man came in before she could get back out again. They have her, Jim. God, we have to get her back. You have to go.”

“I’ll get her,” he said and he didn’t think he’d ever uttered words and meant them more. “I’ll get her back, I swear. How far?”

“Two miles back that way, on the left. Room fifteen. It’s in the first block of rooms, ground floor. There’s a bathroom window in the back. One door and a big window in front. He has a gun. Took a shot at us as we ran for it.”

“Vinnie shot a gun at us?” Tyler asked. His smile was gone. Clearly he was picking up the adults’ fear. “Why did he do that?”

“I’ll explain later, Tyler.” Jim shifted him back into Selene’s arms. “They didn’t follow you? You’re sure?”

“No. I think Vinnie had his hands full with Kara. And, Jim, you should know Angela helped us. She saw us in the back, unlocked the window and kept Vinnie out of the bathroom so we could get Tyler out.”

He nodded, but the words didn’t matter to him. That his one-time wife had finally, for one moment out of millions, put her son’s well-being ahead of her own meant nothing to him. Real parents did it every day of their lives. If either one of them hurt Kara...

He shook off the thought. It wasn’t possible to even consider it. “Take Tyler back to your mother’s. You’ll intercept the guys on the way here. Fill everyone in.” Sirens sounded. “The police are already on their way. Go now.”

She nodded, putting Tyler back into the car. Then she came out again, a scrap of paper in her hand. “Jim, wait. Here, this is the info on the car they were driving. Just in case.”

He took the paper, barely glancing at it before cramming it into a pocket.

Selene got into the car and said, “Save my sister, Jim. Bring her back to us.”

“I will,” he said, then ran to his pickup, got in and took off.

As he pressed the accelerator to the floor, he realized that in spite of everything—his past his determination, his stubbornness—he was sick at the thought of anything hurting Kara. Devastated at the notion of facing a future without her in it, and killing mad at those who were keeping her from him.

He wanted her, he realized. Not for Tyler’s sake, not because she would be the perfect mother. But for himself. He wanted to be with her. Always.

And if that wasn’t love, he didn’t know what was.

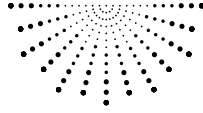
Damn, he loved Kara Brand, after all. And he probably had for a while now. He’d been so busy telling himself he didn’t—couldn’t—that he hadn’t noticed that he did. Fine time to figure it out now that he might never have the chance to tell her, he thought. He hoped he would be able to make things right with her.

All along he’d been beating himself up, feeling guilty for not being able to give the woman what she so richly deserved. A husband who loved her. Was devoted to her. Could make her happy.

And now he realized he did. And he could.

But he had to save her life first.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



There were sounds, sickening sounds. Grunts of pain accompanied each one.

Kara opened her eyes and tried to bring the room into focus. Her head was spinning, and so was the room around her. But it slowed, and she found she was lying on her back on a floor, her legs inside the bathroom, her upper body in the motel room. Blinking, she lifted her head, managed to roll onto her side, though the motion brought pain. And then she saw where the sounds were coming from. The man held a woman by the front of her blouse with one fist, and pounded her face repeatedly with the other. He was swearing at her.

Kara pushed up with her hands, managed to get up onto her knees but no further. “Stop. Stop it, you’re killing her.”

He stopped pounding and swung his gaze her way. Kara didn’t look back. She couldn’t; her eyes were glued to the woman’s battered face. She looked as if she’d lost a battle with a meat grinder. Her neck seemed like rubber. She wasn’t holding her head up, and Kara wasn’t sure if she was conscious.

The man released his grip on the woman’s blouse, and she slumped to the floor. Then he turned and strode across the room to Kara. “You keep your mouth shut, bitch.” He kicked her, his foot landing hard in her side. She collapsed flat on the floor, then curled around herself, hugging her middle. God, it hurt.

“You know what you’ve done, you and your do-gooder family? Huh, you know what you’ve done to me?”

“It wasn’t about you,” she whispered. “It was about Ty.”

“The kid was fine. You should’ve kept your nose out of it! I’d have let him go and everything would’ve been all right. You’re the one who screwed that up. I wasn’t gonna hurt anyone, but now—”

“Liar.”

The tortured whisper came from the other woman, though she didn’t move when she spoke. “You were gonna kill him.”

“What’s-a matter, Ang, you haven’t had enough yet?” He started toward her again, and again Kara pushed herself upright. She looked around, spotted a half empty soft drink bottle sitting within reach, grabbed it by the neck and smashed the bottom against the stand. She held the jagged edged remnants as he turned around, shock in his eyes. “She’s had enough,” Kara whispered. “Leave her alone.” Gripping the table with her free hand, she hauled herself to her feet.

“Guess you haven’t, though, have you?” he asked.

“You ever beat up on anyone besides women, Vinnie?” she asked. “You kidnap children and pound on women. You’re a real man, aren’t you?”

“Damn straight I am. And you know what you are? You’re a dead woman.” He came closer. She saw Angela moving, thought at first she was going to try to help her.

She had a small case, like a square compact, in her hands. Kara didn’t know where she’d gotten it. But as she flipped it open, a little white powder spilled out onto the floor, onto her blouse, sticking to the blood there.

Kara frowned. “What is that? What are you doing?”

Vinnie turned, saw the woman and rolled his eyes. “Let her alone. That’s what she does.” He smiled at the woman. “Isn’t it, Angje? Huh? That stuff might help take the edge off the pain, baby, but don’t you worry. It won’t last long, and I got a lot of anger to work off yet.”

The woman said nothing. Instead she picked up a small straw, held it to her nose and closed off the other nostril. She sucked some of the powder into her nose, despite that it was probably broken.

“Don’t,” Kara said. “Angela, stop it. Think about Tyler.”

Angela looked up, peering through eyes that barely opened at all. “I am,” she said. And she sniffed up some more. And then some more. Angela kept it up until there was nothing left in the case, while Vinnie advanced on Kara. Then she backed into a corner, dropped her little gold case and drew her knees to her chest.

Vinnie reached for Kara. “Let’s go, sweet cheeks. We need to move. Thanks to your heroics, you’re my hostage now.”

He hauled Kara to her feet tugged her toward the door, then turned toward Angela. “Angie, can you walk?”

Angela didn’t lift her head.

“Hell, you’re not going anywhere, are you, honey?” He gripped Kara’s upper arm. “Come on.”

“Where? Where are you taking me?” Kara was terrified of leaving there. There, at least Jim and the police and her family would know where to look for her. Anywhere else, and, they might never find her.

“To the car,” Vinnie said. He opened the motel room door and dragged her across the parking lot. Keeping one hand over her mouth, he yanked out a key ring and pressed a button on it. His trunk popped open.

Kara’s blood turned to ice water. She didn’t have time to be afraid long, because he looked around, then shoved her into the trunk and slammed it shut. She thought some of the people standing in the parking lot must have seen. They had to have seen. She pounded on the trunk, kicked it. But within a few seconds the car was squealing into motion, turning, and her body rolled and slammed against the sides. It reversed fast, then stopped abruptly. She banged into the front. Seconds later the trunk opened again, and Angela was dropped in beside her.

Then the trunk slammed shut, and the car jerked into motion again, slamming Angela and Kara against each other.

Once they got underway, Kara wasn't banged around so much anymore. She put her hands on Angela, curled up beside her. Finding her shoulders, she rolled Ang over onto her back."Angela?" she whispered. She shook her a little. "Ang, come on. We need each other right now. Tyler needs us. We have to help each other get through this."

There was no response.

Kara didn't know a lot about cocaine. But she was pretty sure that what she'd seen Angela ingest was way too much. She smacked Angela's cheek. "Angela?" And when there was still no response, she pressed her fingers to the woman's throat and then her wrist and then she put her ear to her chest to listen.

But there was nothing to hear.

Angela was dead.



Jim was speeding toward the motel when another car came careening from that direction, way past the speed limit. The same car Vinnie had been driving when he'd come to the house with his tire iron.

He pulled a u-turn in and pressed the pedal to the floor in pursuit, and it was only when he passed the swarm of screaming black-and-whites that he thought to reach for his cell phone and call in the information.

Chief Wheatly picked up.

"Chief, it's Corona. The suspect vehicle is currently heading south on Cold Springs Road. I'm in pursuit."

"Does he have the boy with him?"

"No. No, Tyler is safe. But he has Kara Brand."

"How the hell... Is she in the car?"

“I didn’t see her.” His heart turned cold at the implication of that. Vinnie might very well have left her behind, and if he had... he wouldn’t have left her alive.

An emptiness yawned in his chest like none he’d ever felt before. Wrong, he thought He *had* felt it once. Four years ago, while he’d paced outside a Chicago emergency room waiting to learn whether his son would live or die.

God, he couldn’t believe how much Kara meant to him. How could he not have known? “Denial,” he muttered. “Pure self-delusion.”

“What’s that, Corona?” Wheatly asked.

“Nothing. Just redirect the troops and I’ll keep you posted as to where he’s heading.”

“Already done. I’m sending a separate team to the motel. We’ll let you know what we find.”

God, he thought desperately, please don’t let it be what he most feared. Don’t let it be Kara’s lifeless body.

The Ford turned off the well-traveled route and onto a side road. “Damn,” Jim said into the telephone. “He’s onto me. He’s turning left onto—” he scanned the roadside for a sign, spotted one half concealed by a tree limb “—Hawthorn Road. Sign’s barely visible.”

“Got it. I’ll advise dispatch. Better stay on the line.”

“Will do.”

He kept the line open but set the phone down, better to maneuver the car. Vinnie was driving wildly, fishtailing around corners and throwing up dust. The road wound and twisted. A tinny voice came from his phone and he picked it up again. “Sorry, I missed that. Say again.”

“Be advised, Corona, that road heads into rough country.”

“I can see that. Wait, he’s turning again. Hell, this time it’s a right onto a dirt road. No street sign.” He scanned the horizon for a landmark. “There’s a broken-down old barn a quarter mile from the turn.”

“Got it.”

Jim stayed on the car and when it turned again, he thought Vinnie might flip it right over, but he managed to hold it. Jim took the turn nearly as fast, the pickup rocking onto two wheels.

When he got it under control, he grabbed the phone again. “He turned again. Chief. This time it’s barely a dirt track.”

He listened for the chief’s reply, but there was nothing.

“Chief?” Jim pulled the phone away from his ear and examined its face. The words *No Signal* glowed in green from the panel. Hell. He’d lost the signal. He had no way to direct the cavalry in. Looked as if he was going to have to do this himself.

He opened his glove compartment, took out his sidearm and knew without checking that it was loaded and ready.



Kara felt around inside the trunk, whenever her body stopped bouncing off the sides long enough, searching for a latch. Didn’t some cars have trunk-release buttons inside the trunks to prevent someone getting trapped?

Hell, if a guy like this had one on his car, he’d probably have had it removed.

The roads were getting bumpier, the turns sharper, and her body was being pummeled as if she was riding inside a paint shaker. The beating she took was nearly as bad as the one Vinnie had delivered. And she hurt so much she began to wonder if she was going to survive this.

She closed her eyes. “Tyler survived it. That’s what counts.” She consoled herself with the image of Tyler safe in his father’s arms. Tyler having a long and happy life.

They hit another bump and Angela’s body was jostled even closer against her. Kara pushed it away, wincing at how cool it

felt now. It was unnatural. A reminder that she lay there beside death and might soon join Angela in its cold embrace.

The car skidded to a stop. The trunk popped open, clouds of dust rising around it.

Kara didn't wait to see what would happen next. She sprang out of the trunk and hit the ground running despite that every part of her hurt with every footfall. Vinnie must have hit the trunk release from inside the car, she thought, her mind racing. She'd glimpsed him hurrying around the car when she'd landed, but she hadn't looked back. She'd just run.

He was chasing her. She heard his pursuit without looking, felt him close to her and veered off the road into the woods. She couldn't hope to outrun the man, as battered as she was. Her only chance was to lose him in the forest.



Jim's truck skidded to a halt behind Vinnie's car, which stood cockeyed on the dirt road, the driver's door and the trunk standing open. He dived from his truck, gun in his hand, every instinct alert as he went to the car, circling it, peering inside. No one. Then he moved around behind it, wary that the open trunk could be hiding Vinnie. The bastard could be aiming a weapon at him even now. He took a quick peek around the open trunk, ducking back instantly.

But what he'd glimpsed in that darting glance made his blood run cold. There was a woman in the trunk lying very still.

No sign of Vinnie.

He moved around again, fully this time, praying he wasn't about to find Kara's broken body.

Angela lay there, still and pale. White powder clung to her nostrils and caked in the blood beneath her nose. Her face was swollen from what had to have been a terrible beating.

He didn't need to check her vitals to know she was dead. But he went through the motions anyway.

She was gone. The mother of his child. And though she'd never been a mother to Tyler, he thought maybe she'd tried to be one at the end. She must have tried, just as Selene said she had. And Vinnie had beaten the hell out of her for it

He closed his eyes and shook off the sadness and regret of a life so thoroughly wasted—except it hadn't been a total waste, had it? She'd given him a beautiful son.

“Thank you for that, Ang. Thank you for giving me Tyler. And for giving him back to me today.” It surprised him that his throat went tight on those words. He hoped she was at peace somewhere, somehow.

Jim drew himself up, told himself to focus. Then he looked at the dirt around the car and spotted footprints. Two sets led off into the woods. Two sets.

That had to mean Kara was still alive. “Thank God,” he whispered. “Thank God almighty.” He checked the cell. There was still no signal, but he took it with him all the same as he hiked into the woods in search of the woman he loved.



Kara ran deeper into the woods, zigging and zagging, doubling back and looping around until she didn't even know where she was. Vinnie was still chasing her, but she thought she'd managed to get far enough ahead so he couldn't see her. So she slowed her pace, walking carefully, hoping to make it more difficult for him to hear her, as well.

God, if only it would get dark. The sun was still in the sky, lower than before but not close to setting. Not just yet. She had to keep moving, get away from him, make sure he couldn't hear or see her, and then find a place to hide. It was her only chance.

Every part of her hurt. Her ribs most of all. She was certain now that Vinnie had broken them when he'd kicked her.

She thought about her family, about how losing her would devastate them. About how much she would regret not being

able to see the twins grow up, or her mother find love again, or Selene figure out where her life was leading her. She had to stay alive. She had to.

Those thoughts kept her going despite the pain and the way her body cried out for rest, for a break. She crept as quietly as she could through the undergrowth, the thickening woods. She smelled pine and decaying leaves and rich soil. Birds chirped, took flight now and then when she made an inadvertent sound.

A squirrel chattered. She wasn't sure, but she thought the sounds of Vinnie's pursuit were growing fainter.

She thought about Jim. About Tyler. Jimmy didn't love her. But he did like her. And he was attracted to her. She didn't think he'd been faking his desire. And she thought he had fully intended to marry her. Maybe it was only because he knew how badly his son needed a mother. But that was a compliment to her, wasn't it? That Jimmy had chosen her, out of all the women a man like him could have for the asking, to be the one in his son's life. It was an honor. And while Jimmy may not love her, she knew Tyler did. He adored her as much as she adored him. It could be a good life, being Jimmy Corona's wife. Being Tyler's mother. It would be a good life.

If Jimmy still wanted it. And if she could survive long enough to claim it.

She kept going, picking her way, trying not to make a sound as she moved ever deeper into the woods. It was working, she knew it was. She hadn't heard a sound from her pursuer in a long while. Maybe she'd lost him. Maybe he'd given up and gone back to his car. Maybe she could begin to relax now.

She needed to get her bearings, figure out where she was and then find a safe place to stay until after dark. Once the sun went down—and it would only be a couple of hours now—she would make her way out back to civilization. But she'd have to get a solid idea which way to move now, while it was still light enough to see.

She chose a small tree-lined rise and climbed it pulling herself along, still trying to be as quiet as possible. When she got to the top, she found a spot where she could see between the trees and skimmed the horizon in search of rooftops or chimneys or the snakelike cut of a road through the forest.

She was still searching when the distinct sound of a gun being cocked near her ear, made her go ice-cold and still as stone.

“You’ve really pissed me off, you know that Kara Brand?”



It was getting dark, and Jim was running out of signs to follow and had no idea which way to go, when he got lucky.

A branch snapped off to his left, so Jim ducked behind a tree and watched, squinting his eyes, until he made out the shapes moving through the haze of foliage. A woman stumbled slowly through the woods. Kara! And Vinnie moved along behind her, his steps stronger and more certain.

Jim swallowed his relief that Kara was still alive and realized from the direction in which they were moving that they must be heading back to the car. He couldn't let them get there. If Vinnie got her to the car, he might take her out of his sight again, and that was not something Jim could allow to happen.

He chose a path that led him at an angle toward the car, and moved as quickly and quietly as he could. He would cut them off before they got there, get Kara out of the line of fire and take Vinnie down, one way or another.

Jim's entire focus remained on Kara. He didn't lose sight of her again and he didn't allow any other thoughts to enter his mind. He pushed aside his worry for Tyler. Tyler was safe now, with the Brands, a family who would do anything for him. He buried his concern for Kara's family, who must be going nuts with worry by now, not knowing where Vinnie had taken her. Their concern would be alleviated when he returned their Kara to them safe and sound. He silenced the small voice

of mourning he felt over the death of his one-time wife. Angela was in a better place now.

Kara was his focus. Nothing but Kara.

He drew closer to her, close enough now to see that her face looked odd, and then he realized that was because it was bruised. Vinnie had hit her. The thought made his stomach heave. But he had to stay in cop mode now or he'd blow any chance of getting Kara away from Vinnie alive.

He managed to get nearer, and still nearer as they hiked toward the road and the waiting car. He lifted his gun and said a brief silent prayer.



Kara limped through the woods seeking a way out of this mess, but she saw no means of escape. The maniac walked two steps behind her, his gun in his hand, pointing right at her. She kept feeling the phantom sensation of a bullet blazing into her back, burning through her flesh, shattering her bones, piercing her vital organs. She knew he wouldn't hesitate to pull that trigger if she tried to escape. And she kept jerking and wincing as she thought of him tripping over a root or stepping in a hole and shooting her accidentally.

She searched the forest, hoping for some kind of help to arrive, for some kind of sign to show her what she was supposed to do. She kept one hand in her pocket, where she clutched the pink stone Selene had given her, and prayed for a miracle.

Closing her eyes, she thought of Jimmy. She wondered briefly if she would ever see him again. Swallowing hard, she stopped walking.

“What are you doing?” Vinnie demanded. “Get moving, woman.”

She straightened to her full height and turned to face him. “You’re going to kill me, aren’t you?”

He looked her squarely in the eyes. “Not just yet. Unless you push it”

“Then what are you going to do?”

He pursed his lips. “Use you. You’re my passport out of here.” Then he lowered his head, though he kept his eyes on hers. “I’m going to have to leave the country. That kid was my ticket. Now you’re taking his place.”

“So you knew you never had any chance of staying here, a free man. You assaulted a cop. Kidnapped his son, and now his fiancée.” She swallowed hard. “Angela’s dead.”

“I didn’t know that when I tossed her into the trunk with you. Sorry about that.”

She narrowed her eyes on him. “Don’t you even care that she’s dead?”

“Why should I care? She was worthless. Loved cocaine more than she loved her own kid. Helped me kidnap him for God’s sake. All I had to do to coax her along was keep feeding her that damn powder. Freaking junkies. They’re all the same.”

Kara closed her eyes.

“I don’t have to kill you, you know. Doesn’t matter much that you know who I am. Like I said, I gotta skip the States anyway. And I don’t plan to come back. You cooperate with me, be a good hostage, get me out of here, and I might just let you live.”

She opened her eyes again and searched his. “Do you mean that?”

“I do. I get clear of this place and I’ll let you go. You can run right back to that hole-in-the-wall town of yours. Put on your white dress. Have the wedding you were planning to have, the life you were planning to have. You can be Tyler’s mommy. Hell, you’d be a million times the mom Angie ever could have been. It’ll be great. You’ll have a husband who loves you. A great kid to raise. A happy little family, just like you’ve probably been dreaming about your whole life.”

Kara frowned. “You’re doing to me just what you did to Angela, aren’t you?”

“What are you talking about? I’m offering you a deal. Cooperate, don’t give me any trouble and—”

“And you’ll give me the drug I crave, right?” She shook her head slowly. “You’re good at reading people, I’ll give you that much. You know how bad I want that pretty picture you’ve painted for me. That happy dream. And you’re using it to make me do what you want me—what you *need* me to do.”

He shrugged. “I get what I want, you get what you want, right? What’s so bad about that?”

“It’s not going to work, Vinnie. Not with me. Jimmy doesn’t love me. All he wants is a mother for his son.”

He lifted his brows. “You sure about that?”

She nodded.

“You were going to marry him anyway, though.”

“Yeah, I was. For Ty’s sake. But it’s far from my dream come true. If I die out here, Jim will just find some other woman to help him raise Tyler. And he’ll pick a good one, too.”

“So you’re saying no deal?”

She lifted her chin. “I’m not going to help a man like you get away with murder, “Vinnie.”

“Murder. What murder? Angie killed herself.”

“You fed her the drugs. You ordered the murder of Jim’s partner, Colby. You deal in child porn and you kidnapped a little boy—would have killed him, too, if I hadn’t got him away from you.” She shook her head. “Sorry, Vinnie. No deal. If you’re going to kill me, do it and get it over with. I’m not walking another step to help you.”

“Hell.” He lowered his head, shaking it slowly. Then he raised it again and lifted the gun.

Something flew out of the trees and hit him hard, knocking him to the ground. The gun went off, but the bullet flew wild,

hitting a tree near Kara's head. She ducked instinctively, then realized the missile had been Jimmy Corona. He was rolling on the ground and wrestling with Vinnie, who was still clutching his gun.

When they stopped twisting, Vinnie was on the ground on his back and Jimmy straddled him, pinning his hands to the ground above his head. Vinnie still held the gun in his right hand, and that was the one he was struggling to raise.

"Drop it. Just let it go," Jim told him. His lip was bleeding.

"Thought you didn't love her," Vinnie said, grinding out the words.

"You thought wrong. Drop the gun, Vinnie."

Kara looked around for a weapon—a stick or a club she could use to help—but saw nothing... and then she saw a gun lying on the ground a few feet away. It had to be Jimmy's. She went to it, picked it up, but then the men were in motion again. Vinnie got a leg up between them and kicked Jim off him. Jimmy landed on his back, and Vinnie sprang to his feet and pointed the gun at him.

Kara aimed and fired.

The shot rang and echoed amid the trees, and for a moment everything seemed to freeze in place. And then slowly Vinnie dropped to his knees. She saw the dark spot on his shirt. It was spreading. His hands went limp and his gun fell from his grip, and then he toppled forward and lay still.

Jim got to his feet, picked up the fallen weapon, tucked it into his jeans and then he came to her. She stood there shaking, holding the gun on Vinnie still, even though he was no longer moving. Jim put his hands over hers, gently took the gun away. "It's okay. It's all right, Kara." He started to pull her into his arms, but she tugged herself away from him.

"Is he...? Did I...?"

Jimmy nodded, understanding her question, and he went to lean over the fallen man, touched his neck. After a moment he gripped Vinnie by one shoulder, lifting him off the ground enough to get a look at the front of him, though she couldn't

see past him. His body blocked her line of sight. A second later he let the man drop back onto the ground facedown and he rose and returned to Kara. His hands closed around her shoulders. "He's dead, Kara."

"Oh, my God."

"You didn't have a choice. He would have killed me. Both of us."

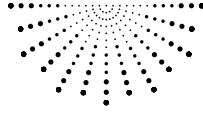
"I know that." She met his eyes, staring into them for a long moment. And then she just gave in to the shock that was fighting to take over and hurled herself into his arms. The tears came, the sobs with them.

Jimmy wrapped his arms around her and he held her so hard she didn't think he would ever let go. His hands stroked her hair, his lips touched her cheek, her jaw. He kept telling her it was going to be okay, and before long she realized they were moving. He'd picked her up in his arms and was carrying her through the woods.

They emerged onto the dirt road just as police vehicles came screaming onto the scene. Tires skidded, dust clouds rose, men emerged from cars and fired questions.

He told them where to find Vinnie, but he never let go of Kara, not once. And then he was putting her into his pickup and driving her away from there, from the horror, from the death.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



The hospital's waiting room was decked with red and green paper chains and popcorn garland, courtesy of the kids in the pediatric unit. It was also full of Brands. Vidalia hadn't stopped pacing since they'd arrived, even though Kara's injuries were minor. Kara hadn't wanted to come to the hospital at all, but Jim had insisted. She needed checking out. And he needed some kind of validation that she really was okay.

So Vidalia paced. Selene sat on the floor outside the treatment room, legs crossed, eyes closed. He didn't know what she was doing, but he knew she was definitely doing something. Maya and Caleb had a row of chairs to themselves. They had their hands full trying to manage the twins, but nothing had wiped the worry from their eyes. The kids were on the floor—Dahlia, Cal and Tyler—up to their elbows in the toy chest some helpful nurse had brought out for them. Mel and Alex sat quietly waiting, holding hands. Mel looked mad enough to do someone serious damage. The fact that Vinnie Stefano was already dead didn't dampen her anger a bit. Edie and Wade were coming down the hall now, each carrying a cardboard tray full of foam cups. Six each. Nine cups held coffee and three, hot cocoa for the kids. Jim took his from Wade's hand, then returned to his post near the treatment-room door, trying to get a glimpse inside.

He'd taken no more than three sips from his cup when the door nearly hit him in the nose as it opened. He stepped back, startled.

The doctor looked at him and smiled, then looked past him at the others, all of whom were jumping to their feet and rushing forward.

The doctor held up two hands. “Kara is fine. The most serious injuries are two cracked ribs. She’s going to be sore for several weeks, but there’s no other damage, aside from various bruises.”

“Can we see her?” Jim asked. He had unfinished business with Kara Brand and he’d waited about as long as he could stand to get on with it.

“She’s getting dressed. Says she wants to go home.”

Jim nodded. “All right. Okay.”

Kara came out of the room then and he was pushed aside by the oncoming tide of bodies, each rushing to get to her, to hug her gently, to touch her.

Hell, he couldn’t blame them. He’d been burning to do the same things, so he understood. They had the right. He didn’t. He’d managed to convince Kara that he didn’t even love her just before realizing that he did. So he stood out of the way and let them all hold her, assuring themselves that she would be okay.

But eventually, after she’d spoken to each of them and the sea of bodies parted, she looked up and met his eyes. “Take me home.”

He was so surprised he stammered at first. “I... I thought you’d be going to your mom’s tonight.”

“If you want me to... I mean—”

“I don’t,” he said quickly. He couldn’t take his eyes off her. There was a bruise on her jaw and she still had twigs in her hair, but aside from those and a few scratches, there was little sign of the horror she’d been through. Much less the heroics she had displayed tonight. “The chief’s going to need you to give a statement but I convinced him to hold off until tomorrow.”

“I appreciate that.”

“You call us if you need anything,” Vidalia said.

“I could take Tyler for the night if you want,” Maya offered.

Jimmy glanced at Kara, but before he could say a word, she shook her head. “We want to keep him close to us tonight. After what happened—you understand.”

“Sure I do.” Maya gently hugged Kara again. “Have a good night honey. Feel better.”

“I will.”

Kara started for the door, and then Tyler stepped into her path, handed his crutches to his father and wrapped his arms around her legs. She held him to her, and her eyes welled up with tears. “I didn’t know he was a bad man, Kara. I’m sorry I went with him.”

She shot Jim a look, clearly unsure how much he’d told the boy. “It’s all right Ty. Everything’s all right now.”

“I know.”

“Come on, son. Let’s get home, huh?”

Tyler nodded, and Jim scooped him up and carried him to the door, across the parking lot to where he’d left the pickup. The whole clan walked them out and then waved as they drove away.



Two hours later Tyler was finally asleep. Kara has taken a soothing hot shower and sat wrapped up in her most comfy robe. She sat in the living room nursing a glass of wine and staring at the twinkling lights of their Christmas tree.

Jimmy came from Tyler’s bedroom, filled his own wineglass and sat on the sofa beside her. The Christmas tree’s lights were the only lights still on and the whole room smelled like pine.

Time to get things said, Kara thought. She sat up a little straighter, set her glass aside. “We need to talk.”

“I know we do.” Jim licked his lips. He seemed nervous for some reason. Then he said, “I heard what you said to Vinnie out there in the woods.”

She lifted her brows, not meeting his eyes. “I said a lot of things out there. You’re gonna have to be more specific.”

“Okay, I will.” He set his glass down. “You told him you knew I didn’t love you. That I only wanted a mother for Tyler.”

“Oh.” She said it softly. Then she took a deep breath. “Well, I told you pretty much the same thing in the hospital. And... it’s okay, Jimmy.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“It really is. I... I can live with that. I can be his mother. I can give you both everything you need. If... if you still want me to,” she said, warily meeting his gaze.

He searched her eyes, his own intense and probing. “I still want you to, Kara. But not because Tyler needs a mother.”

“I don’t under—”

“Shh.” He pressed a gentle finger to her lips. “Let me talk, okay? You’ve been through enough today. I don’t want you to worry or think or try to be selfless. You do far too much of those things anyway. Just relax and listen, okay?”

Kara blinked and nodded. “Okay.”

He took a deep breath. “Angela burned me. I stayed with her way longer than I should have because I loved her. It nearly cost me Tyler. And it cost Tyler more than any kid should have to pay for his father’s mistakes.”

“You couldn’t have known—”

“Uh-uh. You’re listening, remember?” He said it with a gentle smile.

Kara nodded and let him continue.

“I made up my mind that I would never love another woman. Not when it messed up my judgment to the point where I put my own child at risk. When I came here, when I started... pursuing you, that was the attitude I was clinging to. That I wouldn’t love you. That I was incapable of loving you. But you were... you were just too good to pass up. If I could have started from scratch and created the perfect mother for my son, she would have been you, Kara.”

She nodded. “I understand.”

“No, you don’t. I thought I’d stick around here maybe for a year or so and then talk you into coming back to Chicago with me. That I’d pick up my life right where I left off. But something happened while I was wooing and winning you, Kara Brand. Something happened to me. *You* happened to me. You made me fall in love with you.”

She drew in a soft breath, because those were the last words she had been expecting him to say to her tonight.

“I love you. It took me way too long to realize it. But I did, and when it hit me, it hit me hard, Kara. I love you. I want you to marry me because I love you. And the fact that you’re the best woman in the whole world and the perfect woman to help me raise my son—those are just bonuses.”

Tears welled in her eyes. She tried to blink them back, but they spilled over all the same. “I can’t believe—”

“Well, you will, because I intend to spend the rest of my life proving it to you. If... if you’re willing to let me after I botched this so badly the first time. So let me ask you again, Kara, for the right reasons this time. Will you marry me?”

She smiled through her tears and met his eyes, stunned to see they were damp as well. “Yes. I will. And if you really want to go back to Chicago, then I’ll go with you. I’ll go anywhere you want me to, Jimmy.”

“Stop sacrificing yourself, will you? You don’t want to go to Chicago. Kara, you deserve to ask for what you want. So tell me the truth. Where do you want to live?”

She blinked and searched his face. “I... I want to live here. Right here in Big Falls.”

He smiled and seemed to drink in her face with his eyes. “I don’t want to go back to Chicago either. My life is here now. With you and this town and your family.” He looked around the house. “This is the first place I’ve lived that... that feels like home.”

“That’s because it *is* home,” she whispered. “For you and Tyler and for me.”

“And it always will be,” he promised. And then he pulled her close and kissed her gently. “Always.”

“Dad? Kara?”

They pulled apart almost guiltily. Through the slightly open bedroom door, they could see Tyler awake and sitting up in his bed, watching them. They got up quickly, and went to him.

“What is it, Ty?”

He looked from one of their faces to the other, and smiling, said, “This is best Christmas ever.”

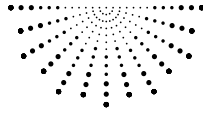
“It’s not even Christmas yet,” Kara said. “It’s still a week away.”

“But I already got just what I asked for. Santa did it. He did it. He got me a mommy for Christmas.”

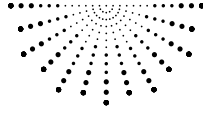
He opened his little arms, and Kara hugged him to her, with tears streaming like rivers. When he let her go, he looked at his dad seriously. “Since I already got the mommy I asked for, and it’s not Christmas yet, do you think I could ask Santa for a puppy?”

Laughing, Kara looked at Jimmy, her husband and her son, laughing with her, and through tears, she said, “You’re right Ty. This *is* the best Christmas ever!”

SWEET VIDALIA BRAND



CHAPTER ONE



Vidalia Brand's guilty secret walked in through the batwing doors of the OK Corral and just stood there—tall and lean and more dangerously handsome than he'd been before.

Vidalia was behind the long, gleaming bar, leaning over it to re-tape the draping pine garland that had come loose from the corner, when his dark silhouette appeared. It was almost like she knew it was him just from the way his shadow fell ahead of the street lights behind him. Even before she looked up, a chill ran the length of her spine. Or maybe that was a tingle. And then she straightened up and looked at him. The twinkling holiday lights that decked the saloon fell on his whiskered face, and the end of the pine garland she'd been holding dropped from her hand to hang limply again.

The familiar noise of her beloved saloon—clinking glasses, chinking ice, murmuring conversation—seemed to fall silent as he met her eyes and just stared at her. Vidalia blushed as if she was that young twenty something he'd known a thousand years ago. And she couldn't take her eyes from his, even if she tried. They were still just as blue—that deep, dark midnight blue that could turn electric with emotion.

If not for Randy Travis's version of *Rockin' Around The Christmas Tree* still coming from the jukebox, you could've heard a pin drop. And she realized every patron she had was looking from her to the stranger and back again. Only he was no stranger. Not to her, he wasn't.

“Miz Brand? You all right?”

She couldn't quite convince her eyes to look at Henry, her come-lately short-order cook, but she did manage to answer him. "Would you stick that garland back up for me, Henry? I can't get it to stay." As she said it, she pulled her apron off, balled it up and shoved it under the bar. Then she walked out from behind it, wondering how she looked, if her hair was wild or her makeup smeared. It didn't matter. She was a working woman, after all. And he was nothing but a brush with disaster from the distant past. He was the man who'd almost ensured her an eternity in Hell. Maybe had.

Before she knew it, she was standing in front of him, having crossed the barroom beneath green and silver garland and strategically placed mistletoe, past dozens of customers who were also friends and neighbors—and busybodies to boot. Maybe some of them spoke to her as she walked by. Maybe she even muttered a response. Damned if she knew.

He was still the same. So tall that she felt diminutive when she stood close to him. He still wore that deliberately rugged, three days growth of whiskers on his face. There was a little gray in it now. Hadn't been before. If anything, it made him seem even sexier.

How could she still feel the same irresistible attraction to him after all these years? Was that even possible? She thought she was long since over this sinfully sexy drifter.

"Hello, Vidalia. It's been a long time." He took off his Stetson, held it by its brim, faked a smile that didn't reach his eyes. His voice was so deep and rich that it felt like he was whispering the words against the skin of her spine, for the shivers that wriggled up and down it.

She decided to test her voice, and tried to make it come out firm and casual, not whispery soft with longing and remembered bliss. "Hello Bobby. What the hell are you doing here?"

His eyes widened a little, then he smiled and this time it seemed a little more genuine. "You still cut straight through the bull, don't you Vidalia? You haven't changed a bit, except to get prettier."

“And you still cut straight *to* the bull. You haven’t changed either.”

He held up both hands as if in surrender. “I’m in Big Falls on business. I had to stop by and say hello.”

“Well, now you have.” A thousand questions sprang to mind, questions she fought hard not to ask. Like, what sort of business could he possibly have here in the small town of Big Falls, Oklahoma? He’d gone from being a handy man back when she’d known him to a billionaire businessman. He’d made a fortune buying up failing saloons, turning them into successful tourist traps and then selling them at a profit. But there were no failing saloons in Big Falls. There were a couple of dive bars, and there was the OK Corral. “So hello, Bobby Joe. And Goodbye.”

His face fell, those heavy dark brows bending a little in the center. God, he was even handsome when he frowned. “Why so hostile, Vidalia? It’s been—”

“I know *exactly* how long it’s been.” She bit her lip and sent a quick glance around her to see a lot of interested eyes still turned in their direction. Lowering her voice, she brushed past him, through the batwing doors and outside. He came too, and she saw him push the outer door closed behind him. Good. They should be closed.

It was a cool night in Big Falls. Late December. Almost Christmas. They might even get a snowflake or two this year. Nothing like the year of the blizzard, but maybe.... Snow at Christmas was something she prayed for every year, but those prayers were rarely answered. Well, they were, but the answer was usually no.

She hugged her arms and watched her breath emerge in puffs of steam as she walked along the front of the building, away from the welcoming holiday lights, past the wreath-decked windows to a shadowy corner. The stars were twinkling from a wide, clear sky. He came up behind her, and she made herself face him. “I don’t mean to be hostile. You were...you and me, we were a mistake Bobby. A mistake that could’ve cost me dearly.”

“I think the only mistake we made back then was denying what we both wanted.”

She shot him her patented glare. “I was a married woman.”

“You only thought you were married. You didn’t know he was a bigamist who’d married another woman before you. You were all alone, trying to start up a business and raise four girls by yourself. Working yourself into the ground while he was out spending time with his other family. If I’d known that then, I’d have never left.”

She let him rant. John deserved it, and worse. But when Bobby finished cursing her late husband, she looked at him very calmly and said, “It wouldn’t have made a difference if you’d known. Or even if I’d known. I said vows in front of God in a church full of witnesses. Just because he didn’t keep his, that didn’t free me from mine. When I make a promise, I keep it.”

He lowered his head. “I know. I know that about you.”

She sighed, unsure what the point was of dragging all this up now. “What are you doing back here, Bobby?”

He heaved a heavy sigh. “Like I said, business. I couldn’t be here and not come by. Just to see you. Just to say...I never forgot.”

He was looking into her eyes. His were just as deep and expressive as she remembered. They’d stared into hers on the dance floor of this very saloon. Only it had been empty, the chairs all tipped up on top of the tables, the lights down low. They’d kept on dancing long after the last song on the jukebox had stopped playing. And then he’d kissed her, and then....

She looked at his lips, just as thick and soft as before, and had to close her eyes to block the memory out.

His voice was hoarse when he spoke again. Almost as if he, too, had been remembering that night so long ago. “Have dinner with me, Vidalia? Just to catch up. I promise I won’t bring up the past if you don’t want me to.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Bobby.”

His disappointment showed in his eyes, just like every emotion always did, and it made her feel mean. “Why not? You’re not a married woman anymore. You’ve got no vows to keep.”

She lowered her head so he wouldn’t see how tempted she was to say yes. Tempted. That was the word, wasn’t it? He had been her biggest temptation. Her test, maybe. A test she’d failed miserably. She wasn’t so sure she’d be any more successful this time, no matter how much older and wiser and stronger she was.

“I really can’t, Bobby,” she said. “But it was nice to see you. Good luck with your business, whatever it is.”

She walked past him, back to the saloon’s big door, hoping he wouldn’t follow and make a scene. Or more of a scene than he’d already caused, because she had no doubt the tongues were wagging. By tomorrow morning, the Big Falls grapevine would resemble a burning bush. And there wasn’t a thing she could do about it.

She went through the door, and for some perverse reason, left it open behind her as she pushed on through the batwings. Then she paused just inside the saloon. The Christmas music was still going, glasses were still clinking, and people had resumed their conversations. She wanted to turn around, to see if he’d followed, or if he was leaving, but she stiffened her spine and walked right back to the bar, smiling and chatting with customers on the way. She felt his eyes on her from behind, but only briefly. And then she heard the sound of a large motor, probably a pickup truck. Probably his.

Closing her eyes, stiffening her spine, she told herself she’d done the right thing. The hard thing, yes, but the right thing.

This time.



Bobby Joe McIntyre drove his pickup truck as far as the giant Christmas tree in the center of town. The forty-foot blue

spruce was all decked out in twinkling lights against one of the darkest nights he could recall. There had been stars before, when he'd been standing outside the OK Corral with Vidalia, but clouds had blown in and not a single star looked down at him now. It was like they'd all gone out three months ago when his charmed life had come crashing down around him. He'd thought maybe seeing Vidalia again might reignite at least a couple of the luminaries that used to favor him. And it had, for a few precious seconds. But she'd shot him down, added a bucket of ice water to the star-dousing party.

It had been years ago, but he remembered it like it was yesterday.

He'd been a single, hardworking handyman. She'd been a married mother of four girls with a husband who was perpetually absent. She'd bought an abandoned motel for back taxes and hired him to help her turn it into a saloon. The OK corral.

She'd been something else back then. Hell, she still was. All of five foot two, with curves that probably still drew appreciative looks from every red-blooded male in town. He was no exception. Rich, lustrous curls as black as ebony wood, and the most fiery brown eyes ever to flash his way. Lashes like velvet fringe. Skin like caramel satin.

He'd admired her. Her work ethic. Her no-nonsense attitude. Her temper. Her steadfast morality. And the passion he sensed bubbling like a cauldron over a low flame—passion neglected by the man whose job it was to tend it. She kept that cauldron covered up tight.

They'd worked late the night before the OK Corral's grand opening, unpacking glasses and bottles of liquor, stocking the kitchen and the shelves. By then he knew two things for sure: She had no intention of breaking her marriage vows, and she wanted him just as bad as he wanted her.

“How about a toast?” he'd asked. “To celebrate your dream coming true?”

She'd smiled—that killer smile he had never managed to get out of his head in all these years. Then she went behind the

bar to pour them each a shot of top-shelf whiskey.

He'd walked over to the brand new jukebox—the same one that had been playing country Christmas songs tonight—dropped a nickel into the slot, and chose *Lead Me On*, by Conway and Loretta. He'd never forgotten the way she'd looked as she'd come around the bar with a drink in each hand, pretending not to notice the lyrics. Beautiful. Tempted. And scared.

She handed him a glass. “To the best little saloon in Oklahoma,” she said, lifting her own.

He lifted his too. “And to the prettiest saloon owner in the entire U S of A.” He tapped the rim of his glass to the rim of hers and downed the whiskey in a single gulp. She only sipped from hers. And then he said, “Break in the dance floor with me, Vidalia?”

She lowered her eyes a little. “I should get on home. The girls—”

“Are sound asleep by now. So's the sitter, I'll bet. They won't notice if you're five minutes later.” He took her glass from her, set it on the bar beside his. “C'mon, Vi. You've worked hard. *We've* worked hard. We deserve to celebrate, even if it's just with one dance.” He held out his arms.

Sighing, she went into them. “Just one dance,” she said. “And that's all.”

“That's all.”

But when she moved up close to him, and he lowered his arms around her waist, he couldn't help the sheer male pleasure that filled him. The scent of her perfume reached him. Vanilla and something else. Something just slightly spicy and exotic. Her body was just barely touching his, and he wanted to press her closer, but knew she'd probably slap the lust right off his face if he did. So he settled for the soft, accidental brushing of breasts to chest, and thigh to thigh every now and then.

She rested her hands on his shoulders, didn't close them around his neck the way he wanted her to. But he didn't push.

He settled for that. They'd spent hours together, for months on end while she'd worked her perfect backside off and put every spare penny into the saloon. She'd insisted on paying him for the work he did, even though he'd offered more than once to do it for nothing. Just being around her was payment enough.

And finally the work was done, and he would have no more excuses to be with her all the time, alone, late at night. No more reason. And he knew her too well to think she might give him one.

This was a goodbye dance. And he was pretty sure she knew that as well as he did.

And then the song ended, and a miracle happened. She tipped her head up, looked right into his eyes and let him see, just for a second, the feelings she kept so closely guarded.

He couldn't help himself. He lowered his head, and he caught her mouth with his, and she didn't pull away. No, she kissed him back, her arms twisting tight around his neck to pull herself up higher. His heart took off like a racehorse at the sound of the starter's pistol, and he bent over her, holding her body tight to his just like he'd been wanting to. He kissed her deeply, leaving no doubt in her mind that he'd like to do a lot more.

She kissed him right back, just as full of enthusiasm as he was. And when he finally lifted his head, wondering where they would go to do what seemed inevitable, she looked deeply into his eyes, and hers were wet.

"Are you...crying?"

"Not yet." She put her hands on his shoulders, and firmly held them there while she took a step back. "I'm a married woman, Bobby."

"Don't I know it."

She nodded. "Then you know this has to stop right here. I shouldn't have even...." Closing her eyes, lowering her head, she said no more. Just walked over to the juke box and pulled the plug. Then she picked up her shot glass, downed its

contents in a gulp. “I’m not the cheatin’ kind, Bobby. I’d hate myself if I did something like that.”

And right then, he felt the truth of those words. “I guess I know that, too.”

“You ought to. You oughtta know it better than most anyone in this town.”

He nodded, wanted to argue, to reason, to rationalize, but he did know her better than anyone, and he knew that if he made love to Vidalia Brand, he would be destroying her at the very same time. He couldn’t do that to her.

“I’m leaving town tomorrow, Vidalia,” he said. And he hadn’t known he was going to say it until he did.

“Don’t feel like you have to—”

“I have to.” He sighed. “I’ve got some money saved up. There’s a falling down Cantina just this side of the Tex-Mex border going up for auction.”

Her head came up, eyes lighting, her smile genuine. “You’re goin’ into the saloon business?”

“Not like you, but yeah, that’s the plan.”

“You’re gonna do well, Bobby,” she told him. “And I’m not ashamed to say, I’m gonna miss you.”

“I’m gonna miss you too,” he told her. And he thought he meant it a whole lot more than she did.

She held his eyes for a long time, and then she went behind the bar and refilled both their glasses.

That had been twenty-some-odd years ago. And that whole time, he’d never been able to get past the notion that Vidalia Brand was The One. The only woman for him. And for some reason, he just wasn’t meant to have her. Not in this lifetime, anyway.

Maybe next time around, he thought as he stood there looking up at the red and green and blue and white lights of the giant Christmas tree. If there was a next time. He wasn’t

the sort of man who had any real convictions about what happened after you died. But he supposed he'd be finding out firsthand in short order. Any time now, according to his doctors.

He sighed heavily, and his breath made a steam puff in the darkness. Then he got back into his pickup and turned it around, driving back toward the former feed store he'd bought at the far end of town. He had the entire thing draped in an exterminator's tent, so the work going on inside would go unseen until he was ready to make it public day after tomorrow.

He'd made a fortune taking over failing bars, saloons and nightclubs, recreating them into successful hot spots, and then selling them for massive profits. He'd become one of the richest men in Texas. He'd married, had three sons, and neglected them almost as much as John Brand had neglected his daughters. He'd divorced after fifteen years with a woman he had liked at first, disliked later on, but never loved. There was only one woman he'd ever really loved.

It was only a month ago that he'd realized he wanted to leave something more behind than a portfolio stuffed with paper wealth. He wanted to leave his sons something real. Something of him. Something they could be proud of. And he wanted it to be in Big Falls Oklahoma, where he'd been a young man with his entire future ahead of him, who didn't yet know that he'd never be happier than he was right then. Richer. More successful. Busier. But never happier.

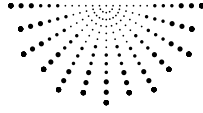
Seeing Vidalia again had been a bonus to coming back here. But it hadn't been his only reason. He intended to breathe his last in Big Falls, the closest thing to a hometown he'd ever had.

But his main reason for coming back here now was because he wanted to spend one more Christmas in Big Falls. Christmases had been magical here. Vidalia and her little girls always made them so special, even when he'd just been a lonely drifter handyman with no family to call his own. Three Christmases, he'd been invited to share in the holiday meal with the Brands. Three Christmases when John Brand had

seen fit to be elsewhere. Even poor, Vidalia had given her girls holidays to remember. Meaningful, sparkling, magical holidays full of love and laughter.

He wanted his boys to experience a holiday like those ones he remembered, just once. He'd been too busy getting rich to give them any of those. And according to his doctors, he should just about have enough time left to make that happen.

CHAPTER TWO



*A*n hour later, after closing time, Vidalia stood in the cold rain, looking across Main Street at what used to be Milner Feed & Grain. The big building was wearing an “I’m being exterminated” sort of disguise. Maybe it really was an exterminator’s tent covering the entire place. Vidalia wouldn’t know, having never seen one. Bugs only tended to be a problem in big cities, where there wasn’t room for them to live outdoors where they belonged. She’d seen big city life. Never lived it. If she had, she figured she’d have most likely run screaming for this particular corner of Oklahoma. The northwestern part, where there were mountains, and where there was weather. They got a little snow once or twice over the course of an average winter. She wondered again if they would this year. Snow for Christmas...that would be something, wouldn’t it?

She almost asked God to send her some, but then she couldn’t quite do it. She’d sinned. She’d sinned in a big way, and she had never made that sin right. And while she’d managed to push it to the back of her mind for a good many years, it was front and center, now. She didn’t feel she had any business asking God for anything.

Sighing, she pushed the dark thoughts aside and got back to the moment at hand. There wasn’t a lick of traffic on the slick, shiny ribbon of road that unfurled in either direction. The sheen of rain on the blacktop was the only way to tell the difference between the road and the night itself. There wasn’t another car around, either. And she’d left her own a football field away, before she’d got here. The former feed store was

right on the edge of town. Vidalia lived five miles beyond the other end of town, back the way she'd come. The OK Corral, her best friend for the past more-years-than-she-cared-to-count, was on the opposite end of Main.

Her hair was getting wet. She should've brought a hat. But she hadn't had one with her at the Corral, and she'd come directly here from there. Probably because she was afraid she'd lose her nerve if she went home first. It would be too easy to just go to bed and try to forget about....

About Bobby.

Not that she would've been able to.

Nope, Bobby Joe McIntyre was on her mind. And in her town. And it hadn't taken too much algebra to figure out why. He'd made his millions buying out saloons, rebuilding them into something huge and gaudy and soulless, and then selling them again. There were no out of business saloons in Big Falls. Not right now, anyway. But there was one former feed store, auctioned off for taxes months ago, that had suddenly come to life underneath an oversized tent. And there were strangers in town. Oh, they were careful, showing up only a few at a time to shop or use the Post Office. But there were a lot of them. She'd been keeping track. No less than twenty new faces had appeared on the other side of her mahogany bar in the past few weeks. Working men, hardly a female among 'em.

Until she'd seen Bobby, she'd assumed it was some PR stunt by whatever corporate giant was going to try to put up a chain store where the feed and grain used to be. There'd been good-natured debate among the locals about what it would be.

But the minute she'd seen Bobby's still sinfully sexy backside walking away, it had hit her. It was a saloon. That was his business. Big, flashy, city-slickin', modern mockeries of old west clichés. He was in this town to put her out of business.

And playing on that one night, and what had happened between them—almost happened, as far as he would ever

know—to keep her too flustered to notice what was happening right under her nose.

She would be damned if she was going to take this sitting down.

But of course, she had to make sure.

Drawing a deep breath, she hunched her shoulders, stepped out from under the leafless tree that she'd been trying to use as an umbrella, and jogged across Main Street and around to one side of the building. Then she stood there with her back against the canvas tent, looking at the night and the parking lot and the road.

It was quiet as a churchyard and cold enough to raise goose bumps on the Devil's backside.

Okay, it's now or never.

The main entrance to the feed and grain used to be right about where she was standing. So she crouched low, lifted the tent, and ducked underneath. And then she stood there between the brown slab wood siding and the canvas, fumbling in her jacket pocket for the flashlight she'd brought from the saloon.

The main entrance was no longer where it had been or it would've been in front her nose. She shone the light up and down the siding, and realized by its gleam that it wasn't wood at all. It was some kind of plastic made to look like slab wood. Didn't that just figure? Make believe wood for a make believe saloon, if her theory panned out.

She moved the flashlight further until it gleamed on a great big window a few feet away. So she edged that way, thinking that from the outside she must look like a giant tick on a barn-sized hound dog.

There, now she was in front of the big window. She cupped her hands around either side of her face and tried to see inside, then had to cup the flashlight in one fist and press it flush against the glass to light the inside a little bit. But its beam didn't go far enough.

She was frowning, squinting, and frustrated, when she heard the distinct sound of a shotgun working a shell into the chamber. Pump-action, if she wasn't mistaken. And she wasn't.

"All right, Mister, I've got you in my sights," Bobby said. "You come on out from behind that canvas nice and slow. And put your hands up just as quick as you can manage. Understood?"

"Yeah," she said. And she didn't waste a lot of time obeying.

She lifted the tarp and poked her head out from underneath it, and before she even got upright, was blinded by a flashlight beam.

"Vidalia? Is that you?"

She pressed her lips. "Yeah, Bobby, it's me. Put the light down, will you? Shotgun too, if the barrel's still pointed my way."

"Son of a—"

"Watch the language, Bobby."

The flashlight moved away, but the damage was done. She was blinking like a mole as his long, tall silhouette strode across the street toward her. Bastard was wearing a duster, of all things. A duster and that Stetson from earlier. He couldn't have a little mercy? She was ashamed but wasn't about to hang her head because of it. God knew she'd done worse things. That was the problem.

She kept her chin high, looked him right in the eyes when she could finally see them.

"You care to tell me what you're doin', sneakin' around my place in the middle of the night, Vidalia?"

He'd never called her Vi. Always Vidalia. She'd loved that about him. "You just answered your own question."

"Huh?" The light came up again. She blocked her eyes with a hand and he lowered it.

“What am I doin’? I’m sneaking around your place in the middle of the night.”

“Don’t be a smartass.”

She shrugged. “I figured out what you were up to as soon as you left the Corral and my head stopped spinning.”

His even, white smile appeared so suddenly she thought he’d turned the flashlight back on. “I made your head spin?”

“Don’t change the subject. I know what you’re up to, Bobby. I just came out here to make sure. Figured I should give you the benefit of the doubt till I’d seen proof.”

“So this is you giving me the benefit of the doubt.”

She nodded, standing her ground. Her ridiculous-sounding, but utterly true ground.

“You could’ve just asked me what I was doing in town, you know.”

“I asked you. Twice. You gave me a non-answer both times.” She shrugged and reached the spot where he stood, looking up into the rain and into his eyes.

He took off his Stetson and put it on her head. “Ask me again.”

“What are you doing in town?”

He took his time about looking at her face before he finally nodded, twice, slow. “Didn’t you see?”

“Nope. You started bellering at me just as I got a good look through that window. Scared me so bad I almost dropped my flashlight.” She looked at him, looked close, just as he’d done to her. Her eyes had finally adjusted, so she could see the cut of his jaw. It was a really nice jaw, wide and square, although at the moment it was set a little tightly for her taste.

“Can I buy you a drink, Vidalia Brand?”

“Corral’s closed.”

“I know.” He took her by the elbow and led her toward the front of the place. Then he unzipped a doorway in the canvas

and led her through, and then through a great big set of double arching doors behind it.

The entryway was huge, with coat racks and benches, and dead center, a set of batwing doors that put her own to shame, their wood all tooled and then the cuts painted gold. Some would call it elaborate. She would call it gaudy.

That was when she knew she'd been right. And he left her for a moment, and went through them. Flipping a switch, he flooded the place with light.

Vidalia pushed through the swinging doors and took a long, slow look around. There were round tables, antiques to look old. There were chandeliers made out of elk racks. There was a three sided hardwood bar three times as long as the one in the OK Corral, with high standing saddle shaped seats all the way around. It was backed by a mirror the entire length of it, behind racks and shelves for bottles and glasses and pitchers. There was a pizza slice shaped stage at the front right corner of the place, a dance floor the size of a basketball court. Half of one anyway. And the coolest mechanical bull over in the corner.

And beside the stage, a player piano. It looked like an antique, not a replica. Wow.

She didn't know whether to tell him how amazing the place was or kick the man where he would know he'd been kicked.

Instead, she turned and looked up and right into his eyes, put her hands on her hips and tapped one foot, awaiting his explanation.



Bobby couldn't think straight with Vidalia's big brown eyes looking up into his. Her expression was probably supposed to be fierce, but all he wanted to do was kiss it right off her pretty face. God, he'd missed her, ached for her, though he'd buried it so deep it had just become a vague sense of dissatisfaction with everything in his life. His marriage, his sons, his wealth.

No matter how much he did, it was never enough to fill the hole she'd left in his heart.

"It's...a saloon," he said.

"I can *see* it's a saloon," she replied. "Of sorts."

"I'm calling it The Long Branch."

"No one under fifty even remembers *Gunsmoke* anymore, Bobby."

"That makes it even better. A little obscure. The kind of thing the kids will Google."

"It's a second saloon in a one-saloon town. You came here to put me out of business."

"Don't be ridiculous. Hell, come 'ere." He walked her across the big dance floor toward the stage. There were red velvet curtains on either side of it, held back by golden cords. "The OK Corral is a place for the locals, where they can relax and drink and get some bar food at great prices. You agree with that description?"

She pursed her lips, lowered her head, saying nothing, not giving him an inch.

"The Long Branch is more of a tourist attraction."

"We don't have tourism in Big Falls. Has it really been so long you don't know that?"

"They have tourism in Tucker Lake, and that's only a few miles east. And there are a half dozen Ghost Towns within a seventy-mile radius, all of them doing steady business. This is gonna become a regular stop for those same tourists. It'll bring business to everyone in Big Falls, you included. We're gonna have floor shows, waitresses dressed as saloon girls. Every now and then we'll have some actors come in and shoot the place up, then be rounded up and arrested by a Marshall Dillon type. Lots of special effects to make it seem real. You know how some places do mystery dinners? We'll be doing Dime Novel dinners. And I mean full dinners, with a well-staffed kitchen and one of the best chefs in the state. Here, take a look at the menu." He took hold of her arm, but she tugged it away

as he led her back to the bar. He walked around behind it, plucked a menu from a stack, and set it, open, in front of her.

She sighed, but slid up onto a saddle shaped barstool and looked down at the menu. Then she blinked slow and looked up at him again. “I can’t really—”

“Here. Use mine.” He’d already had his bifocals in hand, and he set them on top of the menu.

She picked them up, red in the cheeks—which was a good look on her, he thought. Then she put them on and looked at the menu. He did too. And he didn’t need his glasses, because he knew it by heart. Cowboy burgers. Six-gun steaks. Great big racks of ribs with the sweetest, tangiest barbecue sauce he’d ever tasted. Fried chicken. Mashed potatoes and gravy. It was old fashioned food, stick to the ribs food. Cowboy food. Food they didn’t serve far and wide anymore. But prepared by a gourmet chef with prices befitting his skill.

She shifted her eyes a little, then they widened. “Your prices are on the uppity side, don’t you think?”

“Like I said, I’m not trying to compete with you. The floor show’s free. But we gotta cover expenses.”

She closed the menu, slid it back across the bar to him. “Still and all, it doesn’t change what you did. You flattered me. Turned my head, to be honest. I’m ashamed to admit it, but I’m not in the habit of ducking the truth. I was feeling giddy as a school girl when you gave me those cow eyes and pretended you’d been missing me all these years. But it was just some two bit, side-winding dirty trick.” She slid off the stool. It was a little drop to the floor, but she managed to make it with dignity.

“Um, you shot me down, Vidalia.”

“Well what earthly difference does *that* make?”

She started walking toward the front door.

Thinking fast, Bobby grabbed the remote from its holster on the inside edge of the bar, aimed and fired. The lights dropped down low, the bulbs taking on a flickering quality, like gas lamps. She stopped walking, looking around in

surprise. He hit another button and music came up—Conway and Loretta singing *Lead Me On*. And Vidalia turned toward him with a “You don’t think that’s gonna work, do you?” expression on her pretty face.

He jumped up onto the bar, sliding on his denim clad backside right across it, and jumping clean off the other side. Then he strode right up to her, slid one arm around her waist, and clasped her hand in the other one.

“What do you think you’re doing?” She didn’t pull away.

“Aside from pulling a hamstring with that bar-jumping thing I just did to impress you, you mean?”

She tried not to smile. She was fighting it with everything in her. “Yeah, aside from that.”

“I’m testing out my new dance floor.” He nudged her into motion, and she fell right into step with him, following his steps without a single falter. So he got a little fancy, giving her a spin, followed by a dip, then pulling her back up again and holding her a little closer than before.

She laughed when he did that. Tipped her head back and laughed, and when she brought her eyes to his again, he got stuck there. This was magical, what was sparkling between the two of them, he thought. It was just like that night so long ago.

And then he remembered his situation. This wasn’t fair to her.

The song ended, and he let her go. “I’m real sorry I offended you, Vidalia. And I admit, I did walk into the Corral with the intention of asking for your advice and assistance with this new venture of mine. But the minute I saw you again, it wasn’t business at all anymore.”

She lowered her head, and he couldn’t tell in the dim light, but he thought she was thinking.

“Your dance floor works just fine,” she said at length. “I can’t remember the last time I waltzed around a barroom.”

“I remember the last time I did,” he said. “With you, in the Corral. To that same song.”

She shot him a look and he knew she remembered as well as he did. Maybe she was surprised that he did, though.

His conscience pricked him, reminding him to be careful. It wouldn't be fair to lead her on. To let her see how much he wanted to pull her close and dance another round. Or two. Or all night long.

"I wish you good luck with the, uh, The Long Branch." She looked at his face for a long time. "You're a charmer, Bobby Joe McIntyre. But it didn't work."

"It didn't?"

"No. I'm gonna do everything I can do to put you out of business. Because the OK Corral is my baby. The only one that didn't grow up and leave the nest. She's all I've got in the world right now, and I'm not about to let you come waltzing into town and ruin her."

"I don't want to ruin the Corral, Vidalia."

"This is a one-saloon town. I'm gonna make sure that one saloon is always the OK Corral."

He lowered his head. "All right then. If that's how it has to be."

"That's how it is." She nodded once and started for the door.

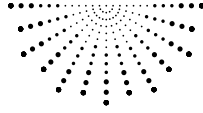
"Thanks for the dance," he called after her.

"You're welcome." She reached the batwing doors, pushed through them, stopped on the other side, and looked back at him. "So, um...you want to get together for lunch tomorrow?"

He smiled real slow. "You're damn straight I do."

She smiled back at him. Damn, she was one Class-A beauty when she smiled. Then she turned and walked out the door, leaving him to wonder just what the hell he thought he was doing.

CHAPTER THREE



“*I*’ve been so busy with life lately, Mom. The twins and Caleb and all. I feel like I’ve been neglecting you.”

Vidalia raised her eyebrows at her eldest daughter and continued sipping coffee from her favorite mug. It had a sexy cowboy on it, whose shirt vanished as the coffee level went down. Melusine had bought it for her last Christmas as part of the girls’ ongoing, good natured battle over who could get their mother the best present. Of course, Maya had won by delivering the twins on Christmas four years ago, and then Kara had tied her by bringing little Tyler into the family two Christmasses later. But Vidalia didn’t mind that they all kept trying. Mel’s mug certainly made the morning cuppa more interesting, and as a bonus, it discouraged that second cup Vidalia probably shouldn’t have. After all, you didn’t want to put the cowboy’s shirt back *on*.

Carefully, she set the mug on the kitchen table. “You haven’t been neglecting me at all, hon. We see each other every day.”

“I know, but we haven’t really talked, except about the kids.” She sipped her own coffee from a far less interesting mug, and said, “How are things with you, Mom? Anything... new?”

Subtle, she wasn’t. “Don’t beat around the bush, Maya. You’re too old for that. Just tell me what’s on your mind.”

Maya didn't return her steady gaze. She looked past her instead, into the living room where the twins were playing with the plethora of toys Vidalia kept on hand, but eyeing the ornaments on the giant balsam fir tree as if they would far prefer to play with those.

"I heard a stranger came into the Corral last night."

"Strangers come into the Corral every night." She wasn't going to make this easy on her firstborn. Vidalia was an adult woman and she didn't need supervision from her offspring. And yes, she was feeling very defensive about this. About Bobby Joe. And for good reasons that were her own fault and not Maya's. Still, she couldn't help bristling a little.

"I heard you went outside to talk to him. And that you seemed...flustered."

Vidalia shrugged. "I wouldn't say flustered is the right word. And he's not a stranger. He's Bobby Joe McIntyre."

"So who is he? What's going on?"

"You mean you don't remember him?" Vidalia asked.

"No." Maya tilted her head and frowned. "Should I?"

Shrugging, Vidalia examined the now half-naked cowboy on her mug and thought Bobby looked better. He'd looked better then, and he still looked better to her. She'd always had a weakness for that man.

"He used to be a local." Vidalia shrugged as if it didn't matter. "He bought the old feed & grain place, and he's turning it into a big glitzy tourist trap he calls a saloon."

Maya blinked, maybe not expecting the answer she got. "So...you don't *know* him."

"Oh, I *know* him." Vidalia got up from the table and went to the coffee pot on the counter for a refill. Never mind that it put the cowboy's shirt back on. She'd take it off again in short order. "He was my handyman, back when you and your sisters were still young enough to respect your mama's privacy. You must've been about six. He and I turned a run-down motel into

the OK Corral on a shoestring budget with nothing much more than elbow grease and determination.”

Maya frowned as if trying to remember. Vidalia thought she might if she gave her a few more clues, but she wasn't sure she wanted to. “What's this guy's name again?” she asked.

“Bobby Joe...that is Jason Robert Joseph McIntyre.”

“Jason Robert Jos....JRJ McIntyre? The Texas Billionaire?” Her eyes were bigger than an Oklahoma harvest moon just then.

Vidalia just shrugged. “He was no billionaire back in the day,” she said, thinking back. “Poor as a church mouse, and pretty much alone in the world. We had him over for Christmas dinner two years in a row. Maybe three. And he brought you gifts every time. Remember those little rag dolls with the black button eyes you all got one year? And there were four pairs of shiny black patent leather shoes another. He even got the sizes right.”

Maya was frowning. “Four...then it was before Selene came along?”

Vidalia got up from the table and wandered to the sink to dump out that second cup she shouldn't have poured. “Must've been. Who can remember?”

“Sounds like you remember it pretty well.”

She didn't look back around at her daughter, probably because she was afraid Maya might see her guilty secret in her eyes.

“So you and he were...close.”

Vidalia turned then, and speared Maya with her eyes. “Just what are you asking me, daughter?”

“I just...I thought you and Caleb's dad—”

“Caleb's father is a city slicker, born and bred. You can't possibly think that was ever going to go where he wanted it to.”

“So you’re saying it’s not?”

“Of course not. And since when do you get to ask me questions about my love life, Maya?”

“Love life? Jeeze, Mom, up until now I didn’t even know you *had* a love life.”

Vidalia bit back the urge to tell her daughter that whether she did or not, it was none of her business. They were a close family. And if she were honest, she would admit she’d dished out the same kind of third degree she was now being served with each of the girls. But she did not need and would not seek her offsprings’ approval when it came to...feelings like the ones Bobby stirred up in her. Feelings she was too ashamed of to even talk about with her minister, much less her kids.

“Mom, did this guy mean something to you?”

Vidalia lowered her head. “I was a married woman.”

“Not legally, you weren’t.”

She shook her head. “It’s been more than twenty years. It’s ancient history that doesn’t matter in the least anymore.” She looked in at the twins. “They’re trying to peel the plastic off the candy canes with their teeth, Maya. Best take them home and feed them.”



The five concerned daughters of Vidalia Brand met at Edie and Wade’s gorgeous place overlooking the falls, because it was the farthest from home. Vidalia’s big farmhouse would always be “home” to them. Maya had called the meeting, but Edie had been about to, and she wasted no time getting to the point once they were all gathered around the giant Christmas tree in her living room. It went clear up to the cathedral ceiling and filled the front window. Breathtaking, Edie thought. She loved her home. Sally, the Great Dane, lay on the floor in front of the tree, her favorite spot, and sighed repeatedly to convey how much she hated being mauled by children. Yet she didn’t

get up and leave, and she didn't growl, and every once in a while her tail thumped the floor. The fraud.

"So," Edie began, "Mom's pickup truck was parked alongside Main Street last night, way out at the edge of town in the middle of nowhere. It was after closing time, so you know it was the wee hours. I heard it was there for a while, too. Who knows what's going on?"

The others frowned and lowered their heads, but, Edie noticed, Maya looked alarmed. "Heck," she said with a look at her twins, who were playing with Sally's dog toys, while Tyler, older and wiser and no longer wearing braces on his legs, stroked the dog's head slow and lovingly. "Was it anywhere near the old Feed & Grain?"

"Yeah. In fact, that was the only thing nearby, according to Sunny from the bakery," Edie said. "Why?"

Maya sighed. "Something's up with Mom. Some handsome stranger came into the Corral last night, and she got all worked up, ended up going outside with him for a while."

"Mom did that?" Selene asked, her eyes wide and searching each of her older siblings' faces.

"Go, Mom," Mel muttered. Kara just smiled to herself.

Maya said, "I asked her about it this morning, and she got all defensive and tight lipped. But she did tell me who he was. JRJ McIntyre. Though she calls him Bobby Joe. He was her handyman back when we were little. Helped her change the Corral from an old motel into a saloon."

"Maya, that had to have been more than twenty years ago," Kara said.

Melusine pulled out her phone and started tapping keys. "Funny. Google says RJR McIntyre is a billionaire tycoon from Dallas. Must be a different one. How does he spell—"

"That's the one," Maya said. "She said he was poor back then. And that he came to Christmas at our house a few times."

“The Raggedy Anne Dolls!” Kara all but shouted. “I *do* remember him.” She tipped her head sideways. “He always seemed kind of sad to me. Cool that he went out and got all rich and famous.”

“He’s famous,” Edie agreed, “but not for much more than being rich.”

“I don’t remember him,” Selene said, frowning.

“It was before you were born, Selene,” Maya went on. “But that’s beside the point. I don’t care who he is or who he was or how many dolls he bought us when we were kids. He’s back in town, and there’s something going on between him and Mom. I think we need to find out just what the son of a gun is up to. What his intentions are.” Maya got up and paced to the tree, taking an ornament out of CC’s hand and putting it back on its branch. “Look, but don’t touch, okay kids?”

“They’re not gonna break anything, sis,” Edie said. “And if they did, I wouldn’t care.”

“Your home belongs in a magazine, Edie. I’m not gonna risk it.”

Mel sighed. “I’ll talk to Alex. We’re the P.I.s in the family. So it stands to reason we’re the ones who should dig into this guy a little bit.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea at all,” Kara said.

“Be discreet,” Maya said, almost as if Kara hadn’t said a word. Edie saw Kara notice and frown. “Mom’s super sensitive about this for some reason,” she went on. “She finds out we were snooping, there’s gonna be hell to pay.”

“We’re professionals, Maya. We do this for a living. We know how to be discreet.”

“I’ll consult the Tarot,” Selene said.

“Um, why don’t we just talk to Mom,” Kara asked.

“I tried that, Kara. She’s not talking.”

“Well, maybe that’s because it’s not our business.”

They all went silent, staring at Kara with their mouths open. Then they almost jointly shook their heads and resumed the discussion. All except for Selene, who met Kara's eyes and gave a subtle nod to let her know she agreed with her.



“Damn, woman. You look like you just stepped off a cloud, hung up your halo, and came down to visit with an undeserving sinner.”

Bobby Joe had always been a charmer. Vidalia met him at Haggerty House, the best restaurant in Tucker Lake, a short drive from Big Falls. As an added benefit, it wasn't very busy at lunch hour. But it was nice. A giant old Victorian house that had been converted to a lush restaurant that served the best meals in a thirty-mile radius. There was a bar off one side, but not like the Corral. It was more a place for folks to get drinks while waiting for a table, than a place to hang out after a hard day's work.

Vidalia liked it here because she identified with its owners. Betty Jean Haggerty had been running the place for as long as anyone could remember, and she had five beautiful granddaughters who helped her. The girls were near the ages of Vidalia's own brood. No wonder she loved it here.

Besides, family business was family business. They had to support each other. The restaurant's tall, ornate windows looked out over manicured lawns that were not at their prettiest just now, all brown and barren. Vidalia thought again of snow. Second time in as many days.

There were only a few other people in the place, and she didn't know any of them—thank you, Lord. Bobby had been standing near the hostess booth when she'd walked in. And he looked good enough to make her knees buckle with his faded jeans and shiny boots. His shirt was black with pearl snaps, just like the one on her favorite coffee mug, which filled her head with the kinds of thoughts she hadn't had about a man in quite a long time.

Dang.

“I just paid you a compliment, lady. Aren’t you even going to thank me?”

“I was gonna, but you distracted me. You look pretty good yourself, cowboy. So where are we sitting?”

“I thought I’d let you pick.”

She shrugged, finally noticing the hostess who stood nearby with menus in one hand. She was young, pretty, and familiar. Frowning, Vidalia said, “Wait, wait, I’ve got this. You’re Bridget!”

The girl flashed a bright smile. “Hello again, Ms. Brand. It’s been too long.” Then she looked at Bobby and there was an expectant pause.

“Oh. Um, this is Bobby Joe. He’s an old friend, back in town on business.”

“Nice to meet you Bobby Joe,” Bridget said. “Any friend of the Brands is a friend of ours. Where would you two like to sit? Pretty much all the tables are up for grabs this early in the day.”

“Near the fireplace,” Vidalia returned. “This time of year, that’s the best view anyway.”

“Right this way.” And then she turned, taking Vidalia by the arm and leaving Bobby Joe to follow behind them. Leaning in close, she whispered, “Don’t take it wrong, but you two look like the perfect couple.”

“You inherited your grandma’s matchmaking genes, I see,” Vidalia said. “How is Betty Jean anyway?”

“Fine, fit, and cooking up a storm. She’s gonna be so tickled when I tell her you’re here.” Bridget put the menus down on the table as Bobby Joe hurried around her to pull out Vidalia’s chair. She sat down, and then he sat across from her.

“I’ll bring you back some drinks. What would you like?” Bridget asked.

“Beer. Whatever you have on tap.”

“Just got a new keg from a local microbrewery that’s been getting rave reviews from the customers,” Bridget said.

“Okie-Gold?” Vidalia asked.

Bridget winked at her. “That’s the one. Should I make it two?”

Not after what happened the last time she and Bobby Joe drank together, she thought. “Uh, no. Tea. A nice cup of hot tea will do me just fine.”

“All right. I’ll be back.” Bridget turned and hurried away.

“You know just about everybody, don’t you Vidalia?” Bobby asked.

She shrugged. “You live in the same town for as many years as I have, you get to know people.”

“I lived in the same town for more than a decade, and didn’t even know my next door neighbors.”

“Well that’s a shame,” she said softly. “They might have been nice folks. And I know they missed out by not knowing you.”

He lowered his head, but she saw the dimple dig into his cheek when he smiled. He had the most beautiful dimples. “I wish I was worthy of that praise, Vidalia,” he muttered.

Age hadn’t done him any harm, she thought, watching his face while he wasn’t watching hers. She wished she could say the same for herself.

Her hair was still just as dark and curly and long as ever, but there was a gray strand here and there. She had laugh lines around her eyes, but she would never regret those. Her daughters had put those there, every last one of them, and she wouldn’t trade the years raising her girls for a smooth-skinned face now. Her figure wasn’t stick thin anymore. Never had been, but the curves were curvier than they used to be—she was well aware of that, she thought, looking down at her strong, denim clad thighs.

She glanced sideways at Bobby and found his eyes on her. They were sliding down her body, as far as the table between

them would allow, even though she wore ordinary jeans and an unbuttoned long-sleeved western shirt over a snug fitting tank, which was her usual attire. She also wore boots. She had to head to the corral after this to open up for the evening, so she hadn't dressed up. Besides, she didn't want him to think she was trying to impress him.

Bobby said, "I've got a proposition for you, Vidalia."

She lifted her gaze from the menu she'd been pretending to peruse. "I'll just bet you do, Bobby Joe."

He smiled and waggled his eyebrows. "I never forgot, you know. That one night--"

Her menu fell to the table as if pushed from her hands by the breath that rushed out of her lungs. "That's not what you said at the time."

He waved a dismissive hand. "I mean the early part of it. When we danced all alone at the Corral and wound up making out like teenagers." He smiled wistfully. "The only part I forgot is the part after we drank a little more."

"A lot more," she corrected, as she felt the blood rush to her face and lowered her head. Her relief that his memory of that night hadn't returned was so huge she almost floated out of the chair. "I don't want to talk about that night, though."

"Why not? It was the greatest night of my life."

"It was the greatest sin of mine. My greatest shame."

He closed his eyes. "I've never stopped thinking about it."

"I've never stopped trying to forget it. And if that's what you came to talk about, then this lunch is over before it begins." She slapped the menu closed, laid it on the table, and made as if to rise, but he shot his hands out to cover hers, and she stopped.

"I won't bring it up again. I promise."

She looked into his eyes. Everything in her shivered with memory, with an old longing she'd thought had died. But it had only been lying dormant, and apparently, growing bigger all the time. And now it was awake and alive and more

powerful than ever before. She banked it and, giving a nod, relaxed into her seat again. “I’m gonna hold you to that, Bobby.”

“You won’t have to. My word is my word.”

“Good to know that hasn’t changed.” She heaved a sigh. “So back on topic, what’s this...proposition you have for me?”

“Ah, that. Well now, I need your help.”

“My help? With what?” She blinked across the table at him. “Not the saloon that you’re building to put mine out of business?”

He nodded precisely twice. She shook her head side to side in time with his nod. Bridget cleared her throat. “Here are those drinks.” She set a big mug of beer in front of Bobby and a china tea cup with a pink rose on the front and gold trim around the lip in front of Vidalia. “Do you know what you want to order yet?”

“You can’t be serious,” Vidalia said. Some distant part of her thought she should address the Haggerty girl, or at least postpone this discussion until she’d left again, but the words were flying free and she couldn’t stop them. “Why would I *help* you with your saloon?”

“Because I helped you with yours,” he said. Then he smiled his charming smile up at Bridget. “You have anything seasonal? I’m feeling festive.”

Bridget smiled right back, though she was clearly feeling a little nervous about having arrived at the wrong moment. “The specials are all festive. Grandma Betty’s idea of festive, anyway,” she said, and she pointed to the list of daily specials inside the menu. “Reindeer Pot Roast, which as you can guess is venison based. Holiday Ham or Turkey and Trimmings. Full meals or sandwich plates, your call.”

Vidalia was trying to drag her shocked eyes off Bobby Joe, but for the life of her, she couldn’t.

Bridget said, “Take your time. I’ll come back in a few minutes,” and then she hurried away.

She had manners, that one did. Betty Jean had raised those girls right.

Vidalia was gaping, but Bobby Joe was giving her those same smitten puppy dog eyes he'd given her all those years ago."

"You owe me, Vidalia. I helped you get the OK Corral up and running."

"I paid you for that help."

"I worked for next to nothing."

She shrugged. "Hey, I didn't name your price, you did."

"And I named one so cheap you wouldn't be able to say no."

"Not my fault. You must've had your reasons."

"I did. I wanted to be around you as much as I could possibly manage."

She had no snappy comeback that time. Her words got stuck in her throat, and she sat there staring at him.

"Vidalia Brand, you knocked my socks off the first time I laid eyes on you. And I'll tell you what, lady. You still do."

She picked up his beer and drank it straight down. All in one draught. When she set it down again, she lowered her head and whispered, "I was a married woman, Bobby."

"Not legally," he said, sounding just like Maya. "But I know, I know you don't see it that way. And that's why I left after that night—"

"Will you keep it down?" She looked around the all but empty restaurant. "Jeeze, you think I want my greatest shame broadcast on the evening news?"

"Oh, come on Vidalia, no one cares about a one-night stand neither of us can remember."

"My daughters would care."

He went silent, staring deep into her eyes for a long silent moment, until she had to lower hers.

Bridget came back. Vidalia said, “We’re both having the buffet, hon.”

“Okay, sure. Um, just help yourselves when you’re ready.” She turned and walked away and Vidalia felt a little bit guilty for not being friendlier. But not nearly as guilty as she felt over what had happened all those years ago. Especially the parts she’d never told Bobby.

At least she hadn’t lied to him. Outright. She had kept a pretty damned huge secret from him though.

“You know it’s odd, how we both blacked out that night,” he said. “I mean, I was drinking way too much at the time, that much I know. Being in love with another man’s wife was a little more than I was man enough to deal with back then. But you never drank much. A little more than usual that night, but it didn’t seem like enough that you’d forget.”

“And this is coming from what? Your non-memory of anything that happened?”

“I remember a lot of it. I remember...most of it.”

She remembered all of it. Including waking up in his arms the next morning in the storage room on a bed made of drop cloths and their respective coats.

“And yet you left town the very next day. Not a note. Not a goodbye.” Not even after that long night of lovemaking, the likes of which Vidalia hadn’t seen before or since. If she didn’t burn in hell for it, then there was no justice in the world.

“What was left to say? You pretty much said it all when I woke up.”

She had. She’d been mortified. Horrified at what she had done. Her husband had been out of town “on business” for two months at that point. She’d been working with Bobby for six. Together every day. All day. Working, bickering playfully, laughing, touching sometimes, always accidentally of course. *Feeling.*

She’d woke up naked, still wrapped in his arms. And she’d been disgusted with herself. Even though by then she was sure her husband was cheating on her. Johnny couldn’t have gone

two months without sex if he'd been in a coma. But that didn't make it right. She didn't know he had another wife, one he'd already been married to when he'd married her. And two kids, to boot.

So she'd got up, got dressed, and waited for Bobby to wake. And when he had, she'd said, "This was the biggest mistake of my life. I can't see you anymore, Bobby. Not ever."

She remembered how hurt he'd seemed and how he'd tried to apologize, saying he didn't even remember coming into the store room, much less what had happened afterward. And she'd said she didn't remember either. But she did. Oh, how vividly she did.

And then she'd walked out and gone home before her four little girls ever woke up. The sitter had fallen asleep on the sofa and never knew what time Vidalia had come home. No one did. No one besides her had any clue what had happened.

Bobby reached across the table and covered her hand with his. "You're not married anymore, Vidalia."

"God, Bobby, a whole lifetime has passed between then and now. You can't just come back here and expect all those old feelings between us to be the same."

"I didn't. I didn't expect that. Not at all. I just..." He sighed heavily. "You know why I left, Vidalia?"

She shook her head slowly. He caught her chin with his fingertip and turned it toward him. She could've closed her eyes, but that would've been cowardly, and Vidalia Brand was no coward. So she stared into his eyes and knew she'd compounded her sins by lying to him just now. All those old feelings were exactly the same, just buried under years and years of guilt and shame.

"I left because I knew that if I stayed, I was going to have you," he said, his voice as rough as if he'd gargled with broken glass. "I wouldn't have let up until you gave in to me, and you would have because you felt the same way I did. I know you did. But I also knew you'd never forgive yourself if that happened. I knew it would tear you apart. Just like leaving

you tore me apart. I chose to take the pain rather than give it to you. But now....”

His voice trailed off there, and lowering his head, he shook it slowly, then pushed one hand back through his hair. He let go of her hands and leaned back in his chair. “Damn, this is not the conversation I intended to have here today.”

“I should hope not.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m not here to seduce you back into my arms. I’m not.” Oddly, it sounded almost as if he was trying to convince himself more than her. “I’m just here to open The Long Branch. Opening night, I’m gonna dress as Marshall Matt Dillon. You know, the vest, the badge, the gun belt. And I need a Miss Kitty to be my hostess for the evening.”

She closed her eyes slowly. She had lied to this man for more than two decades. Okay, omitted the truth. The dishonesty shamed her straight to the roots of her hair, almost as much as that night she’d spent in his arms.

And now, to know that he’d left town to spare her having to say no to him. To spare her the guilt of eventually saying yes.

She’d sworn off drinking that night, but it didn’t change the truth of the lie she’d told. Or of the other much bigger secret she’d kept for all these years. The one he really *did* deserve to know.

She lowered her head to hide the tears that were springing into her eyes. “I dressed as Miss Kitty last Halloween at the Corral,” she said.

“I know. I saw a picture in the local paper. That’s what gave me the idea for the Long Branch, to tell you the truth.”

She closed her eyes, thought she was going to regret her next words, but she owed this man even more than he knew. “All right. I’ll help you.”

“You will?” He seemed both stunned and delighted. “You will, you’ll do it?”

“I’ll do it. You’re right. I owe you. I can have one of the girls handle the Corral that night. Or just close it for the evening. What night are you opening?”

“The twenty-second.”

She lifted her eyebrows. “It’s not the twenty-first, so Selene might be free.”

He frowned. “She has plans on the twenty-first?”

“Winter Solstice,” Vidalia said. “She’s into....” She gave up, waved both hands in a never mind gesture. “She’s always been different from the other girls.”

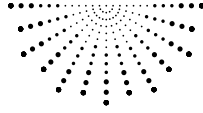
“She’s the only one I never met,” he said.

“Oh, you’ll be meeting her. And seeing the rest of them again, too. Those girls of mine are way too interested in what I’ve been doing in my private time since you blew back into town.”

“I am looking forward to it,” he said. And he cupped her hands in his, pulled them to his lips, and kissed her knuckles. “Thank you, Vidalia. I mean it. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she told him, and she didn’t try to suppress the delicious shiver caused by the touch of his lips on her skin. Again. Finally.

CHAPTER FOUR



*H*e didn't want to say goodbye when their lunch date ended, so he was glad when an aging woman who introduced herself as Betty Haggerty came out from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron, and smiling at Vidalia. He was introduced briefly, before the older woman tugged his date away to engage her in what looked to be an important conversation. He watched them, because he couldn't take his eyes off his raven-haired beauty.

Vidalia was as sexy as ever. She'd come in work clothes, probably because she'd rather be shot between those pretty eyes of hers than to let him think she'd dressed up for his sake. But he kind of thought she had. Her hair was down, not bundled up behind her head like it had been at the Corral the other night. The jeans were snug and hugged her in all the right places, and watching her walk across the restaurant to the buffet had been so delicious an experience that he made sure to let her head back to the table first, so he could watch her all over again. Her hair was just as jet black as ever, springy curls falling way past her shoulders, and her eyes were just as brown.

He'd never got over her. He'd been sure from day one, she was the only woman he would ever love.

But he couldn't have her, and that was that. And so he'd tried to move on. He'd met Judith, married her, raised a family with her, and thanked his lucky stars for the three sons she'd given him. But Vidalia had remained in his heart the entire time.

He hadn't told the boys about...any of this. Not that he was coming here, or why. Not what had led up to the decision to buy the feed store and convert it. Even though it was all for them. Telling them now would ruin the surprise later. And he certainly hadn't told them about his condition, which would ruin his last holiday season ever, and his plan to make it the most memorable of his life.

He didn't want to think about that now, anyway. He wanted to throw himself into The Long Branch, because that was what he loved doing best. And he wanted to throw himself into spending time with Vidalia, because, though he'd never been a saint, he believed that he deserved as much pleasure as he could muster from what was left of his life. And whether he deserved it or not, which was, he supposed, not up to him to judge, he was damn well going to take it.

He was a little hurt that Vidalia didn't seem to be harboring the same endless adoration for him that he had for her. But he was also glad she didn't return his feelings. It wouldn't be fair to encourage that and would end up breaking her heart later on. But since she was so immune to his charms, he figured it was safe for him to spend time with her.

It would be just like getting the Corral up and running together. Just like old times.

After a few minutes, her conversation with Betty Haggerty, who seemed a bit too old to be running an entire restaurant, wound down. The older woman, he noticed, looked tired, and that made him take another look around the place, and wonder whether it was just empty because it was midday, or whether it was in trouble. And as he examined the place with new eyes, he noticed things. The fresh coat of paint that was long overdue, the crack in one of the out of the way windows, trying to hide behind curtains that were starting to lose their vibrance and fray a bit at the edges.

Haggerty House, he thought, might just be in trouble.

But Vidalia didn't mention a word about that as they went their separate ways. No, she wouldn't, would she? Vidalia Brand was a woman who could keep a confidence.

Trustworthy. He'd always trusted her. She'd rather be shot than lie, or betray someone she cared about.

In the parking lot, he walked her to her truck, then stood there like a sixteen year old, wondering if he should go in for a goodbye kiss.

She shot the thought down when she leaned up and planted one on his cheek. Not at all what he'd had in mind. "I'll see you soon, Bobby Joe. And I'll dig out my Miss Kitty costume before I do."

"You don't have to. I got you a brand new one." At auction, for a small fortune, because it had been one of several actually worn by Amanda Blake in the TV series. She'd been five six, a good four inches taller than Vidalia. But a full foot plus shorter than her co-star, James Arness. He'd landed an original Matt Dillon costume worn by the six-foot seven actor. He was only six two. But he'd had both costumes altered, and the height difference between him and Vidalia would look very close to that between Marshall Dillon and his own Miss Kitty. A foot.

One foot was, he thought, the perfect height difference, as he looked down at her, and she looked up at him. Her eyelids lowered as the color rose in those perfect apple cheeks of hers, and she said, "I'd better go. Gotta open soon."

"Okay. Thanks for this, Vidalia. And for helping out with the Long Branch."

"*De nada,*" she said, and then crushed his heart by turning and getting into her truck. She did flash him a bright smile, though, as she drove away. And yet he thought something was bothering her. There were shadows behind her eyes.



Later that afternoon, Bobby stood in his all but finished saloon, looking around the place and planning their grand entrance. He might have Vidalia come down the curving staircase in the red and gold Miss Kitty getup with her curls all bundled up high on her head and a fake beauty mark on her

cheek. He'd be waiting at the bottom in his Matt Dillon getup. That was where the boys came in to play their parts in the skit he had planned for opening night. Of course he had yet to tell them, and the skit was only in his head right now, but he would be doing that later today.

Absently, he opened a cardboard box of the glossy flyers that had been delivered while he'd been out. They'd been waiting by the front door, under the tarp, when he'd come back. They had come out beautifully

Citizens of Big Falls, celebrate the Holidays in the Old West. Come to the Long Branch for our opening night, December 23rd. Have a great meal, see a show, absolutely free of charge. Merry Christmas, Neighbors.

Your friend,

Bobby Joe McIntyre

He smiled when he eyed the line drawings of him as Matt Dillon and Vidalia as Miss Kitty. Feeling confident she would say yes, he'd hired an artist who'd used a photo of Vidalia in her Miss Kitty getup. Bobby had found it on one of her daughters' Facebook pages. It had come out great. Not as great as she was in person, of course, but great, all the same.

As he stood there looking at the flyers, he heard the front door swing slowly open and looked up to see his oldest son, Jason, across the room. It never failed to amaze him, looking at his sons. Grown, strapping young men, as different from each other as they were from him. Jason was six four, and his upper body showed his penchant for workouts. He was the silent one, the brooder who never showed his feelings. But he was wearing his heart on his sleeve just then, looking at his father in a way that left no doubt in Bobby's mind that Jason knew. He held his son's eyes and tried to think of anything else that would've caused those tears he saw swimming in them, but there wasn't anything else.

Jason looked away, tried to hide his emotions, swept the place with his gaze, gave a nod of approval. "So this is the secret project no one wanted to tell me about."

“I just sent you an email. All three of you. Wanted to get you down here for the grand opening.”

Jason couldn't seem to meet his father's eyes. His own were everywhere but there, in fact. “Since when do you stay for the grand opening? Isn't that the new owner's job?”

“Usually.” Bobby went around behind the bar, took down a mug. “Pull up a stool, son, and I'll pour you a beer.”

“I talked to Mom,” Jason said as he crossed the room, took a seat on one of the tall barstools. The saddle-shaped seats were made of leather and suede. Ladies could hang their handbags from the pommels. Bobby thought it was ingenious, himself.

“How *is* Judith these days? She happy with old what's-his-name?”

“It's Stu and you know it. And yes, she's happy.” Jason sighed, lowered his head and shook it slowly. “She told me about...your condition.”

“She shouldn't have done that.” He said it softly, because he didn't know what else to say. His gut wanted to reassure his son that it wasn't all that serious, that everything would be fine, but it wouldn't. He was on a waiting list for a bone marrow donor that would stop the blood disease from killing him if he got it before the symptoms set in. From that point, which could be any day now, it would move fast. They'd be out of time. And his shot of finding a donor in time were slim to none. He had an odd blood type, one his sons had no inherited.

“Why the hell not?” Jason asked. “Don't you think I have a right to know that my father is...is dying?”

“It's my news to tell, son.” He slid a hand over Jason's on the bar. “And I wanted to choose when and how to break it to the three of you.” He sighed, then shot Jason a look. “Have you told your brothers?”

“Not yet.”

“Why not?”

Jason sighed, shook his head sadly. “Didn’t want to go off half-cocked. Thought I should talk to you first. And besides, it’s almost Christmas.”

“Our last one together,” Bobby said softly. “We think alike, you and me. I didn’t want to ruin everyone’s holiday with this news, either. I wanted to make this Christmas special, the best one yet. And I didn’t want it spoiled by premature grieving, son. Hell, you’ll have time enough to mourn me after I’m gone. Don’t start early, all right?”

Jason stared at his dad for a long time. Then he said, “What is it, exactly?”

He shrugged. “It’s a blood disease. Bone marrow’s not producing the right cells or something. There are lots of long-winded explanations but what it comes down to is that it’ll be fast once it kicks in. I’m not gonna suffer.”

“But they do bone marrow transplants, right? Couldn’t one of us—”

“My doc looked into all that. Yes, a transplant could cure it. No, none of you boys are compatible, and yes, I am on a waiting list for a donor. If one comes along in time, this conversation will be moot.” He shifted his gaze away, feeling guilty for throwing even that morsel of false hope his son’s way.

“How long...do you have?”

He shrugged. “Doc said three months at the outside.”

“And how long ago was that?”

Bobby bit his lip, took a deep breath, nodded hard. “‘Bout three months.”

The bar was between them. Bobby didn’t know if Jason would’ve hugged him or not. Probably not. He wasn’t a hugging sort of a man.

Instead, he just kept his head down as he took a bracing gulp of his beer. “You didn’t want to spend that time with us?”

“I had something I had to do first.”

“Right. Sell off damn near everything you owned, buy a feed store in some backwoods part of Oklahoma, and turn it into a saloon. It’s always been work first with you. Even now.” He picked up one of the flyers, eyed it with disdain, and dropped it again.

Bobby withstood the accusation without flinching. It hurt, but he had it coming. “You’re right about that last part. It always *has been* work first with me. It’s something I regret right to my bones, son, I’ll tell you that. Sometimes it takes facing his own mortality to wake a man up to what really matters. But I am awake now. And you’re dead wrong on the rest of it.”

“Then why are you here? Why didn’t you come to us, talk to us?”

Bobby Joe drew a deep breath, counted to five, let it out again. “There are guest rooms upstairs. Just like in the real Long Branch. Here.” He pulled an old fashioned, heavy key on a numbered wooden ring out from underneath the bar, and slid it across to him. “Go on up. Take your beer with you. They hooked up the wireless yesterday, so you can get online all right. Get your email.”

“I didn’t bring anything. I didn’t plan to stay. I just wanted...” He shook his head. “Hell, I don’t know what I wanted.”

“You can get what you need in town. Your brothers’ll be here by tomorrow. I hope. You might as well wait for them to get here at least.” He shook a finger at his son. “But don’t you tell them about the...about my condition. It can wait. Consider it my final request, if that’s what it takes, but I’m serious about this Jason. After Christmas, not one minute before December twenty-sixth. All right?”

Jason met his father’s eyes, pressed his lips. “I don’t know if they’ll ever forgive me if I do that.”

“Then I guess you’ve gotta decide the right thing to do. Go on up, son.”



The daughters of Vidalia Brand didn't work full time at the OK Corral anymore. Two of them were mothers, and all five were married with careers and lives of their own. Hanging out in the family saloon wasn't really necessary, though they did still come by anytime she needed an extra hand. If a barmaid or waitress got sick or she needed extra help for busy nights, the summer holidays and Halloween. New Year's Eve they usually needed the whole crew, sons in law included. But on Christmas Eve, the Corral was always closed. Family was what mattered on Christmas.

Tonight wasn't one of those busy nights at all, so Vidalia was kind of surprised to see Maya, her firstborn, and Melusine, her fourth, come in through the batwing doors at about 6:30 pm. The place was all but empty. One or two regulars nursing their beers slowly in opposite corners, too bored with life to wait for things to pick up. Always the first to arrive and the last to leave, usually with some friend helping them home.

So it was good and quiet, and the girls knew that it was at this time of the evenin', so she expected they had something on their minds. Something discussion-worthy, and she had a pretty good idea its name was RJR McIntyre.

And she was right. When they came up to the bar, it was Maya who slid a glossy poster across the hardwood and said, "Have you seen this?"

"Course she's seen it," Mel said. "She's *in* it."

"What's this now?" Vidalia came to the bar, wiping her hands on her apron, and picked up the flyer. Then she smiled. "Dang, he was sure confident I'd say yes, wasn't he? I don't know whether to be amused or ticked off."

"Say yes to *what*?" Mel demanded.

Vidalia lifted her gaze, narrowed it, and gave each of the girls a long, steady look. They knew enough to stay silent in the wake of that look, too. "I'll thank you to take that tone out

of your voice, young lady. I'm still your mother, and not only that, I'm fairly certain I could still whip your ass, should the situation call for it."

Maya blinked in shock, then turned her head slightly, probably to hide a smile. She was a mother now, too. She got this sort of thing.

"Have a seat. I'll pour us all some coffee, and we can talk like human beings."

"Mama, you can't possibly trust this guy who just showed up out of the blue and plans to open a competing--"

Vidalia pointed at a table, then turned to head into the kitchen behind the bar. The short order cook showed up at eight. Until then, the crowds were light enough that she could handle any cooking needed on her own.

She filled three mugs, fixed them all, knowing her daughters' coffee fixin's by heart, and carried them out to the table in two hands. The girls were sitting, waiting, and speaking to each other in urgent, hushed tones that silenced the second she returned.

Vidalia sat down. "So, I had lunch with Bobby Joe McIntyre today, and he asked me to play hostess for him on his opening night. Since I owe the man more than I can ever hope to repay, I said I would. The Corral will be closed on the 23rd in a show of support and friendship with the Long Branch. Objections should be put in writing, and filed in the trash can. I don't answer to anyone these days and haven't in twenty years, in case that's slipped your minds." She sipped her coffee and pulled the flyer closer, eyeing it and smiling. "It's very flattering, don't you think?"

"Mama," Mel said, "Alex and I did a little poking around--"

Vidalia looked across the table at her daughter. "Alex and you did what, now?"

"Okay, Alex refused. I did it myself."

"Did what yourself, daughter?"

“Don’t be mad.”

She’d come in here all bluff and bluster and now she was realizing just how far she had overstepped.

“I asked her to, Mom,” Maya said. “I’m worried about you.”

“So I checked into RJR McIntyre’s recent activities. The man’s net worth is in the billions. Most of it’s invested, but just recently he sold off almost everything. Converted it into cash and bought gold with every bit of it.”

Vidalia frowned. “What a billionaire does with his assets is kind of his own business, don’t you think, Mel?”

“Ma, when rich men start converting assets to cash and squirreling it away, it usually means they’re expecting to be prosecuted for something.”

“Oh, does it now?”

“I’ve never seen one that didn’t,” she said.

“Huh. Well, I’ll take that under advisement, Melusine. But it really doesn’t have anything to do with me, and even less to do with you. I’ll add that it doesn’t change my decision to help him open his saloon next week.”

“But Mom—”

“No more snooping, Melusine. That’s out of line and the both of you are old enough to know it.”

Melusine looked at her sister. Maya shrugged. “It’s only because we care about you Mom.”

“I accept that’s what it seems like from your perspective,” Vidalia said. “Would you like to know what it feels like from my end?” She didn’t wait for them to answer before telling them. “It feels like you don’t think I’m smart enough to make my own decisions. Like you don’t have any respect for the wisdom I’ve gained, raising five girls and starting a business almost singlehandedly. Like you think that when a woman hits fifty-something, she turns into a blithering idiot who needs a caretaker.”

The girls looked more horrified with every word she spoke, and she knew she had finally got through to them.

“We don’t think that at all, Mom,” Maya said. “I don’t ever want you to think we do.”

“Same here,” Mel put in. But for some reason it didn’t carry the same conviction. “I don’t think you’re an idiot. I just think when romance is involved, even the smartest woman can make a mistake.”

“If there *were* romance involved, it would be my mistake to make. Not yours.” Vidalia pushed away from the table and stood up. “This conversation is over. I’ve got a business to run. You girls have a good night.”

Sighing, they got up, too. Mel reached for the glossy flyer on the table, but Vidalia grabbed it first. “I’ll just keep this. Night, girls.”



Vidalia had no idea what kind of demon possessed her, but after closing time, she found herself once again, parked outside the Long Branch. This time, though, she pulled right on into the parking lot and sat there in plain sight, staring at the impressive face of the place.

The concealing tent had vanished sometime during the day today, and she’d spotted those glossy posters hanging on telephone poles and sign posts all the way here.

Bobby had done a great job. The front entrance had four glossy log pillars that supported a huge sign that read Long Branch Saloon. The lettering managed to be both rustic and fancy at the same time. Rustic, because it looked as if it had been burned into the wood with a cattle brand. Fancy, because the first letter of each word was kind of swirly.

It looked great. And with those signs all over town, she figured there was no longer any point in hiding what was going on beneath the tarp. Still, she’d expected more. Maybe a little fanfare, the high school marching band, the town

supervisor—Big Falls was too small for a mayor—and a ribbon cutting ceremony. Something like that.

No one was awake in there. The place was dark, and she was sitting here like some kind of midnight creeper, spying on a long ago lover and wondering if he really believed that nothing had happened between them that night. Or if he had come back here to find out the truth, once and for all. The secret she'd been keeping all these years.

A secret she'd never had any right to keep.

A light came on inside just as she decided to drive quietly away. The front door opened. No point hiding now. She opened her door and got out of the pickup, landing light and easy on the ground as he came toward her. But when she got the courage to look up, it wasn't Bobby Joe's eyes she found blinking at her. Similar ones, for sure, but not his.

"You're her," he said. "You're Vidalia Brand."

She blinked in surprise. "Well, I sure was last I checked. How do you know?"

He lowered his head, nodding slow. "My father's... mentioned your name once or twice. And then of course, there's the poster."

"You're one of Bobby's boys?" she asked, because it wasn't right, the rush of pleasure coursing through her at knowing Bobby Joe had spoken of her...once or twice. "I'd have guessed that in another second or two. You've got those same blue eyes."

"Jason," he said, extending a big hand. "Pleased to meet you, Ms. Brand."

"You can call me Vidalia," she said. "I had no idea you were in town."

"I only just arrived. Dad didn't tell me...any of us...what he was up to. At least, not until I'd already tracked him down on my own."

Something was wrong with the young man. He looked downright troubled.

“My brothers will be here tomorrow,” he said. “Dad sent an email after I left asking us all to be here for the grand opening. I think we’re supposed to play outlaws or something.”

She smiled. “You’ve gotta admit, he’s very good at this,” she said, looking at the saloon.

“Is that why you’re here in the middle of the night?” he asked. “To get a look at it, now that it’s uncovered?”

She didn’t say yes or no. “I own the OK Corral, other end of town. We only just closed for the night, or I wouldn’t be creeping around in the wee hours.”

“Dad’s not here,” he said.

She nodded. “That’s okay. I didn’t expect he’d be up at this hour, even if he was....” Then she frowned. “Where on earth can he be at this hour?”

“Said he couldn’t sleep. Wanted to go see the falls this town is named after. Said he hadn’t been out there since he’d been back.”

She nodded slow, but she was starting to get a little worried feeling running up her spine. “Does he normally summon all his sons to an opening of a new saloon?”

“Never. But then again, he usually resells them before they open, turning a healthy profit in the process.”

She tipped her head to one side. “Why do you think this time is different?”

He looked her right in the eyes, opened his mouth like he was about to say something, then closed it again and looked past her at the sky. “You’d have to ask him that, ma’am.”

“All right, I will.” Was that a tear glimmering in Jason McIntyre’s eye? What in the hay was going on with this clan? “It was nice meeting you, Jason. Once your brothers arrive, I’d like to have you all over for a meal.”

“Why?” he asked. Flat out, blunt, no bull with this one.

She shrugged. “Well, if your family is gonna run a saloon in this town, I figure I can either make you my enemies or make you my friends. I’ve got enough enemies, so....” she shrugged.

He relaxed, maybe let his guard down even, and smiled at her. “You’re every bit as pretty as my dad always said, Ms. Brand.”

“Vidalia,” she reminded him. “And thank you. Goodnight, Jason.” She turned back toward her truck, then stopped and faced him once more. “Whatever’s troubling you, you know, things have a way of working out.”

“Not this time,” he said softly. He lowered his head, shook it, and turning, walked back into the saloon, leaving her there alone.

Vidalia got into her truck and didn’t even try to talk herself out of driving to the Falls. It was an argument she’d have lost anyway.



Bobby Joe found himself a perfect spot in the little clearing that faced the falls, pulled up a log for a stool, and sat himself down. He had never been one to spend a lot of time mulling on spiritual matters. But learning that you only had a short time to live probably changed that in everyone. Even the most hardened of hearts, he imagined.

Now, though, as he sat there watching that waterfall flowing like it would never stop, it hit him that it would. Eventually, it would stop. The water would dry up or the cliff would erode back far enough to make it level with the rest of the riverbed, and there would be no more waterfall.

He was going to stop, too. And he wondered if there would be any more Bobby Joe once he crossed that great divide. What was on the other side? Was there an other side? How could you go on without a body, and what would that be like? Did he truly believe there was anything after death?

He'd never given these things a lot of thought. Considered himself a good man, a decent man. He didn't think he'd done anything worthy of hellfire, if there was such a thing. But he wasn't sure he'd done anything worthy of heaven, either.

He'd never felt the call to pray before. But as he sat there on that log, in the cold night air, watching his breath form clouds in the darkness, he thought maybe it was time. He looked up at the stars, and he said whatever came to mind. Didn't think first, just opened his mouth. And the words that came out were these. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do here, God. I mean, I know what I *want* to do. Spend time here, in the place where I spent the days that turned out to be my happiest, though I didn't know that at the time. That's probably a life lesson right there, isn't it, God? Anytime you're laughing, smiling, happy, might just turn out to be your happiest moment ever. Probably a good thing to tell young folks. Too late for it to do me much good, I guess. Still, I wanted to come back here, to where I was happiest, and spend time with the woman I was happiest with, the one I could never have for my own. I wanted to spend my last Christmas here, with her, and with my boys, because it seems like it's something they should experience. Something they should know if they hope to know me—really know me, deep down. They have to know what made me happy. So here I am, doing what I want to do with the little bit of time I have left, and while I know I'm late in asking, I figure better late than never. What do *you* want me to spend my final days doing? Cause if you tell me, Lord, I'll give it my best shot. I promise, I will."

He sat there a while, not expecting an answer, exactly. Maybe a sign or a flash of insight or something like that. But the only thing that came was the sound of a pickup truck and the brief gleam of its bouncing headlights as it came to a stop near where he'd left his own. A door slammed, and then he heard footsteps in the tall, dead winter grasses and weeds, and knew someone was coming toward him.

And he also knew before she got all the way there, who it was. Vidalia. He smelled her signature scent—the same one she'd worn all those years before. It used to drive him crazy,

make him want to bury his head near her neck and rub himself in it.

She didn't say a word, just came right on out and plunked herself down on the log next to him. "Beautiful night for star gazing," she said.

"Sure is," he agreed, and as he looked up at the stars, he sent God a smile. *Message received. Thanks.*

"Cold though," she went on.

"Downright brisk."

"I met your son, Jason, tonight," she said.

He looked at her then, figuring he'd pretended the stars held more interest for long enough. And then he just drank in the sight of her. She wore a suede jacket that ended at the waist just above her jeans. And those boots of hers with heels most women her age wouldn't even try to run around in. Her hair was long and wild and dancing with the chilly breeze that the falls seemed to generate all on their own.

"He seems like a good man. You raised him well."

"His mother did," Bobby Joe admitted. "I was too busy with work to take much credit for the man he turned out to be."

"Well, it's never too late to start. Seems like you know that, already. Is that why you summoned them all out here for the grand opening?"

"He told you about that, did he?" She nodded. "He tell you anything else?"

She smiled a little, lowered her eyes. "That you talked about me. Said I was pretty."

"Nothing but the truth," he said.

"He seemed...I don't know. Sad. Troubled."

Bobby looked away from her probing eyes. "I hope that changes when I give him his Christmas present."

"Oh? You have a great one in mind?"

He nodded. “Best one ever. The Long Branch. I’m signing it over to him and his brothers before we open.”

She lifted her brows in surprise. “But Bobby Joe, I thought you were planning to run it yourself.” Then she looked at her hands in her lap. “Does that mean you’re...not planning to stay here in Big Falls?”

“You say that as if you care. Do you, Vidalia?”

She didn’t look up and she didn’t answer. So he caught her chin with his forefinger and tipped her head up, and he was surprised to see tears sparkling on her thick lashes.

And what happened next, well, he didn’t have much control over that at all. Because if he had, it wouldn’t have happened. He looked at her for about a second longer, and then he kissed her.

Her arms crept round his neck, and his slid around her waist, and she kissed him right back, and that made him want to kiss her even more, which resulted in her kissing him back even more. They sat there on that fallen log, all wrapped up in each other, making out like a couple of horny teenagers. And when he lifted his head and stared into her beautiful dark eyes, there was snow falling on her hair. Tiny white flakes of it drifted down all around them. It wouldn’t stick. And come morning, no one would even know it had ever happened.

It was like a gift, just for the two of them.

She smiled up at him. “I’ve been praying for snow,” she said softly.

“Are your prayers always answered, Vidalia?” he asked. He wondered if, in her experience, God answered her prayers as quickly as He had just answered Bobby’s own. He’d asked what he should be doing with the time he had left, and God had sent him Vidalia. He’d as much as told him to go ahead and spend his final days with her, just the way he wanted to.

Made him wish he’d talked to the Big Guy more often. He hadn’t expected it to be that easy or for the answer to be that immediate, that clear. Unless it was just his imagination, and coincidence, and wishful thinking.

She was nodding hard. “Always, Bobby Joe. Every single time I pray, I get an answer. Every once in a while, though, the answer is no.”

He nodded at her. “So you’re still a believer?”

“Look around us,” she said turning her head and looking at the stars, the waterfall crashing down, and the gentle fall of snowflakes in the dark. “How can I not be?”

His heart knotted up and told him right then that he was as much in love with this woman as he had ever been. And he knew it wasn’t fair not to tell her the truth, not when it seemed like she might be feeling fondly toward him as well.

But not yet, not tonight. Tonight was too special, too magical to ruin with talk about death and dying.

He slid his arm around her shoulders, held her near to his side, and continued looking at the sky and noticing how you could hardly tell the stars from the snowflakes, way up high. “I need to get a Christmas tree for the Long Branch,” he said.

“Well, I need to get one for the Corral,” she told him. “What do you say we do it together?”

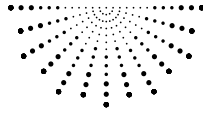
“I say, you bet. How about tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow’s great. Perfect, in fact. It’s Sunday, so it’ll have to be in the afternoon. I go to church in the morning.” She took a deep breath, lowered her eyes. “You could come with me, if you want.”

He was quiet for a long moment. “I um...God and I are working through some issues right now, Vidalia. We’re communicating, Him and I. But I’m not quite ready to visit Him at home just yet.

She frowned and studied his face through the snowflakes, but he didn’t elaborate.

CHAPTER FIVE



Widalia was like a kid on Christmas Eve for the rest of that night. She didn't drive home, she floated on a cloud of romantic pink fluff she hadn't felt since....

Well, heck, since Bobby Joe had left town so long ago.

She felt as giddy as a seventeen-year-old in love for the first time. And maybe that was unseemly and maybe it was silly, but it was. That's all. It just was.

She got herself home and took a long hot shower and didn't sleep a wink all night. Just laid there, imagining how it would be if she and Bobby could start over. Imagining how it would be if he stuck around Big Falls, and what people would think about that. And yet all that time, there was a dark shadow lurking in the back of her mind, casting a pall over her excited, romantic thoughts. The secret she'd kept from him. The one that was standing smack in between the two of them. But she pushed that shadow out of her mind and kept it at bay, just like she'd done for the past twenty-plus years.

She was up before dawn, bustling around the kitchen to get Sunday dinner underway. It was a family tradition. Even on Sundays when the girls and their families didn't come to church, they always came to Sunday dinner. And while she didn't want to get ahead of herself here, she was thinking of inviting Bobby Joe and his sons too, if they felt like coming along.

She was halfway through chopping onions to go into her famous pot roast, when the shadow of her guilt escaped from

where she'd buried it, jumped up and hit her square in the chest, knocking the breath right out of her. Here she was, acting like she was about to embark on a new romance. But it wasn't new at all, was it? It was an old attraction that had led to the biggest sin she'd ever committed, which she had then compounded by adding the biggest lie she'd ever told.

She had no business feeling giddy or romantic or excited at all. And if anything was going to develop between her and Bobby Joe McIntyre, she had to take care of all of that old baggage first.

Because chances were, once he knew the truth, he'd never forgive her.

She should've told him long ago. It was the only stain on her soul, and it was a big one.

"Mom?" Selene had come in all but silently. "Are you crying?"

"Now what on earth would I have to cry about, darlin'? It's the onions, that's all." She used the blade of her knife to scrape them from the cutting board into the roasting pan, popped on the lid, and slid it into the oven to cook slowly. Then she went to the sink and washed her hands.

"You sure?" Selene asked.

"Sure I'm sure." Vidalia turned around to face her youngest daughter, and found herself lost in Selene's mysterious, pale blue eyes. "I don't suppose you're coming to church with me this morning," she asked to change the subject.

"Nope, not today. I celebrated the winter solstice last night, a couple of nights early, with some friends. It was more spiritual to me outside under the stars than church will ever be. It snowed, you know."

"I know! I saw it too. And I have to say, daughter, I agree with you there. It was truly magical, wasn't it?"

Selene frowned at her. "Now what were you doing up at three a.m., Mom?"

Vidalia shrugged and smiled mysteriously. “If you’re not going to church, what are you doing here so early?”

“We thought we’d start putting up the Christmas lights on the house for you. You’re late getting them out this year, and I can’t stand looking at this place unlit this close to the holiday.”

“We?” Vidalia asked.

Selene nodded. “Cory’s outside unloading the ladder and tools.”

“You’re a good girl, Selene. To tell you the truth, I was hoping one of you would offer.”

“You should’ve just asked.”

She shrugged. “So, as long as you’re here, will you keep an eye on my pot roast?”

“Sure thing, as long as you can tell me precisely what time to turn it off.”

“I set a timer.”

Selene smiled. “Go on to church. We’ll have your halls decked in no time.”

“Thank you, sweetie. And happy Winter Solstice.”

Selene nodded. “Thank you.”

“What’s important to my girls is important to me.” Vidalia took off her apron and headed out, sad that none of the snow from the night before had stuck. She’d forgot it was the twentieth already. Only two more nights until The Long Branch’s grand opening. And only four more until Christmas Eve.

Where had the time gone?



The Reverend Jackson’s sermon was about redemption. The son of God paying the price of our sins so we would never

have to suffer death. It was a rouser, and one he repeated every year at Christmas and Easter, with minor tweaks.

Vidalia hung back afterward, chatting with her neighbors and friends, and wishing them happy holidays, until the last of them had left, and she stood there in the open, welcoming doors of the little country church all alone with the minister.

“I can see something’s on your mind. You were preoccupied throughout my entire sermon,” he said when the building was empty.

“Nonsense, I heard every single word.”

He lifted his bushy, gray eyebrows as if he didn’t quite believe that, but graciously didn’t say so out loud. “Shall we go back inside for this, Vidalia?”

“I think we probably should, Reverend Jackson.”

She went first. He closed the red double doors and followed her down the aisle, around the pulpit, and through a small door into his little office in the back. Once there, he waved her into a chair while he poured coffee from a fairly fresh pot and handed her a cup. “It’s decaf. At our age—”

“Speak for yourself,” she said.

He sent her a wink. But his smile died as he settled into his chair behind the desk. “I can see you’ve got something on your mind, Vidalia.”

She sighed. “I’ve committed a terrible sin, Reverend Jackson. And I just can’t seem to figure out how to make it right, or if I even can.

“You?” he frowned. “Tongues have been wagging around town. About you and this McIntyre fellow. Bobby Joe. Does this have to do with him?”

She nodded. “Has to do with him, and me, and John...and maybe Selene. It’s a guilty secret I’ve been keeping for more than two decades. I need you to tell me what to do.”

He leaned back in his chair, steepled his fingers, was quiet for a long moment. Then he said, “We’re not Catholics. You don’t have to confess your sins to me.”

“I know that. And if there was a way to figure this out without telling you, believe me, I’d rather. But I need guidance right now.”

“Guidance.” Reverend Jackson lowered his head, shaking it slowly. “I’ve learned more from you, Vidalia Brand, than you probably ever have or ever will from me. How to be a better parent to my daughter tops the list. So I’m

gonna give you a suggestion. And then if you feel you still need my guidance, I’m here to listen. All right?”

“All right.”

“Whatever this is, whatever sin you committed, and whatever action you need to take to make it right, I want you to imagine one of your girls coming to you and pouring out everything that you were about to pour out to me. Every detail. Pretend it all happened to Maya or Edie or Kara. And then I want you to think about what you would tell them to do about it. How you would tell them to make it right.”

She frowned at him. “It’s not the same thing.”

“It’s exactly the same thing. They’re the age you were when all this happened, aren’t they?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“And you’ve raised them with the same moral code you believe in, haven’t you?”

“Well of course I have but—”

“Write it all down, in the form of a letter to your younger self, or do it all inside your head, and talk to that younger Vidalia as if she were one of your own daughters. And then, Vidalia, no matter how hard, you take your own advice.”

She sat there blinking slowly, and realizing that she knew exactly what she would tell one of her daughters about something like this. Tell the truth. Apologize profusely, beg forgiveness, offer atonement if necessary but first, buck up and tell the truth.

She drew a deep breath, got up from her seat and nodded. “You’re one hell of a preacher, Reverend Jackson. I ever tell

you that?”

“A time or two.” He got up as well, reached out and took her hand, holding it between both of his own. “You remember one thing, Vidalia. God would never judge you as harshly as you are judging yourself right now. And there is nothing He wouldn’t forgive.”

She knew that. She knew all of that. Why had she been half-expecting divine retribution to come crashing down on her instead of loving forgiveness? She knew better, didn’t she?

She just had to come clean. And not just to Bobby Joe. But to her daughters. Oh Lord, why couldn’t doing the right thing ever be easy?



By noon, Bobby’s sons had all arrived, and he’d given them the grand tour of the Long Branch, and pitched his invitation to help him with the grand opening, and then stick around for the holidays.

Joey was eager right off the bat, always up for a good time. Rob was less than enthusiastic, until Jason chimed in with an unrestrained yes and a meaningful look at the other two.

Hell, if they didn’t already suspect something was up, they would now, Bobby Joe thought. But he wasn’t going to let that put a damper on his day. He had every intention of enjoying his time with Vidalia this afternoon. So he left his sons with a list of jobs that needed doing around the place. Now that the crews of workers had packed up and gone home, there was no one to do it but him, and he tired a lot easier than he used to. Which was one of the symptoms that was supposed to warn him when things were...winding down. But he wasn’t going to think about that right then.

He met Vidalia at the Christmas Tree farm five miles from Big Falls and drank in the sight of her in her snug jeans and suede jacket. She didn’t wear a hat. It was chilly today, and he thought she should have but didn’t say so. He’d brought along a hand saw, and the two of them hiked out into acres of pine

trees with a map showing the layout of the place. Balsam firs this way, blue spruce that way, and so on.

“I’m dying for the perfect Douglas Fir,” she said. “Eleven feet tall. You?”

The Douglas Fir section was a long ways back. He hoped he’d have the wherewithal to drag the tree back to the road for her. “I’m opting for a blue spruce,” he said, choosing the kind of tree closest to the road. “But we’ll get yours first.”

“Deal.”

She smiled, and he just basked in her for a second. The sun was beaming down on her hair, the chilly breeze lifting it and playing with its curls, and her eyes were like a chocolate bar in the sun. Her cheeks were pink from the cold, and it made her even more beautiful to him.

“What?” she asked after a moment.

He shook his head. “You’re just pretty enough to take a man’s breath away, is all.”

Her smile seemed to falter. She lowered her eyes.

“What’s wrong, Vidalia?”

“Nothing. I...” She sighed. “Nothing. I mean, there *is* something. But I don’t want to ruin our day with it. So I’m gonna put it out of my mind and just enjoy this. And being with you.”

“Is there someone else?” he asked, because he couldn’t stand not to know.

She looked him right in the eyes. “There’s never been anyone else, Bobby Joe. You said you never got me outta your mind. Well, I need to be honest and admit that I never got you outta mine either. I never will.”

A little rush of alarm went through him. He lowered his head, guilt rising up in his chest. He should tell her. He didn’t expect her to return his feelings at all, much less this quickly, this easily. Her words to him were a dream come true, but it just wasn’t fair. He had to tell her. He couldn’t let her fall in love with him before she knew he was dying.

He couldn't.

"I never got over you, Bobby Joe. And I don't imagine I ever will. But I did a bad thing to you way back then, and I've got to make it right with you now. Before we go any further. I've got to tell you—"

"There's something I've got to tell you too, Vidalia," he said very softly. He met her eyes, dreading that discussion. And then a father walked past them, dragging a pine tree and carrying a little girl on his shoulders, and they were laughing their way through a chorus of Jingle Bells. Bobby smiled and felt lighter. "But not today," he said. "Today, let's just get some Christmas trees, have fun, and not worry about anything heavy. Okay?"

She smiled brightly. "That is more than okay," she told him.



The scene in the parking lot in front of the Long Branch Saloon was like something out of an old western film. The five daughters of Vidalia Brand stood shoulder to shoulder facing the three sons of Bobby Joe McIntyre. About ten feet of recently laid blacktop stretched between them.

Kara Brand had made the call asking for this meeting. Jason had felt bristly, like his family was about to be accused of something and had expected a hostile encounter. He hadn't been all that worried about it, though. At least not until he'd seen them.

He and his brothers might as well have been face to face with a gang of super models. The apples had not fallen far from the tree in this family. Robert and Joey were as rocked by their beauty as he was, but he hoped they also noticed that every last one of them was wearing a wedding ring. Off limits. The McIntyre's didn't roll that way. If there was one thing their father had managed to drum into them during their upbringing, it was that you didn't so much as flirt with a married woman. Hell, not even a going steady girl, when

they'd been in high school. It was probably the one item in their father's moral code that stood above all others.

A handful of cars came and went, and he didn't miss their sudden deceleration or the rubber necking drivers.

Finally, he cleared his throat and walked closer, extending a hand to the apparent leader, "I'm Jason McIntyre."

"Maya Brand." She smiled a little stiffly and shook his hand with a respectably firm grip.

"These are my brothers, Robert and Joseph," he said, indicating the two men who flanked him.

"My sisters," she replied. "Edie, Kara, Melusine and Selene." She nodded at each girl as she named them.

His defensiveness relaxed a little. "Those are all names of goddesses, aren't they?"

"Mama had high expectations for her daughters," Maya said. "Robert, are you named for your father?"

Rob said, "We all are. Dad's full name is Jason Robert Joseph."

More traffic passed, slowed. More drivers gaped.

"We don't get inside soon, there's gonna be a crowd gathered," Melusine said. "And if we're gonna have a shootout, it oughtta be at the OK Corral, so we might as well talk instead."

Nodding, getting her attempt at levity, but not thinking it very funny, Jason led the way, held the door for the females and let them enter first. The youngest one, the platinum blonde with the very blue eyes, looked around in wide-eyed appreciation. "This place is amazing. Wow, is that a player piano?"

"It is," Joey said, sounding proud. Of the three of them, he was the one who was eating all this up. He loved finally being included in one of their father's projects and was diving headlong into the whole outlaw skit nonsense Dad had planned for them. It wasn't surprising. Joey was the fun-loving kid of

the family, and he was taking Selene to show her the piano, tinkling the keys and pointing out the hidden controls.

Robert was harder to read. He'd always been laid back, easy going, never had strong opinions about much of anything. But his go-with-the-flow attitude had been replaced by heartbreak recently when his long-time girlfriend had jilted him.

Jason didn't imagine their father's news was going to be easy for either of his brothers to take.

"Pick a table, ladies," Joey called, going behind the bar for the tray of cookies he had waiting. "I raided the kitchen after you called. Bring that coffee, will you Rob?"

Robert nodded and picked up a carafe from the pot behind the bar. The youngest Brand girl, Selene, slid onto a barstool and said, "We don't need a table, the bar's just fine." Then she ran a hand over it and nodded. "Real fine."

One of the sisters elbowed her, Melusine, if he had them straight. "We're here to talk about our mother and your father."

"And if our mother knew it, she'd probably disown us," one of the two tall ones put in. Edie or Kara. Edie he thought, but either one could be the former model. Heck, any of them could. "So we'd appreciate your discretion."

Joey frowned and looked at Jason. In fact, Robert was looking at him too. Jason sighed. "My brothers only arrived this morning. I haven't filled them in yet, and to tell you the truth, I probably know less than any of you ladies."

"Wait, wait, wait, now. Our father and their mother—" Joey began.

"Didn't you get the last name, Joe? Brand. Their mother is *Vidalia* Brand," Jason said.

"*Holeee* smokes." That was Robert. He was looking at one of the glossy flyers with her likeness on it. An open box of them still sat on the bar, the few left that Jason and his dad hadn't plastered all over town already.

The women were frowning from one to the other. Kara said, "You know our mother?"

"Know *of* her," Joey said. "Dad's...mentioned her."

"Might as well be honest, Joe. Dad's kind of obsessed with her."

"Robert—" Jason's voice had a warning tone.

"C'mon, Jay, these girls are clearly concerned about whatever is going on here. They have a right to know the truth, don't they?"

"*You* don't even know the truth," his older brother muttered.

Maya was still standing. She moved behind the bar to help Joey put out cups and saucers, found the creamer in the mini-fridge down low, while he grabbed a box of sugar packets and set it out.

"None of us know the whole truth," she said. "Our mother's been keeping secrets, and that's not like her." Then she sighed. "This can't be easy for you to discuss. I'm sure your loyalty lies with your mother—"

"Our parents' divorce was the best thing for both of them. They were both happier afterward, which meant we were as well. And Mom's happily married to a guy who's crazy about her now," Robert said.

Jason took the carafe and filled a mug, passed it to Maya, then filled another and offered it to Selene.

"There's always been another woman on Dad's mind," Joey mused softly. "The one that got away. The one he never got over. The most stunning beauty west of the Mississippi. Sweet Vidalia Brand." He gave the words dramatic flair with a hand on his chest and a faraway look in his eyes.

"What's your mother's...situation?" Robert asked.

"What do you mean, *situation*?" Melusine returned. Jason knew which one she was, because he'd seen her photograph online when he'd been checking into this family. She and her husband Alex were high priced P.I.s.

Robert lifted his brows. "Relationship-wise."

Maya said, "My father-in-law's half in love with her."

"So's my brother in law," said the youngest, which made Jason lift his eyebrows in surprise.

"And don't forget Reverend Jackson," Kara put in.

Mel shrugged. "But Mama hasn't shown much interest in any of them."

"Still, nothing could possibly have ever happened between them in the past," Kara said. "Mom was still married to Daddy when she knew Bobby Joe. Right?" She blinked from one of her sisters to another.

Selene shrugged. "Don't ask me. It was before I was born."

"She was married," Maya stated it flatly.

Mel shook her head. "She thought she was married. But it was never legal. Our father already had a wife when he married our mother. We're all bastards, if you want to know the truth of it."

Jason heard more underneath the words, but decided not to pry. His father's warnings about never looking twice at a married woman, however, were suddenly taking on a whole new meaning. Maybe he'd been speaking from experience.

"Wow, that's one for the history books, isn't it?" Joey asked. He was leaning on the bar, listening raptly. "So where's your father now?" Joey asked.

Robert's jaw ticked a little bit.

"Shot by gangsters," Selene said in a dramatic tone. "Aren't we just the most scandalous bunch you've ever met?"

She was a lot like Joey, Jason thought. No carburetor.

"It's not funny, Selene." Her oldest sister sent her a look. "His other wife was killed as well, and for a time, we thought their two kids with them, though it turns out they got away. We only just reunited with them a few years ago."

“He deserved what those gangsters did to him,” Selene said. “He was a piece of—”

“Selene!” Maya snapped.

Selene rolled her eyes at her eldest sister, but she closed her mouth.

“My mother’s a good woman, a church-going woman,” Maya said then. “She wouldn’t have broken her marriage vows, even though they were to a man who didn’t deserve her.”

“And speaking of church, she should’ve been back by now, and she’ll expect to see us at the house.” Melusine looked uneasily toward the door.

Kara shook her head. “No, she won’t be back yet. She was going to pick out a Christmas tree for the Corral after church.”

Jason and his brothers exchanged a quick look, and the girls sent them a questioning one. Might as well tell them, Jason thought. “That’s what dad said he was doing when he left here. Going to get a Christmas tree for the saloon.”

“Holy smokes,” Joey said again. “There really *is* something going on here, isn’t there?” He picked up one of the flyers, nodding as he perused it. “Who can blame him though? If she’s as pretty in person—”

“I don’t think that’s it.” Jason snatched the flyer away and dropped it back into the box. “Dad’s got...a lot going on.”

“Yeah,” Mel said, getting to her feet. “Like selling off assets and closing businesses.”

“You sound like you suspect him of something,” Jason said, sliding off his barstool as well and facing her. His father hadn’t been the best, but he would be damned if he’d let some strange female accuse him of anything. The man was dying, for God’s sake.

Kara got up and planted herself right in between them, a palm to each chest. “Mel, lots of people decide to close businesses. It’s called retirement. It doesn’t mean anything dire.”

Jason said, "I'm curious how you know so much about my father's business. You and your P.I. husband investigate him or something?"

"Yeah, just like you apparently investigated us, or you wouldn't know we were P.I.s at all," she shot back.

"Whoa, now," Joey said. He clapped a firm hand on Jason's shoulder, as if he was going to physically set him on his ass if he didn't back down. "Look, ladies, we're as in the dark here as you are," Joey said. "It's just not like our father, this behavior. His business is everything to him. It's been his whole life. We had no idea he was liquidating everything. And then he heads out here and buys this place in the middle of nowhere. And not to flip it for profit, either, Jason says. It's just...he's never done that. If I didn't know better, I'd think he intends to stay here, long term." He looked at his brothers. "Maybe he's serious about Vidalia Brand."

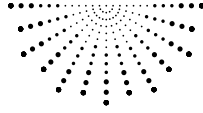
The door opened, and a happy couple came in backwards, laughing and dragging what had to be an eighteen-foot tree behind them. The woman fell on her backside and smiled up at the man. And he beamed down at her as if she was the mother of all goddesses. And maybe she was at that, Jason thought.

And then their laughter died as they both realized they weren't alone, and turned their gazes toward the summit meeting at the bar.

"Well now, what have we here?" Vidalia asked as Bobby Joe closed his hand around hers and helped her to her feet.

Jason's father met his eyes, asking him without a word how much he had told these women, not to mention his brothers. Bobby Joe took three steps closer, and then he collapsed in a heap on the floor.

CHAPTER SIX



“*B*obby!” Vidalia dropped to her knees beside him as the sum total of their offspring stampeded closer. Maya was the first to dial 911. Vidalia heard her on the phone with the dispatcher, but she didn’t think Bobby was very likely to let any ambulance take him out of here. She laid her head on his chest and felt his heart beating nice and strong and steady. His breathing seemed okay, too.

And then his hand touched her hair, and she opened her wet eyes, lifted her head and met his.

He gave her a wavering smile. “I’m not going to any hospital, Vidalia. I’m fine. Trust me.”

“You were unconscious.” She looked up at his sons. The two younger ones looked stunned and terrified, but the eldest had gone white and she thought a stiff breeze might knock him over. “Has anything like this happened before?”

“Never,” Joey said. But Jason didn’t say a word.

“I’m fine. It’s okay, I’m fine now.” Bobby Joe pushed himself up until he was sitting instead of lying flat. Vidalia held his shoulders, searched his eyes, read them, and knew in that moment that what had just happened was not a surprise to him. He already knew what was wrong. And he knew what he was doing.

“Maya, call Doc Shelby,” she said. “He’ll be home. He’s retired. Get him over here pronto. He’ll be faster than an ambulance anyway. You boys, help your father upstairs and get him into a bed.”

No one even thought to argue with her. People seldom did. Vidalia had been through enough emergencies to be able to handle herself in the midst of one. But she couldn't get her head to stop spinning with a million questions. If he was sick and he hadn't told her, then it had to be one of two things. Either it was nothing at all or it was damned serious.

The boys helped their father to his feet, because he wouldn't let them carry him. He slung an arm around Jason, and nodded back at the other two. "Rob, Joey, get the tree upright and into a stand, will you? There's a big one over there by the windows in front. It'll look spectacular from outside, once we get the lights strung."

The boys clearly knew something was going on.

So did Vidalia. She and Jason flanked Bobby Joe, but he looked at her next, smiled and it was a real smile. "I have no intention of missing that Sunday Dinner you promised me."

"We'll just see what Doc Shelby says."

"All right," he told her. "You bring him on upstairs when he gets here, will you Vidalia?"

She blinked. He was asking her to stay down here. He wanted time alone with his firstborn. Hell, what was going on with him?

She didn't ask though. Not now. She smiled, knowing it didn't reach her eyes, and nodded, and kept her tear spigot turned off. "All right."

Jason helped his father up the stairs. When they were out of sight, Vidalia turned and saw seven younger sets of eyes staring at her, as if maybe she had the answers. She shook her head slowly. "I'm sorry, gang. I don't know what's wrong with him either, and I'm as worried as you are."

"Maybe he just pushed himself too hard," Selene said, staring up the stairway even though there was no longer anyone on it. "That tree must have been heavy."

"That's why he picked his from the bunch nearest the road, I'll bet," Vidalia muttered, kicking herself. "God, mine was almost halfway back, and he dragged it all the way for me."

“Shouldn’t have been a problem,” Robert said. “Dad’s a young man.”

“He’s in better shape than I am,” Joey said, patting his flat belly as if it wasn’t.

“He’s never had a spell like this before?” Vidalia asked the men.

“Never,” Joey said.

“Never that we know of,” Robert added, sending a suspicious look up the stairs.

Vidalia got the feeling that young man was starting to have the same worries that she was. When a man sold all he had, closed his business, and went back to the town and the woman he’d long since left behind, maybe he had reasons. He’d said there was something he hadn’t told her.

Well, there was something she hadn’t told him, too, and once Doc finished up with him, she knew she had to. There was no more time for waiting around. Reverend Jackson was right. She’d have tanned her daughters’ hides if they’d kept the secrets she had.

She looked at her girls, shook her head. “I’ve got a tree out there needs taking to the Corral. And I hope to the good Lord someone remembered to turn off my pot roast.”



“Never been so embarrassed in my life,” he muttered as the local medic gave him the once over. “Dropped just like a sack of feed, right in front of the prettiest woman in creation.”

The retired medico who insisted Bobby Joe call him Doc, just smiled at him, his teeth too white and even to belong in such a well-lined face. His hair was shock white and curly. He smelled like peppermint and looked like Mark Twain.

“You don’t seem at all concerned,” Doc said when he’d finished listening to Bobby Joe’s chest, poking and prodding

his belly, taking his blood pressure, and shining a bright light into his eyes.

“I’m not, Doc. You’re just here for show. I know exactly what’s wrong with me, and I’m not ready for anyone else to know. When I am, they will.”

Doc lifted his eyebrows. “There might be something I can do—”

“There’s not.” He sat up in the bed, feeling like himself again.

“You do realize that anything you tell me stays between us, don’t you? I may be retired, but my oath isn’t.”

Bobby Joe liked the old fellow. “I do know that. I also know that if you walk out of this room looking morose, no one’s gonna quit prodding me until I give them some answers. And I’m saving that for after the holidays.”

“So it’s bad, then. Bone marrow transplant won’t do the trick?”

He felt his eyes widen on the older man.

Doc shrugged. “You’d be surprised what a good doctor can tell from an external exam.”

Sighing, Bobby gave in. “I’m on the list. None of my sons are compatible.”

Doc nodded. “How far advanced are you?”

“They gave me three months and that was three months ago. I just want to have a nice, hometown kind of Christmas with my family before I have to break the news. That’s all. Just one old-fashioned family holiday. The kind I never gave them. So please, leave this room with a smile on your face and make it convincing.”

Doc nodded slow. “You’ve got it.” He heaved a big sigh, extended a hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. McIntyre. I only wish—”

“Nice to meet you, too.” Bobby Joe swung his legs around and put his sock feet on the floor, so he’d be sitting up, not

lying down in the bed when the door opened. “Merry Christmas, Doc.”

“Merry Christmas.” He opened the door, lifted his head and put on a smile for the crowd gathered in the hall outside it. Three strapping men, and Vidalia standing among them, a foot shorter and a mile prettier. Of them all, only Jason knew the truth, and he was standing there waiting, probably expecting Doc Shelby to share the grim news with them all and ruin the holiday for everyone.

Instead, Doc said, “Can’t find a thing wrong with him, but I did extract a promise he’d come see me once the holidays are over.”

Jason frowned and looked past the doctor to his dad, who told him without a word to keep quiet. Just a look, and Jason read it, pressed his lips, but then gave a nod so slight no one but Bobby Joe could’ve seen it.

Vidalia didn’t look convinced, and she came inside, marched right up to the bed, clasped his face between her palms and stared hard into his eyes. Her dark brown ones were filled with questions, speculation, and worry.

“I’m holding you to that Sunday dinner invitation, Vidalia Brand,” Bobby Joe said.

“Well that’s good, because I’m bringing it here. This place needs a good breaking in before you throw it open to an unsuspecting public.”

“You don’t have to—”

“Don’t start with me, Jason Robert Joseph McIntyre. And after dinner, we’re gonna decorate that tree of yours. I presume you have some ornaments around here somewhere.”

He smiled at her, at the way she was taking charge and making this about anything and everything other than his health. “I do. I’ve been doing a lot of shopping in between flirting with you every chance I get.”

She rolled her eyes, pretended a lightness he knew she wasn’t feeling. She’d question him later, when they were alone, he thought. But for now, she was putting on a show for

his sake and for his sons. “I’ve got to go get everything together. You boys,” she said, addressing his sons, “You might want to childproof the place just a little. Put anything breakable out of reach, and set your mechanical bull to Slow.”

She leaned down and pressed a kiss to Bobby’s mouth, not caring what his sons might think about that. “I’ll see you in a couple of hours. I want you to rest until then.”

Then she turned and left, her steps brisk and purposeful all the way down the hall, down the stairs, and out the front door. He heard her pickup start and heard her drive away. Shaking his head, he looked at his sons. “That right there is one hell of a woman, boys. And you might as well know now as later, I love her. I’ve loved her most of my life.”



Vidalia Brand was nobody’s fool. She’d raised five girls practically on her own, so she knew bullshit when she saw it. Doc had been shoveling it when he’d come out of Bobby Joe’s room, and Bobby Joe had been dealing it all along.

He was not well. She’d managed to put it all together while directing his sons to raise that Christmas tree, get it upright, straight, and properly placed.

When she arrived at home, the family was already there, every last one of them. The twins were running in and out of the living room, hanging a fresh batch of ornaments, freshly made for her in their pre-school class, on her tree. Tyler was keeping right up with them, helping them reach the higher branches. The braces he’d once worn on his legs were a thing of the past, and while he still walked with a slight limp, he was on his way to complete healing.

The men, her sons in law, were gathered in the living room, sipping beers, talking and watching the kids, while the girls were in the kitchen, bustling. Every Sunday was like a holiday around here.

When she walked in, everyone went silent and looked her way.

“How is he, Mama?” Selene asked.

Vidalia took a deep breath and decided to respect Bobby Joe’s wishes by not sharing her suspicions just yet. “Doc Shelby said he couldn’t find a thing wrong with him. Just a fluke, I think.” Selene’s eyes said she knew better, but Vidalia hurried on. “If you will all indulge me, I would like to take our Sunday Dinner over to the Long Branch.”

“If that’s what you want, Mom, sure we will,” Melusine said.

“It won’t even be hard,” Maya added. “We’ve got the sides all made already.”

“We can wrap everything up to keep it warm,” Edie put in

Vidalia frowned at them. “Why are you being so cooperative all of the sudden?”

Kara came and put a hand on her mother’s shoulder. “We saw your face when he went down in a heap, Mama. We know you...have feelings for him.”

“Well, don’t be ridiculous, I don’t have any...well...I suppose I am *fond* of the man, but it’s not as if... it’s not as if...” She shook her head. “Let’s just get this food over there, all right?”

The girls exchanged knowing looks and everyone started loading pans, kids and themselves into the vehicles that cluttered Vidalia’s driveway. Selene alone hung back, waving her beloved Cory away when he came for her. That was something, because the two were inseparable. But Cory seemed to understand, and he stepped outside, leaving the two alone together in the house. Selene closed the front door, and turning, stared into Vidalia’s eyes.

“He’s sick, isn’t he, Mama?”

Vidalia was, by now, used to her youngest daughter’s odd ways. She knew things, Selene did. There was no point in lying to her. “I think so. But I also think he doesn’t want anyone to know.”

“I could sense it. Something out of balance in him. Is there anything we can do?”

Vidalia nodded. “We can pray for him, child. I in my way, and you in yours.”

“As hard as I can,” she told her mom, and then she hugged her softly, and Vidalia had all she could do not to let her worried tears break free.



Bobby Joe’s sons had set up the banquet room for dinner. It had gold wallpaper with velvet textured swirls and roses. It was set off from the rest of the saloon by red velvet curtains with gold tassels that could be drawn for privacy. It would be crowded, as Vidalia’s family was huge. Vidalia, her five daughters, three grandkids, five sons in law, added to Bobby’s three sons, and himself made eighteen—quite a crowd for a meal.

The long table was set though, with him at the head, Vidalia at the foot, eight chairs on each side. And when the food was all laid out, wafting scents that made his mouth water, and everyone had taken their seats, an odd, tense silence made the very air in the room feel heavy.

And then Vidalia said, “So, Tyler, why don’t you tell us all what you’ve asked Santa Claus to bring you for Christmas?”

The little boy grinned. “A pony! And I think he’s gonna do it this year, I really do. I’ve been so good, and I know how to take care of him. Miss Haggerty teaches me every single week when I go out to ride Rusty. And I can board him at her place and ride him anytime I want.”

“If you get one, can the twins come and ride too?” Maya asked. Her kids started bouncing in their seats, asking “Can we, can we?” They were smack between her and Caleb, so they could keep them anchored and focused.

“Sure you can!” Tyler said, nodding eagerly. “I’ll show you everything. I know how to put on a saddle, and a bridle,

and—”

“I want a baby. A real one, not make believe,” Dahlia said.

Maya and Caleb looked at each other in surprise, but their little girl went right on. “I got so many dolls. I’m tired of dolls. I want a *real* baby.”

“I want a four wheeler,” her brother said. He was all of four years old.

“Over my dead body.” Vidalia pressed a hand to her chest. “You’ll get yourself killed.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Vidalia,” Bobby Joe put in. “I think Joey had one at his age.”

“I sure did,” Joey boasted, grinning at CC. “It was red, and Dad put a control on it so it wouldn’t go faster than he thought I could handle. But my big brother Robby knew how to take it off.”

“Oh, you didn’t!” Vidalia shot a wide-eyed look at Robert.

He smiled, apparently remembering. “I did.”

“Yep, he sure did,” Jason said with a frown at his brothers. “And within the hour, Joey drove it into a tree and wound up with eighteen stitches in his head.”

Maya shot Caleb a terrified look. Caleb patted her hand. “They have little ones that barely go five miles an hour, hon. Far more suited to a four-year-old.”

Soon they were all exchanging childhood memories, and eventually, Christmas memories. Maya told about the birth of the twins the year of that freak snowstorm. Kara talked about her first Christmas with Tyler and Jimmy, leaving out the scary parts involving Jim’s addict ex and her porn-king boyfriend. At that point, Bobby Joe’s boys seemed to run out of tales of their own to offer, and Vidalia shot a look across the table at him, about to try to prompt him for some more, he thought.

“I want a Christmas like that, this year,” he said. “Well, minus the blizzard and home delivery of twins, that is.” Everyone laughed softly and beamed at Maya and Caleb. Then Bobby went on. “I want an old-fashioned holiday, full of pine

needles and piles of food and noisy family members all talking at once.”

“Kind of like this right here, right now, you mean?” Vidalia asked him.

Smiling, he nodded hard. “Just like this.” He looked at his sons. “That’s part of the reason I asked you boys to come up here. So we could have that together, right here in Big Falls. My adopted hometown. That’s how I’ve thought of it ever since I left it behind.”

“I think that’s a beautiful idea,” Vidalia said. “And I’d be real pleased if we could have that together, Bobby. You and your boys are welcome to share your holidays with us.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” He lifted a glass. “To family.”

“To family,” Vidalia agreed, and they all lifted their glasses in agreement. Even the children picked up their glasses of juice and tinked them together.

Bobby met Vidalia’s eyes across the table and held them as their families all started talking at once and food was passed around and compliments were paid. And he couldn’t help thinking that this should’ve been *their* family. His and hers. They should’ve been spending *every* holiday season all gathered around together, all talking at once with kids making a mess of their food and dreaming of ponies and babies and Santa Claus.

When the meal ended, he left their offspring to clean up the mess, and took Vidalia with him into the main part of the saloon. The eighteen-foot tree stood bare and waiting. “We’re gonna deck these halls tonight. Then, dessert by the fireplace. Will you stay?”

“You couldn’t get me out of here if you tried, Bobby Joe.”

He smiled at her, and he knew he was going to have to tell her the truth pretty soon. But maybe it could wait just a few more nights. Just a few. He wanted a Christmas without heartache. One so chock full of joy and sappy holiday magic

that his sons would never forget it. He wanted that, just once, before he died.



They all stood around the eighteen-foot beauty of a tree, and Bobby Joe said, “I bought decorations, but I don’t think there’s gonna be anywhere near enough.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Selene said, walking right up beside him and resting her hand on his shoulder. “Mom had us bring a small portion of the horde of holiday decor she had stashed at home in the attic.”

“I think we have enough for ten trees,” Vidalia said. “Plus two.” She gazed at the boxes, smiling in self-deprecation. “Some of these haven’t seen daylight in several years. I can’t wait to go through them. Shall we?”

“Lights first,” Caleb called. “We have to string the lights first. That’s how we always do it.”

“I’m with you on that Caleb,” Jason said.

“Fine, you young men handle the lights,” Vidalia told him. “Robert, can you find us a couple of stepladders around here?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Robert said. And if Bobby Joe didn’t know better, he would think Rob was starting to enjoy himself a bit. His sadness seemed distant, and he was even smiling now and then.

Melusine cranked up the music. Caleb and Rob strung the lights, while Vidalia gave constant direction. The others girls vanished into the kitchen. But in short order, they were back, handing cups of hot cocoa around. Jimmy, Kara’s husband, turned up the music a little louder, and when Randy Travis started singing Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer, the children all sang along.

They were all picking through boxes of ornaments, re-attaching hooks or strings, and passing them around to be placed on the tree. And it seemed to Bobby Joe that every single piece in Vidalia’s old dusty boxes from the attic had a

story attached to it. Her girls didn't mind one bit telling them as each one was added to the tree.

He heard all about the Christmas when they'd all made homemade gifts for each other because money was low, but how somehow, they'd still found Cabbage Patch dolls under the tree, one for each of those girls, from Santa.

"You never told us how you did it, Mama," Maya said softly.

"I got up at two a.m. on Black Friday to be first in line at the Kmart, where they had a five doll limit. I pawned my wedding ring to pay for them." She rolled her eyes. "Oh your father was furious when he came home and saw my ring finger bare. Course, by then it was February, and I'd saved up enough to buy it back."

Selene pulled out an ornament, a picture frame shaped like Santa's sleigh with a baby in the seat beside Santa. "This was me!" she said happily. "Look!" She held it up.

"Baby's first Christmas" was part of the frame itself. But someone had taken a green marker and carefully inscribed "Selene Brand," and her birthday.

She grinned and handed it to Joey. "We always joke that I was conceived by the Corral. Born nine months to the day after her doors opened."

"Yeah, Barroom Baby," said Melusine.

"Saloon Sister!" Kara threw in.

"Beer Barrel Brat," Maya called.

"Happy Hour Half-Pint," Edie sang.

"Enough already!" Selene said, but she was laughing so hard she had tears brimming in her eyes, and she was leaning on her husband Cory as if she'd fall down without him. He was laughing too.

Bobby Joe frowned though, and sent a searching look Vidalia's way, but she averted her eyes.

"She was a premie."

“An eight-pound premie,” Edie said. “Good thing she came early, or Ma still wouldn’t be walking straight.”

Mel snorted, elbowing Alex, her quiet, well-dressed husband whose sharp eyes seemed to see everything, and everyone laughed. Then the next ornament came out of the box, and another story came with it. No one seemed overly stuck on Selene’s tale. No one but Bobby Joe. He was kind of fixated on it and spent the rest of the evening searching the girl and noticing things that probably meant nothing at all.

Her eyes, though, weren’t they a lot like Joey’s? The shape of them, at least. And her chin was almost identical to Jason’s. But no, she looked like her sisters too, and like her mother. All in different ways.

Still....

No. No, Vidalia wouldn’t have kept a secret like that. Not like that.

Would she?

He watched when the ornament with her baby photo was hung, and sidled that way at the first opportunity for a closer look. But Vidalia reached past him, and took it from the branch where it dangled. “Sorry, Bobby Joe, but this one ought to be on my tree at home. I have no idea why it was buried in that box of forgotten ornaments.”

“You’re the one who keeps saying everything happens for a reason, Vidalia,” he said. “Could there have been a reason for that, too?”

She averted her eyes. “My forgetfulness is the only one that comes to mind. Oh, look! Kara, that’s the God’s Eye you made in Kindergarten!” And she hurried to her daughter and left the conversation with Bobby Joe unfinished.

But a seed had been planted, and he was looking at Selene differently now, and at the easy way she was laughing with Joey and rearranging the glittering silver ball he’d just hung.

When the tree was all decked, Vidalia ran around shutting off all the lights, and Rob stood with a plug in one hand, near an outlet. Everyone else gathered in front of the giant pine.

The children were still giggly but starting to look a little bit sleepy, too.

As soon as Vidalia returned to his side, Bobby Joe said, “Okay, Rob. Light her up.”

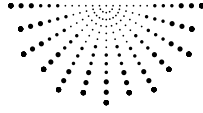
Rob plugged in the extension cord, and the tree came to life, a collection of multicolored lights, topped by strand after strand of tiny white twinkling ones. There came a collective “Ooooh” that should’ve been corny, but somehow, wasn’t.

Softly, Maya started to sing “Oh Christmas Tree” and the others all joined in. Even his sons, though they probably had to guess at the words. Vidalia elbowed him. “Come on, open that heart of yours and let the magic in.”

He nodded and started singing. He didn’t mutter. He sang out loud. And he knew he was going to get his wish. A Christmas his sons could remember after he was gone. And all thanks to this woman.

Even as he thought it, she looked up at him with a dreamy smile and a suspicious glimmer on her lashes, and slipped her small hand inside his. He closed his around it, and his heart tightened. It wasn’t fair not to tell her. He realized he had to do it and soon. He was going to break her heart otherwise.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Vidalia said she had posted signs all over the OK Corral explaining that tonight, she was closing in order to help welcome a new saloon to town and encouraging her patrons to stop in to see her at the grand opening of The Long Branch.

Now she was with him, at the brand new saloon, and she and the boys were rehearsing their lines in the store rooms in back. Bobby Joe had spared no expense on the costumes and props. Vidalia had even added Miss Kitty's beauty mark to her own cheek for good measure. She looked more like Miss Kitty than the real one had, aside from one minor alteration. Vidalia's hair was jet black, not copper penny red.

Her big skirt and bustier top might have been a little sexier than Miss Kitty had worn, but then, he'd probably think that about a feedbag if she was the one wearing it. "Marshall Dillon" walked up behind her and looked over her shoulder at her reflection. He couldn't keep his eyes off her décolletage and didn't bother trying. "Damn, woman. You look even better in that getup than that photo of you from Halloween."

"Well, it's a nicer costume," she said, but her eyes were on him in the mirror. He wore his duster and cowboy hat and her eyes said she liked the look on him.

"Even better than you did in my imagination when I picked it out, too, he went on, as if she hadn't spoken. "And trust me, that's saying something."

"I'm not bad for my age, I suppose."

“You’re not bad for any age.” He turned toward the still-open door leading into the saloon. “Jason, you out there?”

“Yeah, pop,” Jason said, poking his head through the door. “What’s up?”

Bobby Joe pulled his six shooter from his holster and held it up. “You’re gonna have to switch out my blanks for real bullets, or I’m not gonna be able to keep the competition away from my lady, here.”

Vidalia spun around, snatched the gun away from him. “Keep it in your holster, Marshall.”

He laughed out loud, slapping his thigh, and Jason laughed too, shaking his head and returning to the saloon.

“You look so much better than you did the other day,” Vidalia said, her smile giving way to a serious expression, and a searching one too.

“I feel better. You make me feel better.”

She looked as if she was about to say more, even opened her mouth, but then closed it again, and he could almost hear her thoughts. *Not tonight. Tonight’s the grand opening. It can wait.*

To ensure she didn’t change her mind, he went to the door, pushed it open a little and peeked out. “Man, the place is jumping, and it’s still early.” They would repeat their floor show twice tonight, and it was nearly time for the first run.

“I’m glad. I want the Long Branch to be successful, Bobby.”

“Not afraid I’m gonna put you outta business anymore?” he asked.

She shook her head firmly. “No. You were right, it’s an entirely different sort of place. I think it’ll complement mine, not compete with it. Yours is for tourists and special occasions. Mine’s for the locals. I’m sorry I didn’t believe you in the beginning.”

He shrugged, letting the door fall closed and facing her fully. “You’ve got nothing to be sorry for, Vidalia.”

“Oh yes I do, Bobby Joe. And I’m gonna tell you all about it...soon. But not tonight.” She heard the gasp of the crowd and then the sounds of Joey’s grand entrance as he burst into the saloon through the batwing doors, shooting his guns in the air and growling, “Hand over the cash, barkeep!” The barkeep was Robert, who hadn’t wanted to play, but had agreed to tend bar and at least put his hands up and act scared when the villain burst in.

“You’re on, Miss Kitty,” Bobby Joe said. “Head on out there.”

“I’m nervous, can you believe it?” She headed for the door, and Bobby Joe attempted to smack her on the backside as she passed, but the layers of slips and crinoline prevented it from amounting to much.

Then she made her entrance, sashaying across the saloon to the center of the floor, where an area had been cleared of tables for this to play out. She put her hands on her hips and a heap of attitude into her tone as she called, “Just what do you think you’re doin’, Mister? Put those guns down before I show you a new place to keep ‘em.”

Feigning shock, then pushing his hat back a bit and admiring her much like his father had just done, Joey said, “Well now, ma’am, far be it from me to insult a beautiful lady, but I got business here.”

“If your business is robbing this saloon, then it’s my business too. Now put those guns away and get out of here before I do what your mama should’a done years ago.”

“And what would that be, ma’am?”

“Oh, I’ll show you what that would be.” She had, by that time, maneuvered her way to the authentically aged braided leather bull whip that was curled up and hanging on the wall, and she yanked it down and gave it a snap that cracked deliciously.

Technically, Miss Kitty had never used a bull whip in *GunsSmoke*. It was Barbara Stanwick as Victoria Barclay who had often put bad guys in their places with a whip back in the

days of *The Big Valley*, but Bobby Joe had taken a bit of poetic license, and Vidalia agreed it was a nice effect.

As she swung the whip for a second time, Joey caught it and jerked her forward, pulling her around in front of him and turning them both to face the doors just as Bobby Joe, dressed as Matt Dillon walked in, drew his gun, and ordered, “Let the lady go, pard.” He’d gone out the back door and come around the front to make his entrance, just as planned.

“Drop your gun or I’ll drop your woman, Marshall.”

“Don’t listen, Matthew!” Vidalia cried. “Shoot him in the head. You won’t miss!”

“Yeah, *Matthew*. Shoot me in the head, and maybe hit her instead. Or put your gun down,” Joey drawled.

Bobby Joe lowered his gun. Vidalia stomped on (beside, actually) Joey’s foot, then spun away from him, and Bobby brought his gun level again and fired twice.

Joey jerked with each blast, got one shot off that went astray, knocking a painting off the wall—it was rigged. Behind the scenes, Jason had simply pulled a cord that sent the picture to the floor. It took Joey five minutes to finally die, and even after he hit the floor he kept kicking and gasping for a while. But he finally ended it. Saloon girl Selene was ruining the ruse by giggling at his antics behind her gloved hand.

Matt Dillon swept Miss Kitty into his arms, bent over her and kissed the living daylights out of her while the crowd whooped and roared. The piano player started tickling the ivories again, and a couple of dusty cowboys (Cory and Jimmy) came in and dragged Joey out of the bar.

But Vidalia wasn’t paying attention anymore. She was in Bobby’s arms and that was right where he wanted her to be. When he lifted his head, she stared into his eyes. “That wasn’t in the script,” she whispered.

“It is now.”

“Bobby, I have something I’ve got to tell you. And it can’t wait any longer.”

He frowned and set her upright again. Then taking off his hat and waving it at the still cheering patrons, he scooped her up into his arms and strode right out the front door, and around to the rear of the saloon.



There wasn't much out there, Vidalia thought. A patch of scrub brush, bare ground, and a creek meandering along a few yards back. That was where he carried her, despite her protests. And when he set her down on her feet again, he kept his hands around her waist. "You look so good as Miss Kitty I can't take my eyes off you. No one could."

"Oh, stop it Bobby Joe. This is serious." She lowered her head, unable to look him in the eye. "I should have told you a long time ago. But I just.... I was so ashamed."

He frowned, his playful expression giving way to a worried one. Then he led her a little farther, where a wooden bench had been placed along the bank of the creek.

"Here. Sit. If you can, in that skirt."

She bunched its layers up, checked the bench for dirt, and not seeing any, took his advice and sat down. He sat beside her. "I like to come out here and just watch the water go by," he said. "It's soothing."

"Water's like that for me, too. It's a nice spot. The whole thing, what you've done here, with this place. It's really amazing, Bobby. It's wonderful. You did all right."

"You think the boys liked it?" he asked, his eyes searching hers.

"Joey sure did. He almost convinced me he was a real outlaw."

"Yeah, yeah." He nodded, eyes low. "But do they like the place? I built it for them, you know. I want to leave them something more than just a portfolio full of stocks and holdings. I want to leave them something real. Something they can build on, be proud of. You know, when I go."

“Which isn’t gonna be for another thirty years or so.” She frowned at him. “Is it?”

He smiled as if she’d said something funny. “You said you had something to tell me. You trying to change the subject now?”

She wasn’t. But she thought maybe he was, and she filed it away to mull on later, with all the other little things leading her to a conclusion she didn’t want to reach. But first, she had to come clean. Entirely clean. Because she was falling in love with this man. Again. Maybe she’d never really fallen out of it.

Drawing a deep breath, she nodded once, lifted her chin and met his eyes. “I lied to you all those years ago, Bobby. That night we spent together? The night you can’t remember?”

He nodded, but didn’t speak.

“I told you I didn’t remember either. But I did. And I still do. I remember every single second of it. And it was...it was the most beautiful, the most intimate night of my entire life. You made me feel...cherished. And I didn’t want it to end.”

He sat up straighter and searched her eyes. “Are you saying that we—?”

“We made love. We made sweet, incredible love.” She pressed her lips tight, nodded once. “And there’s more....”

The saloon’s back door opened, and someone leaned out, calling, “Dad, you out there?” It was Jason’s voice.

Sighing, Vidalia felt as if she’d been saved by the bell. God knew she was dreading the rest of what she had to confess to this man.

She got to her feet and turned toward the saloon.

He got up too, put his hands on her shoulders. “Oh, no. No, you’re not getting off that easy.” And he turned her to face him again. “Why, Vidalia? Why would you lie to me about that?”

“Dad?” Jason called.

“Why? Come on, Bobby Joe, I was a married woman. A mother of four. I’d committed adultery.”

“No one ever would’ve known.”

She lowered her head. “I thought about telling you then, but you said you were leaving town. And I just...I just thought it for the best to let you go.”

He nodded, was silent for a long moment, during which his son called for him once more. “I wish I remembered,” he said. “I’ve dreamed about being with you like that, so many times. To think I actually had it and was too damn drunk to remember...”

She lowered her head. “Do you hate me for not telling you?”

“I couldn’t hate you if I tried.” He hooked a finger under her chin, lifted her head, kissed her softly and sweetly, and then a little more deeply. When he lifted his lips from hers, he whispered, “I’d sure like another night like that with you, Vidalia.”

“Ohhh, you’re the devil in blue jeans, tempting me like that Bobby Joe McIntyre.”

“I’m noting only that you didn’t say no.”

“I didn’t say yes, either.”

“Then I’m gonna keep on trying.” He kissed her once more, then turning her, kept his arm around her. “But you said there was more.”

“There is. But I think we’d best save it. We’ve got guests to entertain and your firstborn’s not gonna stop bellering until we get back inside.”

“You sure it can wait, Vidalia? It felt...important.”

He was staring into her eyes as he asked the question. She averted her gaze. “It’s important,” she admitted. “But one confession is enough for one night, don’t you think, Bobby Joe?”

“I do, at that.” He tightened his arm around her, pulling her closer to his side, and they walked together back to the saloon.



The next day morning, Bobby phoned to invite her to go Christmas shopping with him, and Vidalia was all too happy to oblige. They shopped all morning long. The man had shockingly deep pockets, and he didn't mind dipping into them. She helped him figure out what to get for two of his sons by asking him questions about the young men and guiding him from there. For example, Joey, the youngest, had a penchant for video games when he was younger, and they found him an actual arcade version of his favorite old video game. The thing was huge and would be delivered to the saloon the next day. Rob was into the outdoors, so for him, a hand crafted wooden canoe that was so beautiful it took even Vidalia's breath away. For Jason, they were drawing a blank, and had stopped for lunch to give their brains a rest. Their table was in the food court in the middle of the closest mall, a full hour from home. Holiday music was playing, and the place was decked to the rafters with tinsel and garland, glittery stars and snowflakes. In the distance, a half circle of twinkling trees bordered a jolly old man in a red suit, who sat in a throne-like chair in front of a mile-long line of eager children with wonder in their eyes.

“I wish I'd been around more when my kids were growing up,” Bobby mused. “I was gone so much.”

“I know. You've told me. But regrets are a waste of time. And you're making it up to them right now.”

“How do your girls feel about their...father, now?”

Why did he hesitate before saying the word “father?” Did he know? Or suspect? She pushed the thought aside. She was going to tell him. It was just a matter of choosing her moment. “It's a different situation, Bobby Joe. He died before he could even try to apologize to them, much less make things right the way you're doing now with your boys.”

“Still,” he said. “I’d like to know.”

She shrugged. “We don’t talk about him a lot. I think they might still resent that he wasn’t there for them. But they also know that he couldn’t be other than who he was. You can’t hate someone for being who they are. I’ve raised them to know that. And the truth of the matter is, when you know better, you do better. Sadly, he died before he got around to knowing a better way. I think he knows now.”

That comment made him look up swiftly. “You think he... went to heaven? Even with everything he did? Bigamy?”

“I *know* he went to heaven, Bobby Joe. I’ve had extensive conversations about this with Reverend Jackson, who you still need to meet, by the way, and with Selene as well.”

He frowned. “Why Selene?”

“She’s...spiritual. Deep. Sometimes the things that girl spews sound like they’re coming from a hundred year old prophet just out of his cave. She’s a special one, she is.”

He nodded, leaning forward, having forgotten his sandwich and cup of soup. She pointed at it so he’d continue eating. He’d lost a little weight, she thought, since he’d been in town.

He ate, and she talked. “Selene doesn’t believe in an actual Hell. She says if God is love, then a place of eternal torment isn’t impossible. And that makes sense to me.”

He washed a bite of his sandwich down with a drink of sweet tea. “I’m sure your Reverend Jackson doesn’t agree with her.”

“Don’t be so sure. He says it’s a dilemma that’s always troubled him too, for the very same reasons. And that he thinks some things won’t make any sense until we cross over, and that we just have to trust that all is well until then.”

“What do you think happens?” he asked her.

She held his eyes, and her heart ached for the secrets he was keeping, and the worry in her own mind. “I think maybe when we get to the other side, we look back on our deeds, both

good and bad, and we see the lessons in all of it. I think we get wiser, and that we heal.”

“That’s a beautiful way to look at things.”

She nodded. “And if I’m wrong, I’ll find out when I cross over.”

He smiled, dipping the final corner of his sandwich into the bit of soup he had left in his bowl. “I guess we all will,” he said softly. And he seemed a little bit grim just then.

Vidalia reached across the table and covered her hand with his. “What’s wrong, Bobby? Sometimes you look so sad it breaks my heart.”

He met her eyes, unashamed of the moisture that had come into his own. None spilled over. He blinked it away. “I don’t want to tell you yet. Not yet, Vidalia. Don’t make me. We’re having so much fun together. And it’s Christmas.”

Those words sent a shiver down her spine. So it *was* something bad. Way down deep, her suspicion took on more substance, but she refused to look at it or even acknowledge that it was there.

“After the holiday?”

He nodded.

“Right after?”

Again he nodded. “I know it’s not fair, my keeping my secret and choosing my time to share it. And in the very next breath, asking you to reveal the rest of yours. But I am. I have to.”

She drew her hands back suddenly and looked down at the table. “Bobby, I—”

“Is Selene my daughter?”

Vidalia slammed her eyes closed, like slamming a door on the secret she had kept for far too long. But it was too late. It was already out. She drew a deep breath, prayed for strength and forced herself to look him in the eye. “I was going to tell

you last night. And I've been working up to it all morning. The truth is, Bobby, she might be. But I don't know for sure."

"How can you not know?"

She held up a hand to ask him for patience. "John came home only a couple of days after you...after we...after you left. It was six weeks later I realized I was carrying Selene. You were long gone and I hadn't heard a word. I was mortified and ashamed of myself for cheating on my husband, and I just...I saw no good that could come from digging around in any of it. I just never looked into it any further." She lowered her head. "To tell you the truth, I was afraid to."

He sighed heavily. "You should've told me, Vidalia. I had a right to know."

"I don't deny that. I was wrong, and I'm sorry. But I want you to ask yourself what difference it would have made if you had known? You were as much as an absentee father to your boys as my husband was to my girls."

"No. Not quite that much," he denied.

She nodded, unwilling to argue the point. He was right. At least he hadn't had another wife, another family, competing for his attention. "All right, not quite that much. But still, it wasn't like you would've spent time with her, raised her as your own. Not back then. You were all wrapped up in making your fortune."

He was silent for a long moment, and then, at last, he heaved a heavy sigh. "You're right. But I'd have...at least tried to help you support her. I would've sent money—"

"And I'd have sent it back. I'm a proud woman, Bobby Joe. One of the things I'm proudest of is having raised those five girls on my own. I wouldn't have taken your money. If I had, they wouldn't have turned out to be the women they are, and I'm damn proud of the women they are."

He nodded. "You should be."

She looked at her sandwich, half-eaten, and pushed the plate away. "I've never told Selene. But if you want me to, you

have a right to ask that of me, I suppose. Or if you want some kind of testing done to be sure—”

“I don’t know if I need to tell her or not. I...I need to mull on this a little. It’s a lot to take in.”

Nodding, Vidalia pushed away from the table, picking up her tray and heading for the nearest wastebasket. Bobby came behind her, put his hands on her shoulders. “I’m not angry with you, Vidalia.”

“You should be,” she said. “I deserve your anger. This has been eating at me all this time. I was so wrong—”

“You were a single mother, for all intents and purposes, and you had to put that first. I don’t blame you at all for making the decision you did.”

She set the now empty tray atop the stack of others and turned to face him. “I did wrong, Bobby, and I had every intention of telling you the truth today. I was...working up my courage. But I readily admit that I am desperately in need of your forgiveness.”

“I don’t see that there’s anything to forgive—”

“I need it. And I need you to mean it. So give it some time to settle in, and really think it over, Bobby Joe. This is a stain I’ve been wearing on my soul for a long time, and you’re the only one who can remove it.”

He nodded, leaned down, kissed her forehead. “I forgive you, Vidalia. And I mean it. I’m not gonna change my mind, even if I think on it for a few years. And I’ll tell you why.” He licked his lips, lowered his forehead and pressed it to hers. “It’s because I love you.”

“Oh, Lord, Bobby Joe, it’s too soon to be saying such—”

“Too soon? I’ve loved you for more than twenty years, woman. Listen, I’m a man who knows his own mind. His own heart. At least, I am now. I’ve made a vow to say what I feel to everyone in my life, right at the moment I have the chance, because life is short, Vidalia, and you just never know when you’ll get another shot. I love you. I’ve loved you since I came

to work for you a hundred years ago. And I'll love you till the day I...." He stopped there and swallowed hard.

And then he smiled quite suddenly and said, "A ventriloquist's doll!"

Vidalia frowned, blinking up at him in complete confusion.

"That's the one Christmas present Jason ever asked for that I didn't get him. He got on this kick after seeing an old TV show on a Sunday afternoon that featured Edgar Bergen and his Charlie McCarthy puppet. I looked everywhere. But there were none to be found."

"Well, why don't you use that fancy phone of yours to track one down?" she asked. "If you can't find one on the Internet, then one doesn't exist." She was glad the subject had lightened up so much. And grateful that he wasn't furious with her for the secret she had kept all these years. If only she knew for sure, and if only she could have the courage to tell Selene the truth. But there was one thing Vidalia Brand feared more than she feared the devil himself, and that was losing the love of her daughters. What if they hated her for what she had done? What if they lost respect for her?

And she was worried about more than that, too. Because that niggling little theory about this secret Bobby Joe was keeping from her was growing bigger all the time, and she didn't like where it was leading her.

God was punishing her, that's what it was. She was being punished for the sin she'd committed and then compounded by the lie she had told.



Bobby Joe found the doll on Ebay, and rather than trusting overnight shipping this close to the holiday, decided to make the drive to get it himself, right then. Vidalia had the saloon to run and had already lost a night's business by helping him with his, so he took her home first and made the drive on his own.

And as he drove, he kept putting Selene's pretty face in his mind, and searching it for similarities to his own and to his sons. Remarkably, he saw plenty, at least in his imagination. In fact, that baby photo he'd glimpsed in the ornament the night they'd decorated the tree had looked an awful lot like one of Joey's baby pictures.

While he was out, he would use the opportunity to find gifts for Selene and her sisters as well. And for Vidalia's grandkids. And for Vidalia.

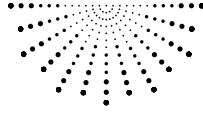
What could he possibly give to her?

Oh, he had a solid idea about that. But what he had in mind was something it would be unfair to give her until he'd told her the truth. Because it came with a question she could not possibly answer until she had all the information at hand. And yet, he bought it anyway. Took him the better part of an hour to pick it out, too. But as soon as he saw it, he knew it was right.

The small golden hued diamond formed the center of a daisy that was surrounded by brilliant white diamonds in the shape of its petals. Daisies had always been Vidalia's favorite flower.

Now all he needed to do was figure out how and when to tell her the truth. And how to ask her to be his wife for whatever time he had left.

CHAPTER EIGHT



“Hello, Bobby?” Why Vidalia’s throat felt full of sand, she could only guess. Nervous as a prom date. At her age.

“Hey, Vidalia. Happy Christmas Eve.” He sounded...off. Tired or something. “Didn’t expect to hear from you this morning.”

“I hope I’m not calling too early.”

“If I could start every day hearing that sultry voice of yours, I’d be a happy man. And it can never be too early. Or too late. I hope.”

His flattery could’ve distracted her and might have, had she been a twenty-year-old. But she was old enough and wise enough and paying enough attention to hear behind the words. “Are you all right, Bobby? You sound odd. You’re not sick or anything—”

“It would be pretty lousy of me to get sick on Christmas Eve, wouldn’t it now?” He laughed and forced—she thought—more lightness into his voice. “Don’t you worry about me, Vidalia. I’m gonna have the holiday of a lifetime. Now why don’t you tell me what’s on your mind.”

She smiled a little, despite the nagging worry that wouldn’t quite go away. “I was thinking that Christmas Day is gonna be bustling with your boys, my girls, their kids and their hubbies and whoever else shows up. Your boys have any women in their lives, Bobby Joe?”

“Besides their mother, no. Joey’s determined to stay free and easy as long as possible. Jason seems to be waiting for the perfect female to just fall into his arms, but isn’t very proactive about finding her. And Rob’s been burned badly and hasn’t healed enough to try again just yet. Why do you ask?”

She shrugged. “I was just thinking about the Haggerty sisters.”

“Why is that name familiar?”

“It’s the restaurant where we had lunch, over in Tucker Lake. It’s owned by five gorgeous sisters, all of whom are still single, and their grandmother, a woman I’ve always admired.”

“Betty Jean. I remember you talking with her.”

“Should I invite them to join us for something over the holidays? Maybe take Rob’s mind off his wounded heart?”

“No. I mean...just no. I don’t think my boys would be even a little bit appreciative. And if they acted ungrateful I’d have to show them I could still kick their keisters. Not something I really want to do at holiday time.”

She smiled. He was sounding more like himself. Teasing and light. She could hear his smile in his voice, see the sparkle in his blue, blue eyes. “Well, that’s not what I was calling about anyway. I’m gonna be shockingly forward with you here, Bobby Joe, but um...I think we should have a Christmas for just the two of us.”

“Instead of—”

“No. I don’t ever do anything instead of my family. I was thinking in addition to. And I was thinking tonight would be the perfect time. Everyone else is busy with their last minute planning and baking and wrapping. The night before Christmas has been the quietest night of the year around my house since the last of those girls got married and moved out.”

His breath whispered into the phone. She imagined she felt its warmth caressing her ear. “That sounds a little sad, Vidalia.”

“Oh, no. Not sad at all. I turn off all the lights except for the ones on my Christmas tree. I put on soft holiday music and light candles. I pour myself a special drink and sit in the living room breathing in the pine and I kind of...reflect on the year gone by. Sometimes on the whole lifetime gone by. And to tell you the truth, Bobby Joe, there hasn't been a single Christmas Eve that you haven't been a part of that reflection.”

“You don't say.” His voice sounded a little softer, maybe a little gruff too.

She shrugged as if he could see her. “It would be nice to have you actually here with me, instead of just whispering like a ghost through my mind.”

“I'll be there. What can I bring?”

“Yourself. And my present. You did get me a present, didn't you?” She had absolutely no doubt that he had, or she wouldn't have asked. She'd got him something as well.

“You'll just have to wait and see. What time should I arrive, sweet Vidalia?”

“Seven, if you can stand to wait for your dinner that long.”

“You don't have to cook for me.”

“Shush now. You just show up at seven, all right?”

“I will. I don't know how I'm gonna wait that long, but—”

“It's only eleven hours. That's not so much more waiting, not after all these years. Besides, I have to get ready.” She hung up the phone before her suddenly tremulous vocal chords gave her away. Nervous as a prom date.

She went to her bedroom after that, opened her closets and stared in almost blindly. She even moved hangers around, and took a few things out, holding them in front of her and turning to face the mirror attached to her antique dresser.

And then she looked a little harder and moved a little closer, tipping her head to one side and seeing the lines at the corners of her eyes in a way she'd never seen them before. They'd been there. It wasn't that she was unaware of them. If she looked closely, she could see the beginnings of lines across

her forehead, too. Not deep, barely there, even. More like coming attractions. Her lashes and brows weren't as lush and abundant as they had once been. Her lips, not as full. And she didn't need to take off her clothes to remind her that her breasts were no longer as perky as they had been in her youth. Her waist, not as tiny, her tummy, not as flat. Her hips were wider, curving out from her waist.

“Mom? You up here?”

She grunted a reply and leaned nearer the mirror.

“Mom?” Maya was at the bedroom door, coming inside, taking in the clothes on the bed, and her mother's close self-scrutiny, no doubt. “What's going on, Mom?”

“I'm aging,” Vidalia said.

“You sound surprised.”

Tearing her gaze from the mirror, she managed to turn and face her firstborn. “I guess I shouldn't be. I just haven't been paying that much attention.”

“Mom, you're fif—”

“I know how old I am. I just...didn't know I looked it.” The mirror pulled her back until Maya stood beside her, leaning just as close, looking just as intently at their reflections.

“You don't look your age. You look my age. I have more crow's feet than you do.”

“Pssh,” Vidalia replied.

“I don't think it's that you never noticed before. I think it's that you never cared before. What's going on, Mom? Is it Bobby Joe?”

Vidalia had never been much for vanity. What the heck was getting into her? Sighing, she turned from the mirror and looked at her daughter. “Yes, it's Bobby Joe. I um....” She looked at the floor. “I'm in love with him.”

Maya gasped. It was a soft sound, a surprised one, and Vidalia couldn't quite meet her eyes. She just kept looking

down. “I don’t think I realized it myself until just now, but the truth is, I’ve been in love with him for as long as I’ve known him. But things were....well, you know. Impossible then.”

“I had no idea,” Maya whispered.

“I’m going to tell him so. Tonight. I thought we could have Christmas Eve together, just the two of us, but—” She waved a hand, sort of indicating the clothes on the bed and the danged mirror all in one gesture.

“Oh, Mama. Oh, come here.”

Vidalia looked up with a frown, glimpsing tears on her daughter’s cheeks just before she found herself enveloped in a hug. “Well, you don’t need to be so emotional about it, daughter. It’s just—”

“I’ve wished this for you a thousand times,” Maya told her. “Maybe a million. We all have.” Sniffling, she stood back, hands on her mother’s shoulders, wet eyes meeting hers. “You just relax. I’m gonna call Edie and Kara and—”

“No. No, wait, this isn’t big announcement time or family meeting time, it’s just—”

“It’s just, let’s help Mom get ready for her romantic evening time. C’mon Mama. We owe you this. Let us help.”

She pursed her lips, glanced at the mirror again, and nodded. “To tell you the truth, I’d be lost without you. He’s important to me. And you’re important to me, and it just doesn’t seem right that those two things shouldn’t be all bundled up together.”

Maya grinned, dashed away her tears, and pulled out her cellphone. And Vidalia wondered if the enormity of the guilt on her shoulders could grow any larger. What would they think of her when they learned the truth?



Bobby Joe felt like a million bucks. If he didn’t know better, he’d have thought he was in the peak of health as he got ready

for his evening with Vidalia. He put the ring in his pocket. He couldn't ask her until he told her the truth, of course, and he really didn't want to tell her the truth until after Christmas, because it would ruin her holiday. But he didn't know how things were going to go tonight, and he wanted to be prepared for anything.

He dressed nice. Wore a suit that accentuated his shape, which was still damn good, if he did say so himself. He added a bolo tie, because he thought she'd like that. And when he arrived, he didn't show up empty handed. He brought a bottle of the best brandy he had—top-shelf stuff, remembering that she'd liked it—and a bouquet of Daisies he'd had to order from a town two hours away. It was not daisy season. But it was worth it when he saw them. Pretty white petals, around bright yellow centers, with fine mists of tiny blue forget me nots all in between.

He felt oddly nervous when he stood at her garland decked front door, facing a giant wreath, with his flowers in one hand, preparing to knock. He could smell whatever was cooking from outside, and it made his stomach rumble.

And then she opened the door, and he forgot everything else. She'd turned herself into a movie star, he thought. Makeup—just a little, but somehow it made her eyes sparkle and shine even more than usual, lined in black that way. And her hair, her riotous curls had been tamed into a long, sleek, gleaming style. She wore a long dress with a plunging neckline that showed off her lush cleavage, and a sparkling necklace of crystal snowflakes. And there was a slit up one side that showed peeks of thigh and made him tremble.

He released a long, slow whistle as his eyes devoured the high heeled, open toed shoes, and made their way back up to her face again. “Just when I didn't think you could get any prettier. I guess you can gild a lily after all.”

She smiled, apparently approving of the compliment. “You're not so bad yourself. Those boots make you almost too tall for me.”

“Then I’ll take ‘em off,” he said as he stepped inside, handing her the flowers and the brandy. “Two of your favorites, as I recall.”

“Thank you, Bobby Joe. You’ve got a good memory.”

“Not as good as I wish it was.” He winked at her.

She blushed, turning away to hide it and going to the sink for a vase and some water. She arranged the flowers, and unable to wait, he walked up behind her, put his hands on her shoulders. She bent her head sideways to run her soft cheek over one of those hands, and he thought he was the luckiest man alive, right now, tonight.

Setting the vase full of flowers aside, she turned in his arms, twisted hers around his neck, and standing up on tiptoe, kissed him in a way that whispered promises he knew better than to expect her to keep.

Then lowering down again, leaving his heart pounding like the hind foot of an alarmed jack rabbit, she turned and walked away. “Dinner’s ready. I thought we’d eat in front of the fireplace.”

“I thought I caught a whiff of wood smoke. That’ll be nice, Vidalia. Here, let me get that.” She was bending over the oven, removing two dinner plates, already loaded with food, and he waited until she straightened up to make his offer, because he was distracted by the view. He was polite, but he wasn’t crazy.

He took the plates from her, pot holders and all, and she said, “Go on in. I’ll get drinks. Wine with dinner okay with you?”

“And brandy with dessert,” he said.

She got wine glasses down while he carried their meals into the living room, and then he stood there for a moment, taking it all in. He’d had houses. Big ones that could be called mansions, though he hated the term. Smaller ones too, vacation places he bought and sold as the whim took him. There had been a beach house on the Gulf and a summer place up in the mountains of Tennessee that he’d kept but hadn’t visited in ages. He’d had a great big stately plantation style

house in Dallas. Judith got that in the divorce. After that he'd moved into a modern architectural wonder with uneven peaks and as much glass as wood.

But this wasn't a just house. This was a home. The living room was wide and warm. The furniture was arranged so it all sort of faced each other and the fireplace and the Christmas tree that stood in the corner to the right of it. The sofa was huge and soft, and it had a twin. Two double width recliners had been squeezed in there as well. He supposed with a family as big as hers, there needed to be plenty of places to sit. He went to one of the dual recliners, because the coffee table was in front of it, already set with a red and green checked cloth napkins with napkin rings that looked like holiday wreaths holding them, two sets of silverware already laid out, and tall glasses of ice water too.

He set the plates down, waiting for her to sit before he did. Then he joined her, nodding in appreciation as he did. That tree of hers had so many homemade ornaments there was hardly room for the few store-bought ones she'd added. Popsicle stick and yarn God's eyes in every color combination you could think of. Tiny pewter frames with newborns all pink and wrinkly held within. Styrofoam balls lovingly painted by tiny hands. Pine cones dipped in glue, then rolled in glitter, dangling from strings. Every Christmas project of five young women and three grandkids decked that tree, and he thought it was the prettiest thing he'd ever seen, next to Vidalia herself.

"You like my ragtag mishmash of ornaments?" she asked.

He nodded. "I love it." And I love you, he thought, but he didn't say it just then. He didn't want to keep putting pressure on her to reply in kind, and he thought every time he said it, that was probably what he was doing, intentionally or not.

The fireplace was brick, and three stockings hung from it, each with a different name spelled out in glitter. The grandkids. Tyler, Dahlia and CC.

Behind them the fire snapped and cracked and filled the room with warmth and holiday cheer. And the entire mantle

was lined with holiday decorations, trees and Santas, a sleigh and reindeer, photos of the kids on Santa's knee.

As he turned his attention to the plate of food in front of him, which included a T-bone steak that had apparently been sawed off a T-Rex, a baked potato already loaded with melting sour cream, a slice of warm homemade bread melting with butter, a mound of asparagus, and some glazed carrots, he wondered how he was going to eat it all.

"Don't even start," Vidalia said. "You've lost weight just since you've been here."

"Have I?"

"Yeah, and you need to put some back on if you want me to be seen in public with you. I'm not going to walk around next to a guy who makes me feel chubby."

"You are voluptuous. There's a difference."

"And I intend to stay that way. So since I'm not gonna skinny down, you're gonna have to chub up." She winked at him, and he forced a smile he didn't feel.

He wasn't going to gain any weight, and he probably wasn't going to be able to do this fabulous meal of hers justice. The symptoms of the end didn't come on until things were about to get very bad, very fast, or so his doctors had told him. And they had begun. He was nearly out of time, then. But he was sure as hell going to try to make it through the holiday.

He sawed off a piece of steak, so tender he didn't really even need the knife. Vidalia picked up a remote, thumbed a button, and soft romantic holiday music came on. She leaned against him a little, then sat up and dug into her own meal.

He surprised himself with how much he managed to tuck away, but had to plead for mercy where dessert was concerned. She agreed to put it off until later, then excused herself to use the restroom.

He took the opportunity to clear away their dishes, rinse them and load them into the dishwasher. When she came back, he took his turn freshening up. He'd even brought along a toothbrush, that was how hopeful he was that there would be

some making out going on tonight. The kind that would make a teenager blush.

If he could hold up. He was tired. Weaker than normal. It wasn't a good sign.

When he returned to the living room, he held out a hand instead of joining her on the couch. She took it, and he pulled her to her feet and then right up against him, and he started moving her around to the music. *Merry Christmas, Baby* wasn't the easiest to dance to, but he thought they did a pretty good job. God, she felt so good against his chest. And her hair smelled good, too.

She looked up at him, smiling. "I thought maybe I could give you your Christmas present tonight," she whispered.

"I've got no objections."

"It's got two parts to it." She snuggled her head onto his chest. He closed his eyes and hoped the next song would be just as slow and mellow. So far, they all had been. Maybe she'd planned it that way.

"I didn't see anything under the tree."

"Well, it's not the kind of gift you can wrap," she said, very softly. And maybe her voice trembled a little bit. "You'll get one of those tomorrow."

"This is getting mighty interesting now," he said. "Go on...?"

"Well, the first part of it is this." She lifted up her head, and looked right up into his eyes. "I love you, too."

Everything in his life lit up. *She* lit up. She glowed momentarily with backlighting that seemed to be a mixture of gold and red and white around the outside. He stared down at her, blinking in blatant disbelief.

"I think I've always loved you. And I have no doubt that I always will."

He opened his mouth to tell her how much that meant to him. How long he'd been waiting, how much he'd been

hoping, and how sorry he was that their time together would have to be so brief.

But he found he couldn't speak. Something odd was happening and he felt like he wasn't in control of his body anymore. He thought the music had changed. It sounded like a choir of about a thousand voices, all singing different notes, but in perfect harmony, no words, just that tone. And the room around Vidalia had sort of vanished. There was only her, all lit up like the angel on top of the tree, looking up at him, and saying, "Bobby Joe? Honey, can you hear me?"

"You love me," he said. And smiled. That smile stayed in place, even when his eyes fell closed and his body fell off him, just as if he'd stepped out of it. As if it was a suit of clothes, just falling bonelessly to the floor, while he remained up above.

But then Vidalia fell to the floor too, bending over that discarded suit and shaking it, and calling his name, and starting to cry.

"I'm not there. I'm up here," he tried to say, and he noticed the body on the floor. The way the mouth moved when he tried to speak, and that was when it hit him that he had left his body.

Was this it, then? Was he dead? No, not yet! Please, not yet! The ring, he had to give her the ring. He stared down at the body on the floor, willed the hand to move, strained every part of whatever he was now, and by gosh, it worked. That hand moved. It didn't feel like he was moving it directly. More like he was the puppeteer, pulling the strings.

Vidalia crawled away from him, but only a few feet, grabbing a phone, then hurrying back again. She dialed, spoke rapidly, and clicked off while he could still hear the operator telling her to stay on the line. Her second call was to one of her daughters. He didn't know which one. He heard her say, "Call your sisters. Call his sons. Meet us at the hospital. It's bad, I just know it."

She dropped the phone, bending over his body, close to his face. "Bobby Joe, dammit, I knew something was wrong. You

should've told me. Come on, don't give up. Hang on for me, will you?"

He wanted to nod, but every asset was focused on moving the hand. He closed it around the box in his pocket. He couldn't feel the box with his hand, he could just tell that there was something between the fingers and the palm, and he willed them to squeeze hold of it as he tried to tug the hand back out.

Frowning, she looked down, apparently feeling the movement.

She took his wrist, gently pulling his hand from his pocket. Yes, finally! He relaxed the hand open, letting go of all that effort and floating more easily and lightly above his body. The little box fell out of that pale, lifeless hand that did not feel like his own, rolling onto the carpet, and Vidalia gasped softly. "Oh, Bobby Joe, you didn't...."

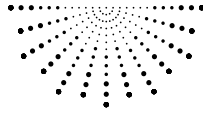
He wanted to watch her open it, to see her expression when she did, but there was noise out front. Time sure had passed quickly, or someone had been close by.

"Mama!"

One of the girls. He didn't know which one. There was something pulling him away, something so beautiful that he couldn't focus much on what was going on below. The choir grew louder, and he turned his attention toward it and saw swirls of color that didn't exist on earth. They were outside the spectrum.

Wow. That was something. *Are you seeing this, Vidalia? Are you seeing this?*

CHAPTER NINE



“*M*ama, what happened?”

“Maya,” Caleb said, “keep the kids in the kitchen, hon. Let me try to help.” Caleb knelt beside Bobby Joe, opposite Vidalia, but she only barely noticed him there, and his voice faded to a sort of deep hum.

Don't take him from me, Lord. It's too soon.

The front door opened and banged shut again. And then again every few heartbeats or so, and more voices joined the insect-like drone that was filling her head as she stared down at him. *So pale. And thinner than I even realized. Look at his collarbones.*

Noticing his collarbones made her notice that someone had opened his shirt, and she dragged her eyes off Bobby's sweet face long enough to look to see who. Paramedics...efficient and confident, and asking her to move aside and let them work. Who knew how long they'd been asking? She'd only just noticed they were here. Numbly, she told herself to move out of the way, but her eyes locked on Bobby's face again, and her hands tightened on the one they held, and for the life of her she just couldn't back away.

“Bobby, don't go,” she whispered. “Bobby, don't you go.” His eyes were closed, his lips as soft as they'd been when he'd been kissing her only a few minutes ago. She looked at his nose, at his jaw, at his eyebrows, memorizing him in her heart.

“Mama, come on. Let them help him, Mama,” said two of her daughters at once. Their hands were on her shoulders.

Nodding, she laid Bobby's hand on his chest, and tried to get up onto her feet, but she stumbled, and one of her strong sons in law caught her. She got her balance as Alex helped her a few steps away, and then she looked up and all her girls were standing there, wide, wet eyes so full of love for her that it broke the log jam, and she just burst into tears.



“Did someone call his sons?” she asked, knowing she'd asked before, but she couldn't remember the answer. They were walking across the blacktop lot toward the glass doors of the hospital. Only a short distance away, the ambulance sat outside the emergency room doors, having beat them here, but not by much.

“They're already here,” Selene said. “That's Jason's truck, next to where we parked.”

“Oh.” She nodded, wanting to go directly to the ER doors. Only her family all around her, herding her with them to the approved entrance, kept her from going. They got inside, and while some of them veered toward the nurses' desk, she just kept walking, aiming in the direction of the ER. And Bobby.

Her family came behind her, every last one of them. She didn't know who'd been the last minute babysitter, but someone must have come through.

Jason came out of nowhere and said, “Vidalia. Good. You're here.”

“I'm here. Where is he? What have they said?”

“Nothing. Nothing, but as I was just about to tell my brothers...” he turned to look behind him, and Vidalia realized there was a waiting room behind there. He hadn't come out of nowhere, he'd come out of there. Joey and Rob were standing within, pale and shocky looking. There were orange vinyl chairs mounted to the walls, and two rows down the middle, bolted to the floor. There were vending machines with junk food and junk drinks. The only healthy thing in the hospital

waiting room was the bottled water, and she wasn't so sure about that.

She nodded hello to each of the boys, when what she wanted to do was hug them. But they weren't close enough for that, were they?

Her question was answered when Joey came and hugged her. "Vidalia, are you okay?"

Behind him, Rob looked her over worriedly. "They said he was with you when he collapsed."

"And Jason was about to tell us something about that. He got as far as... 'Dad's sick.'" This, Joey said with a look over her head toward his oldest brother, who had come back into the waiting room on the tide of her family.

Vidalia turned too, sinking into a chair because her knees were too watery to hold her up any longer. "I knew it. I knew something was wrong with him. What is it Jason?"

Jason stayed standing, though everyone else sat. "It's a blood condition. He's known for three months now."

Joey and Rob looked at each other and then at Jason again.

Vidalia said, "He's known what, exactly, for three months now, Jason?"

Jason lowered his head and swallowed hard. "That's he's dying."

"God no," she whispered.

"How long have you known?" Joey asked softly.

"Since I got here."

"And you didn't tell us?" Robb demanded. "How could you not—"

"He wanted to give you a Christmas to remember," Vidalia interrupted. She met Jason's eyes. "That's it, isn't it? He was going to tell us all right after the holiday. But he didn't want that news to ruin it. He wanted us all to have one wonderful, perfect family Christmas with him."

“Almost word for word what he said to me,” Jason said, wiping a tear away from the corner of his eye before it could spill over.

“So this is...this is it? His time is up?” Vidalia asked.

“This fits what the doctors told him.”

Vidalia lowered her head, her girls were all around her, hugging her, touching her, holding her, patting her.

The ER doors opened and a grim faced doctor she didn't know—she'd have so preferred someone she knew—came to stand among them. “He's stable for now. We've got him settled in a room, and he's comfortable.”

“I just can't believe there's no cure for him, Doctor,” Vidalia said. “He's got more money than God. Surely somewhere in the world there's a cure for this—”

“There *is* a cure, ma'am. He needs a bone marrow transplant, but he's got a rare blood type and none of his sons are matches. He's on the waiting list, but I'm afraid he's run out of time.”

That buzzing sound came into her head again, and she heard nothing else. Nothing at all as she stood there with her gaze turned inward. And when she focused outward again they were all staring at her, and Selene stood closest of all. Searching her mother's eyes, she said, “I have a rare blood type too, or so they tell me every time I give a pint. You should test me. Shouldn't they, Mom?”

Vidalia met Selene's eyes.

“I can do math, you know,” Selene said. “And I look a little like Joey.”

Vidalia could feel the realization of what Selene was talking about blinking into each person's head in that waiting room. Her girls were looking at her in shock, and Bobby's sons were staring at her in dawning realization, as well.

“Yes,” Vidalia said, nodding slowly. “Yes, Bobby and I had...one night together all those years ago, and yes, there's a very good chance that was the night Selene was conceived. I

was married, I was lonely, I was drunk, and.... No. No, you know what? I was in love. That's what I was. I was in love with the man I was meant to be with. And I couldn't be with him, and that was the tragedy. Not the affair. Not the pregnancy. Not even the lie I've told all this time. The tragedy is that we were meant to be together and we couldn't be, and now we can be and he's...he's--"

"He's found a donor," Selene said softly. "I know it. I can feel it." Turning, she kissed her husband hard. "I love you, Cory. And I've gotta do this."

"I know you do. I'll call your friends, get them to fire up their cauldrons. I know the deal."

She smiled, and turned to the doctor. "Take me to the bone marrow drilling rig, Doc. It doesn't sound like we have time to waste."

The doctor looked befuddled, but seemed to be getting it. Before he could lead her away, Joey shot forward and hugged Selene hard. "I have a sister," he said, sort of into her hair, but everyone heard it.

She seemed startled at first, but then she softened and hugged him back. "I always wanted a big brother," she said, looking him in the eye, then past him at the other two. "Looks I got three of them now."

Vidalia's paralysis broke as her youngest pushed through the double doors, and she lunged forward, caught Selene's shoulders, and held on. "Honey, wait. You don't have to do this. To risk--"

"I'm doing it, Mom." She smiled broadly, kissed Vidlia's cheek. "Merry Christmas." Then she looked back at her four sisters and stuck out her tongue. "Top that, bitches." She winked and sashayed through the double doors that closed behind her.

Vidalia sat down, suddenly aware that everyone in this room now knew the secret she'd been so afraid of for so long. They all knew she'd been unfaithful to her husband. They all

knew she'd sinned, given birth to another man's child and lied about it. They all knew she wasn't perfect.

Melusine pressed a styrofoam mug of cocoa into her hand and sank into the chair beside her. Edie sat in the one on other side, leaning on her shoulder. Maya and Kara knelt in front of her, holding her hands. "It's okay, Mama," Maya said.

"It was such a long time ago," Kara added.

"And our father had kids by two other women," Mel said.

"That we know of," Edie added. "And he was secretly married to one of them."

"It's really okay, Mom. We love you. Nothing's changed," Maya said.

"Something's changed," Mel said. "We know you're human now, like the rest of us. Frankly, I like you better with a few flaws."

"And it explains a helluva lot about Selene," Kara said.

"Really. I thought she was left by Gypsies, not McIntyres," Edie added, and they all laughed.

Vidalia sighed, and a good deal of the tension that had been pulling at her back and shoulders melted away. She looked toward the ER doors and waited, and prayed.

Then, remembering, she dipped her hand into her pocket, where she'd dropped the small black velvet box Bobby Joe had worked so hard to fish out as he lay there on her living room floor. She had a pretty good notion what was inside, and it made her throat tighten till it was hard to breathe past her tears.

She wasn't going to open it and look inside. She was going to wait for Bobby to show it to her himself. Until then, she needed a little one-on-one time with the Lord.

"I need to find out if this place has a chapel," she whispered.

"I'll find out, Vi," Cory said softly, and he went to the nurse's desk to ask.



Vidalia knelt in the hospital chapel in front of a stand with a statue of Jesus, who looked down at her with his serene, wise eyes. There were other statues, symbols of other faiths all around this room. But Jesus was her guy. Always had been.

She knelt in front of Him, bowed her head, folded her hands, and let her tears flow. She couldn't talk. Not for a long, long time. But her sobs seemed to dissipate when she heard, off in the distance, a clock striking the hour. On and on it struck. Midnight.

She blinked her eyes dry. "It's Christmas. It's the perfect time for a miracle. Oh, I know, Lord, I know—I was wrong to keep this secret. And now to find out that telling it was the only way to save him. Could've saved him long before now, too. Oh, please don't let it be too late. Please let it be in time. I am a good woman, Lord. I am not a perfect woman, but I am a good woman. I've never asked you for much. For anything really, at least not for myself. I deserve this. You make sure my Selene is okay through this, Lord. And if you can find it in your heart, let Bobby and me have our time together. And when you have to call us home, call us home together, too. We've spent way too much time apart. You made us for each other, after all. I'm just sorry it took us so long to realize it."

A car passed by outside, and the headlights blinded her. But as they faded, their light passed slowly over the face of the statue. And for the barest moment, she could've sworn He'd smiled at her as, from the distance, church bells rang in Christmas.



"Mama!"

Vidalia didn't turn at the sound of Kara's voice in the chapel doorway. She stayed perfectly still, and maybe braced herself a little for what was to come next.

“Mama, you have to come.”

Blinking away her tears, she took a deep breath. “Thy will be done,” she whispered. “Amen.” Then she got to her feet and was surprised how hard it was to straighten her legs. She’d been kneeling there far longer than she had known.

Kara put an arm around her shoulders, holding her close and walking her out of the chapel and through the hospital corridors. When they reached the waiting room, Edie came to her other side, also holding her, and Mel and Maya crowded close too. “A nurse said to gather everyone. Said the doctor would be out to talk to us momentarily,” Maya whispered.

“She didn’t say anything else?” Vidalia searched the eyes of each of her daughters, but they all just shook their heads.

A small group of people passed by, carolers, all dressed in Victorian garb and carrying songbooks and looking a bit lost. Vidalia barely noticed them because the doctor came out through those double doors then and met her eyes.

“They both came through the surgery just fine,” he said, smiling a little. “Your daughter is a strong woman, Mrs. Brand. She’s already in recovery and arguing with the nurses.”

“I’ll go calm her down,” she said, softly.

“You’re not allowed—”

“In the recovery room. I know. I’ve broken that rule anytime one of my brood has been in there, and you’d better believe I’ll be breaking it again momentarily. Now tell me, doctor, Selene is fine, thank you Lord. How is Bobby?”

The surgeon’s exasperated smile turned more serious. “Bobby’s condition was pretty serious going in. He was weak. But the transplant should stop his disease from progressing any further. And in a few days, when Selene’s marrow starts producing healthy new cells in him, we’re gonna see rapid improvement. Right now, he’s still critical. Keeping him alive long enough for those cells to do their work is our mission now.”

She sniffled a little, nodded hard. “I’ll go into that recovery room now.”

“You’re really not supposed to—”

“There’s no point, Doc. She’s going,” Maya said.

“Might as well lead me to a sterile gown, one of those hideous hats, a mask, some gloves. And don’t forget those bootie things to go over my shoes.” The doc blinked at her, but she reached out a hand and clutched his arm. “And Doctor, thank you. Thank you more than I can ever say.”

“Merry Christmas, Miz Brand.”

“So far, it’s just that. Let’s hope it continues to be.”



Vidalia walked into the recovery room to see Selene, standing beside a patient’s bed, muttering something softly under her breath. A charm, a prayer, a healing rite...she didn’t know which, but she appreciated it, whatever it was. A nurse was heading her way, stern eyed, but Vidalia picked up the pace and stepped into her path. “Leave her be,” she said. “I’ve got this.”

“She shouldn’t be up—”

“It’s Christmas. That’s her...that’s her father. You let it be.”

The nurse seemed to hesitate, but then sighed and threw her hands in the air, turning and walking dramatically away. Smiling, Vidalia went to stand by Selene’s side, slipping an arm around her middle.

“We sure do have some mighty big Christmases in this family, don’t we? The twins, in the middle of the holiday blizzard. Little Tyler, coming into the family. And now this. You got yourself a father.”

Bobby lay in the bed. His skin was pale and his hair mussed. Vidalia smoothed it with one hand, thinking he’d be embarrassed to be seen looking like an upset rooster. “Are you very mad at me, Selene, for not telling you sooner?”

Selene kept her eyes on Bobby's face as well. "You didn't really know."

"I had an inkling."

"Things happen the way they're supposed to, Mom. Everything worked out just fine. And I love you even more knowing you haven't always been perfect."

"I've never even been close."

"You have a giant family out there who'd argue that one." Selene leaned in and kissed her cheek, she wobbled a little on her feet.

"That's it, daughter. Back into bed you go. Come on now." Turning Selene around, Vidalia helped her back to her bed, which was right beside Bobby's. She helped her sit on the edge, then picked up her legs for her, and tucked the covers over her. Her light blue eyes kept falling closed, then popping open over and over, before she even hit the pillow. "I love you, Mama."

"I love you too, Selene. You rest now."

"He's gonna be okay. You don't have to worry," she said, finally letting her eyes fall closed and stay that way. "I talked to my guides. He's gonna be just fine."

"And he'll probably start dancing under the moonlight, what with your marrow in him now."

Selene's lips curved upward, but just barely. "That would be so cool." Then she was asleep, and she needed it. Vidalia patted her hands, then turning, went to stand beside Bobby's bedside.

To her surprise, his eyes were open when she looked at him.

"Well, hello cowboy. You finally decide to wake up?"

He moved his lips, made a face. Vidalia got the water from the bedside, and held its straw near his lips. "Just a little now," she told him.

He sipped, then let his head fall back onto the pillows. "I'm sorry, Vidalia. I thought...I thought there would be... more time."

"Oh, there is. There's lots more time. Take a good long look at the girl in the next bed, will you Bobby Joe?" And she stepped aside as she said it.

Bobby turned his head, then he frowned harder. "Is that your Selene?"

"Turns out she's actually...your Selene too."

"She...?"

"Bobby, she's yours. The doc told us you needed bone marrow and that none of your boys were a match. Why on earth didn't you say something when I told you she might be yours?"

"I didn't want to know so I could take her bone marrow, woman. I wanted to spend time with her, while I still had time to spend." Then he blinked, tearing his eyes from the sleeping blonde and fixing them on Vidalia again.

"Selene...?"

"Is a perfect match. And so you, my love, are cured. Oh, the doc is making noises about having to keep you alive long enough for the new bone marrow to start doing its job, but I have my sources and Selene has hers, and they both agree, you're gonna be fine."

"I'm not dying?"

"Not anytime soon," she told him.

"Are you...sure?"

She looked past him briefly, then got stuck there, her eyes on the window. "I am now."

He looked where she was looking.

Soft snowflakes fell past the darkened window, dancing and spinning as they drifted to the ground. "It's Christmas," she told him. "It's snowing. And you're alive."

He dragged his stunned eyes back to hers again, as, from just outside the doors, a group of voices sang Silent Night in perfect four part harmony. They sounded just like angels.

Then his hand moved, as if in search of his pockets, only he no longer had any. “Your present. I had it in my pocket.”

“I know.” She pulled it out of her own pocket. “I thought it might be for me, but I didn’t look. I wanted to wait for you.”

He took the tiny box from her, and turning it to face him, he opened it. “When I came back here, I thought my time was running out. And I made a decision to live what was left of my life doing what was important. Doing what was right. I wanted to spend my time with my boys, building something I could leave behind for them. And I wanted to spend it with you, basking in you the way I should have been doing all along.”

He gripped the bed’s rail and shook it. “Lower this danged thing, will you?”

“You’re not getting up!”

“Gonna start bossing me around already, woman? Lower it or I’ll climb over. I’m gonna do this right.”

She lowered the rail. He sat up, put his legs over the side, and then pushed off the mattress before she was even ready. His feet hit the floor, his knees bent, and he went down onto them so fast she couldn’t stop him.

“Mr. McIntyre!” a nurse shouted.

He held up one hand and sent her a silencing look. Then he lifted his head, and the little black box, its lid open now, the ring winking and twinkling inside. “Sweet Vidalia, you are the love of my life, and I refuse to live another day without you. Will you marry me?”

Her tears were streaming. The carolers had just broken into the third verse in the hallway, and even the nurse was sniffing.

“Say yes, Mom,” Selene whispered. “Make me legitimate.”

Vidalia dropped to her knees too, pressed her hands to Bobby’s cheeks, and kissed his mouth slowly. When she

finished, she spoke so close her lips brushed his as she told him, “You bet I will.”

He grinned, plucked the ring from the box and slipped it onto her finger. A loud cheer broke out, and they both turned their heads to see a number of faces vying for a spot outside the door’s glass windows, her daughters and his sons, all of them smiling so wide it was blinding.

They kissed again, kneeling there in front of the window with the snowflakes as their backdrop, and Vidalia knew that her fondest wish, her very own Christmas miracle, had been delivered right then, that very night, on the Christmas when her life began anew.

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