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A small airplane is flying in the sky above a large, colorful cloud. The sky is a mix of blue, pink, and yellow. Below the cloud is a green, tree-covered shoreline. In the foreground, there is a body of water reflecting the sky and the shoreline. The word "Miracles" is written in a large, stylized, cursive font with a pink-to-purple gradient and a 3D effect, positioned in the upper half of the image.

# Miracles

Mary Kirk

**A man turned out of heaven. A woman living in hell. A love born of miracles....**

Kate hesitated all of two seconds. Then, with tears brimming in her eyes, she threw her arms around Sam's neck and kissed his cheek, saying, "This is for Francis . . . and this is for me."

But when she pulled back, Sam's arm clamped around her waist, his gaze holding hers fast.

"And this is for me," he said. Then his head angled and dipped, and his lips caught hers in a kiss that spoke of things far more potent than gratitude.

She trembled as his mouth moved across hers. The first touch of his tongue skimming the seam of her lips sent warning signals shooting through every nerve in her body.

She tried to pull away. "Sam . . ."

"Hush, now." He shifted forward on the fallen tree to plant his feet on the ground, then drew her close, nestling her thighs between his. "No more talking," he said as his lips grazed her temple, her cheek, the line of her jaw. "We've both been wanting this. You know that."

Yes, she knew it. But she also knew she'd been afraid of it, and the instant his mouth slid, open and seeking, onto hers, she knew why. In less than a heartbeat she was quivering with excitement, and her safe, passionless world was in danger of being set to flames. Not even if she had pushed him away in that instant would she be able to settle for passionless again. Which was reason enough, since it was too late, anyway, simply to give in. . . .

To Keith, for that long-ago weekend in West Virginia,  
where the story was born. And for all the years  
before, after, and yet to come.  
With love.

# *Miracles*

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**Mary Kirk**



## MIRACLES

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# One

The rain was cold on Kate's face. It was colder still as it soaked through her jacket and jeans. It turned the pain she was suffering into misery and the misery into tears that ran down her cheeks to mingle with the rain.

Huddled against the tree whose roots had tripped her, she looked up at the wind-twisted maples and birches that dominated the Michigan forest. Their tender new leaves offered scant protection from the deluge, and she knew it would only get worse. This was no spring shower but a northwester off Lake Superior. It had blown in without warning and turned the fair afternoon sky into a mass of roiling black clouds. Running along the rutted dirt track, trying to beat the storm, had been worse than useless; in her haste, she'd fallen—and it looked as if she wasn't going to be getting up again any time soon.

Kate grimaced. The ankle was bad. Her fingers trembled as she gently poked the thick cotton sock covering it, and she winced at the sharp pain that accompanied the tentative exploration.

A loud crack followed by a wrenching groan brought her gaze flashing upward in time to see an old hemlock, maybe a hundred yards away, split wide open. Cleaved in two, the dying giant crashed earthward, wreaking havoc on neighboring trees as it fell. In the next instant, when a switch of maple leaves stung her face, she cried out, inching her way around the tree trunk in a futile search for shelter.

She knew she was being childish, letting a storm frighten her, but circumstances were rapidly undermining her confidence. She was alone and in pain, and her left ankle was swelling rapidly. It was storming violently. The Nielsens, whose house

she'd just left, lived a half mile south. Bournier's Crossing, where she lived, was two miles north. And crawling the distance in either direction would be impossible.

Maybe a fisherman would find her, or a park ranger. It was more likely, though, that she wouldn't be missed until tomorrow morning, when she didn't show up at the office for her meeting with Doc. Meanwhile, what would she do that night, as the temperature dropped, to keep from freezing in clothes that were soaking wet?

With the wind howling and the rain beating upon her, Kate stared at her foot and tried to stop crying. Normally, she didn't mind crying, but these tears made her uncomfortable. They were an expression of helplessness, an echo of the queasy, panicky feeling growing inside her, and she fought against them, hoping that if she could control the tears, she'd control the panic.

It didn't work. Kathleen Morgan, eldest of six Morgan children, rarely wallowed in self-pity and never gave in to hysterics. She was on the verge of indulging in both, however, when a loud male voice, coming out of nowhere, pushed her over the edge.

"Lady, what the hell are you—"

She screamed, recoiling, before she'd even gotten a look at the figure looming over her. When he moved a step closer to hunker down beside her, she tried to scramble away, wrenching her ankle in the process.

"Ouch! Oh, Lord—"

"Hey, it's okay." His voice was deep and gravelly as he shouted over the roar of the storm. "What're you doing here? Are you hurt?"

She struggled to speak past the lump in her throat.

"Look"—he laid a hand on her arm—"we've got to get out of this. There're trees going down."

Kate tried to blink the blinding wind and rain out of her eyes, but she got only a glimpse of the man through a gray curtain of water: lean thighs encased in blue denim, broad shoulders hunched inside a worn leather jacket, a face of sharp lines, and dripping wet hair.



His hand tightened on her arm. "Did you hear me? We've got to get—"

"Can't walk," she croaked. "My ankle. It's twisted." His gaze slid away from hers, zeroing in on the injured limb. "I was on my way h-home from the N-Nielsens'. They live down the road, and Erik . . . Erik has a truck. He'll help if you— Oh!"

The wind shifted, blowing a sheet of rain in their faces, and Kate shrank farther against the tree.

Swearing a blue streak, the man stood abruptly to shrug out of his jacket and drop it around her shoulders.

"Oh, th-thank you, but . . ."

He snatched her knapsack off the ground, slung it over his shoulder, then reached down to her. "Give me your hand. I'll carry you."

Kate saw how quickly the pounding rain soaked his chambray shirt and noted irrelevantly, "You're going to get cold."

He gave her an exasperated look. "I'll survive. Now, come on, before we both drown!"

"But it's too far for you to try to carry me, and Erik—"

"Dammit, just shut up and give me your hand, okay? We can argue later!"

Kate's breath caught in her throat, and she flushed with embarrassment. He was right; she sounded ridiculous. She wasn't thinking very well, though, and it seemed a great effort to shove her concerns aside enough to hold out her hand and let the man enfold it in his grasp.

His hand was strong and warm despite the cold, and he pulled her upward in an easy motion.

"Honestly," she began, "I could wait while you go—" Her suggestion died abruptly when he drew her arm around his neck, slipped his arm under her knees, and lifted her.

She gasped. "Are you s-sure about this? The pack's heavy, and I'm not exactly . . . l-little. Let me hop or— Oh!"

He tossed her slightly to shift her weight, and her arms locked in a death grip around his neck.

"It's all right, honey," he said. "You let me handle this." And with that, he began walking down the mud-washed track.

Kate was too stunned to utter another word. It's all right,

*honey?* No one ever talked to her that way. Nor was she used to being “handled”; she was used to doing the handling herself. Still, amid her pain and the punishing torrent, she was relieved he wasn’t giving her choices she was incapable of making.

Kate buried her face against his shoulder. Soon enough he’d realize he couldn’t carry her far and would want to put her down. Not that she was overweight, but the ample curves on her five-foot-six-inch form could not, in her estimation, be considered insignificant. He didn’t put her down, though, and after a minute or two, she stopped worrying that he would slip or drop her.

He didn’t move like a man who was unsure of himself. He didn’t feel like one, either. His body was all lean muscle on a tall, broad-shouldered frame. He moved carefully and as quickly as the wind and the rutted, slick track would allow, carrying her not easily but with confidence. Slowly, some of that confidence seeped into her.

After what seemed a long time, the man stopped walking. Kate lifted her head and saw through the rain that they’d reached a small, cedar-shingled hunter’s cabin, one of many scattered throughout the forest.

“I’m going to put you down,” he warned, setting her on one foot, her back braced against the cabin. Her hands clutched his shoulders, and he gave her a questioning look. “Will you be okay?”

She nodded, but the instant he moved away, her knee buckled and she slid to the ground. He grabbed for her, but she waved him off. “Go on. I’m f-fine.”

She obviously wasn’t, but he left her sitting there to reach for the door. It was locked, and he rattled the handle, slamming his shoulder against the stout pine several times before giving up. Moving to the window to the right of the door, he yanked hard on the shutter until it banged open. Then, giving the window a cursory look to see that it was locked, he stood back and put his booted foot through one of the panes.

Kate winced at the sound of shattering glass, then watched anxiously as he reached inside, unlocked the window, and slid it up until he could climb through. He did so with long-legged

ease and, an instant later, opened the door. This time her arms went around his neck unhesitantly as he lifted her, carried her inside, and kicked the door closed behind them.

The sound of branches scraping across the roof combined with the clomp of heavy boots as the man strode across the plank floor. Maneuvering in the semidarkness to a couch that sat facing the hearth, he started to lower Kate onto it but stopped when she tensed.

“The f-floor. Closer to the f-fireplace,” she rasped.

He put her down on the braided rug in front of the cold hearth, and she hugged her ankle close, shutting her eyes against the pain. Her relief at being out of the wind and rain was palpable, but for the first time she realized how badly she was shivering. Her teeth were chattering, and she couldn’t clamp her jaw tightly enough to make them stop.

A sudden slam made her eyes fly open, though she had to strain to see across the room. Her rescuer had closed the shutter against the driving rain and, in doing so, had cut off the only dim source of light. She could scarcely make out his shadowed form as he grabbed something from the day bed along the front wall, then moved toward her, his boots crunching on broken glass.

Dropping to one knee in front of her, he started to drape a blanket around her shoulders. Hesitating, he finally tossed the blanket aside. “Got to get these wet things off,” he muttered, “or the blanket won’t do much good.”

Right, Kate thought, but she couldn’t make her muscles move to help herself. He wasn’t wasting time letting her try. Without asking permission, he pulled his leather jacket, the inside of which was still dry, from her shoulders, then went to work on the buttons of hers, which, being denim, was saturated all the way through.

She struggled to speak. “I’m K-Kathleen Morgan, but p-people call me K-Kate.”

“Sam Reese,” he replied, pulling one sodden sleeve, then the other, off her arms. “Hell, you’re soaked to the skin. Look, Katie, I know this is kind of short acquaintance, but . . .”

Above all else, Kate was practical; she knew this was no

time for modesty. Besides, it was nearly pitch dark in the cabin—dubious reassurance, at best, but it quelled any protest her inhibitions may have offered as Sam Reese’s long fingers skimmed down the buttons of her cotton blouse, leaving gaping fabric in their wake. He yanked the hem out of her jeans, then lifted each hand in turn to loosen the cuffs. The darkness didn’t hinder him, she noticed, and she appreciated his tactful comment when his hands slid inside the sopping blouse to peel it off her shoulders.

“Now, I’m just going to close my eyes, here, and . . .”

“I’m . . . f-freezing,” she whispered.

“Honey, you’re not just freezing. You’re in shock.”

“Uh-uh.”

“Uh-*huh*.”

“Not y-yet.” But almost. Over a twisted ankle and a storm. It was mortifying.

Her shirt slapped onto the floor in a wet heap, and in the next instant he had reached behind her and unhooked her bra—one-handed. In the dark. She might be cold and hurting, but she had enough sense left to realize she was being undressed by an expert. When his hands skated down her hips and discovered that her jeans were mostly dry above mid-thigh, she was relieved. Even putting modesty aside, she couldn’t have coped with having them pulled off over her ankle.

The wool blanket was thick and scratchy and warm as he rubbed it over her bared back and shoulders.

“S-Sam, you know . . . you’re n-not exactly . . . c-catching me at my b-best.”

“Is that so?”

“I promise, I’m u-usually a lot d-different.”

“You telling me these goose bumps aren’t permanent?”

“I’m r-really . . . v-very efficient.”

“Well, Katie, we all have our off days. You sit tight while I hunt up some matches and get a fire started.”

He drew the blanket around her, and she clutched the ends together between her breasts. Fire. That sounded like salvation. She knew the cabin, knew it had heat and lights, but the power came from a liquid gas generator located outside.

Weather conditions being what they were, a fire was the easiest, fastest way to make heat.

"In my pack," Kate said. "F-flash . . . light. And matches."

"Good girl," Sam murmured, dragging the pack across the rug toward them. "I was beginning to wish I hadn't quit smoking."

As he unbuckled the straps and began sorting through the knapsack, she tried to concentrate on him rather than the pain. He was on his knees, only inches away, and with every shallow breath she took she caught the scent of him—unembellished male blended with the smell of his wet leather jacket beside her and the wool around her shoulders. In the face of physical discomfort, her senses focused on those clean, honest smells and found in them something immensely comforting.

A beam of light shot across the room as he switched on the flashlight. He used it to find the matches, then turned to the fireplace. There was wood piled beside the hearth, and when he began arranging logs, she almost asked him to find her aspirin first; but if he was half as cold as she was, fire was more important.

Gritting her teeth and telling herself she could wait a little longer, Kate searched for something to say to keep her mind off her ankle.

"Did you know about this c-cabin, or did we just get l-lucky?"

Sam answered without looking at her. "I'm renting it."

"You're renting *this* p-place?"

"Right."

"So, how c-come we . . . had to break in?"

"No key. I stopped to look around before I went to meet the owner—a man named Fournier."

"Yes, I know Steve."

Sam shot her a quick glance, and she added, "He's my brother-in-law. He's m-married to my sister, Cressie." His replies hardly encouraged conversation, but she persisted out of her own need. "Besides, I k-know everybody around here."

Sam's "humph" was unimpressed as he broke kindling to stuff under the logs he'd stacked.

Kate closed her eyes briefly, then tried one more time.

“Where are you f-from?”

“Detroit,” he said, then reached for the matches to light the fire. The tip of a wooden match scraped briefly on the side of the box, then flared. He waited an instant, until the flame steadied, then touched it to the kindling in several places. The logs, being seasoned and dry, caught quickly, and soon tongues of fire licked at the hardwood.

Eager for heat, she wiggled closer as she reached for her knapsack.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“A black case. It’s in the b-bottom. Somewhere.”

She let him take the pack from her, and he produced the case in seconds, snapping it open, then giving her a startled look at the sight of her stethoscope, blood pressure cuff, and other medical equipment.

“You a doctor?”

“A n-nurse practitioner and midwife.” She was having trouble preserving her modesty and rooting through the bag at the same time. “Please. Do you s-see the aspirin?”

“Got it.”

“Give me th-three.”

Without comment, he uncapped the bottle and tapped the pills into the palm she’d stuck out from under the blanket. She groaned when her uncontrollable shaking made two roll onto the floor. “I’m sor—”

“Hush,” he said, steadying her hand with his own as he shook out two more. His hand closed over hers, curling her fingers around the tablets; then he waited until she had them in her mouth before recapping the bottle.

“What’s in here?” he asked, unscrewing her Thermos.

She answered with the aspirin on her tongue. “Coffee.”

He wouldn’t even let her try to handle the plastic cup but held it for her as she drank to swallow the pills. Caffeine might not be the best cure for a bad case of nerves, but she was desperate enough for its warmth that she reached with both shaky hands for the cup.

Sam hesitated. “You sure?”

“No, but it f-feels good. Hot.”

He held the cup out to her but didn't let go when her fingers trembled against it. Instead, his hands covered hers to hold it securely. Slumped and shivering, her eyes closed, she concentrated on the way the heat from both the cup and his strong, steady hands seemed to travel up her arms to warm the rest of her body.

It should have felt strange, she thought vaguely, to sit there, nearly naked and less than half coherent, while a stranger touched her with such familiar ease. Yet it didn't feel strange at all. It felt right and natural, the way it should feel when circumstances defeated pretense and formality, and people were forced to trust each other in a hurry, under stress.

She knew the feeling well. She'd experienced it treating gunshot wounds in victims of hunting accidents and stitching cuts in unlucky hikers and fisherman. It was at its strongest when the isolation of the northern wilderness necessitated that she deliver the baby of a woman she barely knew. The sudden, intense intimacy, the bond that formed at those needful times between two people whose only common ground was their essential humanity. Yes, she knew the feeling.

Still, she'd never experienced it from this side of the fence. She was always the helper, the rescuer, the strong, reassuring one who, hopefully, made everything all right again. To be treated as she might treat a patient contradicted Kate's view of herself entirely, and, under less dire circumstances, she probably would have balked. Having reluctantly accepted the situation, though, she discovered it wasn't so bad. In fact, if she thought about it too closely, it might even make her cry. For having Sam Reese hold her hands to help her get warm was, very simply, the nicest thing anybody had done for her in a long time.

Slowly, her shivering lessened. Clearly, Sam felt the change, too, for he withdrew his hands. Taking a ragged breath, she opened her eyes to discover the coffee wasn't sloshing in the cup. The pain in her ankle was atrocious, but she felt better—still a little rattled, but together enough to remember she wasn't the only one who was cold and wet.

Offering him the cup, she spoke in a voice closer to her own. "Here. Pour yourself some. And you should do something about your wet shirt."

"I'm okay," he said, taking the nearly empty cup from her and setting it aside.

He was crouched in front of her, one side of his face bathed in firelight, the other side in shadows. He wasn't handsome in any typical way, but she found the rough-hewn planes of his face compelling. Lines fanned out around his eyes and creased the corners of his mouth, carved in skin bronzed by the sun. Like his harsh-edged voice, his features were distinctly masculine—a thin, straight nose and high, sharp cheekbones beneath which his face was long and a bit too hollow. In contrast, his mouth was generous, with a fullness to the lower lip that made it disturbingly sensual. His hair swept back from a high forehead and was medium brown streaked with blond. She guessed he was close to forty.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"A little. Thanks." She tried to smile as she met his gaze.

His eyes were clear gray. In the firelight, they were almost colorless, like prisms that in one instant reflected light and in the next, absorbed it. A second later, though, the sparkling irises darkened to a muted pewter, and Kate felt cheated. For a moment she'd seen something in the depths of Sam Reese's eyes that belied the tough image he projected.

He rose to drag two straight chairs from the kitchen table to the fire, then draped her garments and his jacket over them to dry.

"What about your jeans?" he asked. "Do you want to try to dry them out?"

She shook her head. "I wouldn't dare take them off over this foot. . . . Sam?"

He glanced at her, and she tried another smile, this time revealing a hint of dimples. "I acted like a complete idiot back there. I'm sorry."

He lifted one shoulder in a loose shrug. "Don't worry about it."

"I *was* worried. And I'm very glad you showed up."



With a nod of acknowledgment, he walked away.

Kate wanted to ask him not to leave her. The throbbing in her ankle was bone-deep, and talking helped to keep her from coming unglued. Her eyes followed him, her fingers knotting the wool chafing her breasts, as he scouted the farther reaches of the cabin. The purpose of his search became clear when he pulled a broom from the closet in the corner of the kitchen.

“So, are you in the area to fish?” she asked, her tone brittle with forced cheerfulness.

Sam crossed the room and began sweeping up the broken glass, giving her a brief “Maybe.”

“Lake Gogebic is practically next door, and it’s the best place for walleye. But just about any direction you go, you’ll find water to throw a line in.”

“Hmm.”

“Then again, if you’re a hiker, you can’t go wrong, either. Of course, this is our slow season—and the snow melted early this year, too. People come to the Upper Peninsula to see fall colors or to ski or hunt. About the only thing now is fishing. Are you going to be staying long?”

“Depends.”

“On?”

“On how long I decide to stay.”

“Oh.”

Leaning the broom against the wall, he studied her from across the room. Then, slowly, with what appeared to be reluctance, he came over to stoop in front of her. His eyes were full of an emotion she couldn’t begin to read, and he seemed to be deliberating as he worried a corner of his bottom lip with his teeth.

Finally he asked, “Is it bad?”

His directness startled her after his vague, terse statements.

“Your ankle,” he said, when she didn’t answer. “Do you know how bad it is?”

Her gaze fell from his, and she tried to muster some breezy assurance. “Oh, it’s nothing an ice pack won’t cure.”

It was a ridiculous lie. Her ankle was obviously swollen, her hiking shoe biting into the flesh around it.

Lifting her gaze, she said tentatively, “You know, I would like to get this shoe off, but . . . well, do you think you could lend me a hand?”

For a moment Sam neither moved nor spoke, though his gaze darted from her face to her ankle several times. Then, abruptly he surged to his feet and pivoted away, reaching for the poker hanging beside the fireplace.

“You’ll do better yourself,” he replied, giving the logs a shove. “I’d just wrench it worse.”

His refusal struck Kate as odd in light of everything else he’d done for her, but she wasn’t about to push. Maybe he was squeamish about injuries and medical things.

Gamely, she tucked her blanket so it wouldn’t fall open, then stuck her hands out from under it to begin working at her wet shoelace. It was soon obvious, however, that her short-trimmed nails and shaky fingers couldn’t untie it. She kept trying, but pain and frustration and raw nerves drove her rapidly to tears.

“Cut it.”

Her eyes were brimming when her gaze flew upward to collide with Sam’s. He was standing beside her, an open pocketknife lying across his outstretched palm. She looked from the knife to him in pain and confusion, not understanding how a man could sound so hard and cool when his eyes said he was anything but. Understanding even less his almost anguished expression when his gaze dropped to her ankle.

Was he that squeamish? If so, why did he torture himself by watching as she took the knife from him, slipped the blade under the lace of her shoe, and sliced it? And why did he hover over her as she whimpered through the agonizing process of working the shoe off her foot? Finally, when her hand slipped on the wet leather and she gasped at the sudden jerk, he made a low, strangled sound and strode away.

His behavior was definitely odd; but then, she’d seen enough men, especially macho types like Sam Reese, turn to jelly over medical emergencies. As she sliced her cotton sock

from shin to toes with the knife and peeled it off, she had only a vague awareness that he was pacing the room like an animal paces a cage.

By the time the injured foot was bare, she felt sick to her stomach. Besides that, she was beginning to think about the ramifications of her injury. She wanted to believe it was only a sprain but feared it was worse. In any case, she was facing a trip to the hospital for x-rays, at least a few days in bed with her foot elevated, and maybe weeks of hobbling around on crutches, dragging a cast.

But, darn it, she didn't have time for beds and crutches and casts. Laura Graff's baby was due in ten days. And she'd promised Cressie and Steve she'd stay with the kids one evening soon so they could get out. And there was Bert Andrews, with his new high blood pressure medication, who had to be closely monitored. And she'd promised Alison Lenox she'd talk to her biology classes next week about prenatal development. . . .

Kate groaned at the long list of obligations. Some were part of her job, but many were things she'd agreed to do simply because she enjoyed doing things for people. Yet here she was with a messed-up ankle, and all she could do about it was worry.

"Doc's going to strangle me," she murmured, giving voice to her anxious thoughts.

"Aren't you allowed to get hurt or sick?"

She glanced up to see Sam standing on the other side of the hearth. Uttering a short laugh, she replied. "I don't know. I've never tried."

"This Doc guy—who is he?"

"Dr. William Cabot. His office is in Bournier's Crossing. I've been working with him for about three years."

"And he's the slave-driver type?"

She shook her head. "No, Doc won't really be mad at me. But he's an older man, and he depends on me to handle most of the emergencies. I also do all the prenatal care, and I deliver babies for women who can't make it to the hospital, and . . . well, things like that."

“You mean, you do the legwork.”

She cast a woeful glance at her ankle. “As much as I dislike your choice of words right now, yes.”

“So maybe he’ll have to get somebody to help out for a while.”

“I wish it were that easy. But look, it’s my fault I’m in this mess, and I’ll figure it out. Now, tell me the truth, Sam, are you really from Detroit? Because you sure don’t look it.”

His face went blank at her shift in topic. Then, slowly, one side of his mouth sloped into a smile. “How does somebody *look* like they’re from Detroit?”

“Oh, I don’t know. You *sound* like you’re from the Midwest. But I’d have said you live somewhere hot and sunny.”

He cocked an eyebrow, and she directed a look at his hair. “It’s the tan and the beach-boy blond streaks. In the summer, my sisters and I used to smear lemon juice all over our hair, trying to make it look like that. But it never worked.” With a toss of her head, she caught her long, wet braid in her fingers and looked at it, dismayed. “We had to settle for plain and ordinary brown.”

There was a brief silence, then Sam drawled, “I don’t know, Katie. Plain and ordinary can be real nice . . . under the right circumstances.”

His lazy, sultry tone got her attention. Her gaze flashed to his, and she blinked, certain she wasn’t reading him right. The harsh lines of his face revealed nothing, but those gray eyes told her things his expression did not. She knew with every feminine instinct she possessed that she wasn’t mistaken. His gaze still held an odd wariness she didn’t understand, but it also held interest—frank, sexual interest that was made even plainer as his gaze slid over her blanket-wrapped body in a slow perusal.

Kate flushed, her gaze skittering away. She wasn’t accustomed to being eyed so openly. Men always seemed to look at her as a big sister or a friend, which usually meant their shoulder to cry on. They almost never looked at her *that* way. And the not-so-subtle message in Sam’s appraisal was even harder to believe given that she must resemble a

drowned rat.

Squirming a little inside the blanket, she busied herself by working her waist-length hair out of its braid. It was imperative to keep talking, although she wasn't sure anymore if it was to keep her mind off her ankle or her eyes off Sam Reese's sexy mouth and its unsettling smile.

"So, are you really from Detroit?" she asked.

"Yeah, but I haven't lived there in a long time."

"Am I right? Do you live somewhere hot and sunny?"

"It's definitely hot and sunny in the Mojave Desert."

Kate's fingers, caught in the tangles of her hair, stilled.

"The desert? What do you do in the desert?"

"Nothing, right now."

"Well, what *did* you do?"

He paused before answering. "I flew planes."

"Oh, you were a pilot!"

"I *am* a pilot."

He said it with such vehemence that she felt as if she should apologize for her ignorance.

"Were you—" She stopped to correct herself. "Are you in the Air Force?"

Sam shook his head. "I was in the Navy, but I've been out ten years."

"So you fly commercial planes now?"

When he didn't respond, she looked up to see that he was staring at her—and he didn't look happy.

"You know, Katie," he said, "you're awful damned nosy."

Heat rose in her cheeks. "I'm sorry. I don't usually babble like this, but—"

"But your ankle hurts."

There it was again: the reminder that, regardless of what he said, he understood. He was willing to cooperate, up to a point. Then something would happen—maybe she was asking questions he didn't want to answer—and he'd balk.

Well, we all have our secrets, she thought. He's as entitled to his as I am to mine.

"The aspirin helped a little," she mumbled, glancing toward the shuttered window. "Listen, maybe the rain's let up.

You could probably go get Erik now, and I'm sure he'd take me—"

"It's still pouring," Sam interrupted her. "When the storm blows over, I'll take you home."

"But I've already put you to a lot of trouble and—"

"Katie."

"—it's getting late—close to dinnertime, and—"

"Stop it."

She sucked in a quick breath, and her gaze snapped to his.

"You haven't been any trouble. I just don't—" He broke off, his eyes reflecting indecision. An instant later, he scowled. "Listen, I'm a little touchy about answering questions. I've been doing a lot of it lately. I know why you've got to keep talking—and, believe me, I'm sorry as hell about your ankle—but I'm not much of a talker. Okay?"

She supposed that scowl could be darned intimidating, and she was sure he intended it to be. But it was too late for that. He'd carried her out of the rain and undressed her and helped her get pills into her mouth. He'd held her shaking hands around a hot cup of coffee in unquestioning silence until she was warm. There was no way she could be intimidated by him. And he must have realized it, for his expression gradually softened.

"Forget Nielsen," he said. "I'll take you home."

She hesitated only a second or two before giving him a single nod of acceptance. She held his gaze a moment longer, but when he turned away to stare into the fire, her gaze slid over him and she suddenly registered that his hands were rubbing his crossed arms—and that his shirt was still wet.

"You're cold," she said.

His right hand, wrapped over his left biceps, stopped moving. "I'm okay."

"Where are your things, Sam? If we're going to be here a while longer, you should put on a dry shirt."

He shook his head. "My Jeep's around back, but I'm not going to unload it in this deluge."

"I guess everything'd be wet by the time you got it inside," she agreed. "But your shirt would dry faster if you hung it with

the other things.”

He shrugged off her concern. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. You’re cold.”

When he didn’t answer, Kate sighed. “Look I feel bad enough, causing you all this trouble—and don’t tell me I haven’t. I was a pain in the neck when you found me, and you’ve got a broken window to fix because of me. I’d feel better if I didn’t think you were freezing.”

His head turned, and she met his gaze with an encouraging look. “If you’re worried I’ll faint at the sight of a man’s naked chest, forget it. I grew up with three brothers. And in my line of work, believe me, hairy chests are the least of what I have to look at.”

He didn’t respond to her attempt at levity but continued to give her that wary, closed expression. Then, suddenly, he yanked open the buttons of his shirt, tore the wet garment off, and flung it over the chair with his jacket. Without pausing to glance at her, he grabbed the poker and squatted in front of the fire to give the blazing logs a few good jabs. He made a production of it, shifting logs until streams of sparks were flying up the chimney.

But she was hardly aware of his actions. Her eyes were wide with shock, riveted to his lean torso.

Shiny, flat scars, dozens of them: They mottled his right side—chest, ribs, back, and upper arm. All were the result of burns—all but one, and that one commanded her attention. A single arc that began over his heart, swept under the curve of his right pectoral and around his rib cage, and ended close to his spine: It was a surgical scar, one she was certain must have resulted from a monumental effort to repair internal injuries.

Her first thought was to wonder what had happened to him. Her second was to regret persuading him to take off his shirt when he clearly hadn’t wanted her to see the marred flesh. Her third was to note that it would take a lot more than scars to diminish all that unashamed virility. Scarred or not, Sam Reese was quite a man.

“Is there a grocery store in Bournier’s Crossing?”

Kate hardly heard Sam's question. She was studying the pattern of crisp hair, muscle, and scars on his chest. He was stooped down across from her, stuffing her medical bag and Thermos into her pack, and when she didn't answer his hands fell still.

"Have you changed your mind about fainting?"

Her gaze flew to his and locked for the space of a heart-beat—long enough for her cheeks to stain red.

"No." She dropped her gaze. "No, of course not."

A minute of strained silence passed before he resumed the packing. "I'm hoping I don't have to drive a lot further tonight to find a store that's open. Is there one in town?"

"Uh-huh."

"What time does it close?"

"Whenever Mrs. D. calls Mr. D. home to dinner."

Vaguely, Kate realized how worthless her answer was, and that realization led to an awareness that she was staring again. Her gaze flickered upward, and when she found him watching her, her blush deepened at being caught a second time. This time, though, she held his defiant gaze. *I dare you to say what you're thinking*, his eyes seemed to say. And manners dictated that she keep her mouth shut.

But she was no actress. Even when she was at her best—which she certainly wasn't—it would have taken more talent than she possessed to pretend she didn't see the scars. Finally, she had to ask, "Sam, what happened?"

Something dark flickered in his eyes, but he applied his attention to buckling the straps of the knapsack as he spoke. "I ran into some trouble with a plane."

"You mean you crashed?"

"That's the general idea."

His tone was so lacking in emotion, she could almost hear him adding, *But it was no big deal*.

"How long ago was it?"

"A little over a year."

Not long enough for the burns to lose their angry look, nor for him to sound even half so dispassionate about it. At least, she thought, she understood why he'd been upset about her



ankle; given what he'd suffered, it was easy to see why pain, even someone else's, would bring back agonizing memories for him. As she tried to imagine what those memories must be like, her gaze coasted over him again, her expression an unconscious reflection of her thoughts.

"Cut it out."

The sharp order brought her gaze up to meet his angry scowl.

"Listen," Sam growled, "I don't need you or anybody else feeling sorry for me."

Actually, the thought of feeling sorry for him was laughable. He stirred a welter of emotions inside her, but pity wasn't one of them. Still, she knew what he must have seen on her face.

"I wasn't feeling sorry for you," Kate said. "I was feeling, well, bad, I guess. Not about the scars, though. I promise you, Sam, I've seen worse."

His look was suspicious, but he seemed to believe her.

"It's my nurse's instincts," she went on. "I can't help thinking about how badly you must have been hurt." Her gaze traveled over him, and she shivered. "A plane crash! Heavens! It's hard to believe you survived at all."

An instant of silence flashed past before Sam muttered, "Yeah, well, maybe I didn't." And with that, he grabbed her clothes off the chair and tossed them into her lap.

Kate stared at the clothes, then at him. Then she frowned. "What is that supposed to mean—maybe you didn't?"

He buttoned his half-dry shirt as he answered. "Nothing. Forget it."

"You're here, and you're alive, aren't you?"

"Yeah. Look, the rain's stopped." He picked up his jacket, nodding toward the door. "I'll bring the Jeep around front while you get dressed. Or, uh"—his eyes skimmed over her—"do you need some help?"

His tone wasn't suggestive; the offer was sincere, for all its reluctance. But it wasn't dark anymore, and she was no longer the stranger in need he'd undressed an hour ago.

She turned to look at the fire. "No, thanks. I can manage."

He walked to the door, stopping when he'd opened it to glance over his shoulder. "Listen, Katie," he said, "I'm a nasty bastard to be around lately. Don't take it personally. And don't try to make sense of it, either. Not much about life makes sense, anyway. Take my word for it."

And then he was gone.

## Two

Sam stood with his back to the closed cabin door and heaved a sigh. He stared at the greening, rain-drenched forest, listening to the silence, smelling the wet dirt and leaves, willing the tension out of his body. Slowly, his jaw relaxed. Gradually, the trembling in his hands stopped, and his heart, which had been racing for the past hour, settled down to a quieter beat. He felt like he'd won a war.

Well, okay, maybe only a battle. But that was progress. Total victory would have been preventing Ms. Kathleen Knows-Everybody-Around-Here Morgan from suspecting that the battle was being fought.

Pretty, dimple-cheeked Katie Morgan, with her big brown eyes and her soft, sexy body, and her “plain and ordinary” hair that fell all over the place in masses of rippling waves. Yeah, she was plain and ordinary, all right. Like hot apple pie with vanilla ice cream. Nothing fancy or exotic, but rich and sweet and so damned good you kept wanting more. A man could get hooked on that kind of goodness.

Sam grunted softly and glanced at the door. He wouldn't have to worry about getting hooked. He wouldn't even count on being given a taste. Because no matter what he thought of her, Katie probably thought he was pretty strange. And he couldn't blame her.

Frowning, he trudged through the mud and last year's fallen leaves toward his Jeep, parked behind the cabin. His only comfort at the moment—and small comfort it was, too—was that nobody, Katie Morgan included, would ever guess the cause of his odd behavior, not in their wildest dreams. The only way they'd find out was if, by either word or deed, he told them.

Words were easy to control; he could ration them out as he saw fit. Deeds were a different story. His impulsive actions over the past few months had all but ruined his life. And that's why he was here. He had to take charge of things again, get a handle on what had happened to him, on what he'd become.

First, he'd unwind a little. Relax. Put some space between him and all the people who'd been bleeding him dry. Not that he held it against them, but enough was enough. And he'd forget about all the others—the ones with the endless questions, and the ones who'd looked at him, shivering-in-their-shoes scared. Then, when he was feeling less harassed and more like himself again, inner battles such as the one he'd just fought over Katie Morgan wouldn't be a problem.

And neither would flying.

That's all he needed—some time to get himself together. After seven months stuck in a hospital and another four spent fighting with the Federal Aviation Administration, he could finally think about flying again. . . . Damn, it had been a long time.

Climbing into the Jeep, Sam removed the map, sunglasses, and empty Coke cans from the passenger seat, then started the engine. He stopped, though, in the act of releasing the brake to look around. The air was clear and chilly with the passing of the storm, and the late-afternoon sky, through the trees, was a splashy array of blues and pinks. Rain dripped off the old hemlock beside the cabin, splashing occasionally onto the canvas top of the Jeep. This was the big woods. Tall, straight aspen and shapely birch and maple stretched over mile after mile of rolling hills. The place felt clean, immutable. Safe.

If he wanted it to stay that way, though, he was going to have to be more careful than he'd been in the past couple of hours. He'd come too damned close to giving in to Katie's big, brown, tear-filled eyes. Her little sounds of pain had just about wrecked him. The worst part was, he'd have to listen to those sounds until he got her home—and he'd have to ignore them.

His hand fell from the steering wheel, and he slumped in the seat with a sigh, figuring he'd better plan his defense before he had to face her again.

Okay. So, he'd gotten here this afternoon, and the first person he'd run into was a nurse. The local doc's assistant. Yeah, he'd walked straight into that booby trap. And she was sweet and sexy, and the idea of spending about a week in bed with her was damned appealing. But no matter how sweet and sexy she was, and no matter how hard it was to deny the urges that had tormented him since he'd found her sitting there, nursing her ankle, he was going to keep his urges—all of them—to himself.

With that thought, Sam's mouth twisted in a dry smile. As far as his baser urges were concerned, he doubted he had anything to worry about. Ten to one, Katie was married with a bunch of kids. He could see her with some big lumberman, the kind who'd flatten any guy stupid enough to let his eyes drift below her chin. So all he had to do was take her to town, turn her over to her husband, and leave. And, hell, she'd still be a damned sight better off than she'd been when he found her.

Between now and then, he wouldn't try to get to know her or give her any reason to think he wanted to make friends in the area. Because in order for his plan to work, he needed to foster the idea that he wanted to be left alone. Let the locals think he was a recluse—"that strange guy who moved into Fournier's cabin. Never speaks to anyone when he comes to town. Goes about his business and disappears again. Oh, he's polite enough. Just strange."

Sam wasn't a recluse, and he didn't like the idea of going weeks without talking to anyone. He didn't like being thought of as strange, either. But he needed the isolation—and the peace—this cabin and these woods offered. If letting people think he was strange was what it took, he'd put up with it. What he couldn't put up with was worrying that maybe they were right.

Perched uncomfortably on the seat of Sam's no-frills, two-seater Jeep, Kate grabbed for a handhold as they started toward town. The storm had turned the forest road into a river of mud and potholes, some of which half swallowed the Jeep's tires. Sam wasn't making any concessions to the terrain, though;

he was attacking the road as if he were driving an armored tank.

Kate cast a sideways glance, wondering if she dared ask him to take it a little easier. His jaw was set, and his mouth was turned down at the corner. He hadn't spoken three words since he'd come into the cabin to get her, and she decided she'd rather put up with the jarring ride than ask him anything.

What on earth made him so touchy? She didn't believe he was really the nasty bastard he'd called himself. In fact, she'd seen enough of the person beneath that crusty exterior to know that Sam was actually a very nice man. A nice man with a problem.

Clearly, he'd been through some rough times. He'd had a terrible accident, which must have something to do with his leaving his job—whatever that job had been. He didn't like answering questions because he'd been doing a lot of it lately; he wasn't here to fish or hike; and she had a gut feeling he might have come simply to seek shelter, like a wounded animal slinking off to a cave to lick its wounds.

Turning her back on someone in pain went against every instinct Kate possessed. She should do as he'd told her—not take his remarks personally or try to make sense of them. She should let him work out his own problems, stop worrying about a man she barely knew. Yet the only thing that kept her from trying to cheer Sam out of his black mood was that she was exhausted from her own pain and didn't have the energy to be anything more than polite. Besides, at the moment, it was all she could do to stay in her seat.

When the Jeep bounced in and out of a pothole and her left foot hit the floor, a pained “Ouch!” escaped her lips.

“Shit,” Sam muttered, then shot her a quick look. “Sorry.”

She wasn't sure if his apology was for hitting the pothole or swearing—he seemed to have a flair for both—although he did slow down to navigate the road more carefully.

“It's okay,” she replied, every muscle tensed for the next jolt. Short of sticking her bad foot across his lap, she tried every conceivable position the confined space allowed, but nothing was comfortable.

His frequent glances told her that he was aware of her dilemma. Finally, when she moaned in defeat, he passed a hand over his jaw in an impatient gesture and spoke.

“You okay?”

“I’ll manage,” she replied with a tight smile. “It’s not that far.”

“Why the devil were you walking from these people’s house—what’d you say their name was?”

“Nielsen—Erik and Lynn.”

“It’s a long way from town.”

“It’s only about two and a half miles. Up here, that’s around the corner.” Kate locked her hands together under her left knee to keep her foot suspended. “I have to drive most places, so I like to walk when I can.”

Sam grunted, then lapsed into silence. A minute later, he asked, “Are you going to have that ankle x-rayed?”

“I think I’ll have to,” she replied.

“Where’s the closest hospital?”

“There’s a small one in Ontonagon and a bigger one in Ironwood. They’re both about fifty miles.”

He kept his eyes on the road, but she could see by the tautness of his features that he was shocked.

“You must have ambulances closer than that,” he said.

“We used to, over in Smithville, about ten miles from Bourner’s Crossing. But they got cut out of the county budget.”

“Great,” he murmured. “So now people just die, huh?”

He had picked up quickly on one of her own worries, but it startled her that it so clearly upset him, too. As her arms quivered with the strain of supporting her leg, she drew her ankle onto her lap and attempted to explain. “People who’ve lived here all their lives are used to being isolated. They don’t think anything about driving twenty miles to shop or fifty miles to the doctor. And, generally, folks are prepared for emergencies. Nearly everyone has regular phone service now, and the loggers have field radios. Cell phone service isn’t reliable enough yet, but Doc and I have pagers and CBs in our houses and cars, so pretty much everybody can reach us at any time. Still,

it's true, sometimes things happen, and we don't make it. That's the risk of living here. If you live in a city, you'll be near the hospitals—but then, you're taking other kinds of risks.”

With a sharp turn of the wheel to avoid a fallen limb, Sam spoke angrily. “So to get your ankle x-rayed tonight, your husband will have to drive you fifty miles to a hospital and back.”

“Yes. Except I don't think I can face going tonight. Tomorrow will be soon enough. And it won't be my husband taking me because I'm not married.” Kate frowned at the brief glance he gave her. “That surprises you?”

He shrugged.

“Did I say something to make you think I was?”

He hesitated, then shook his head. “No, I just had you pegged as a home-and-family kind of woman.”

His disgruntled tone made her think he wasn't happy to have the image dispelled, no more happy than she was to be caught off guard by his perception of her. He was right: She was a home-and-family woman, one with a home but no family to put in it.

She was saved from having to comment when the forest track came to an end at Main Street in Bourner's Crossing.

“Which way?” Sam asked.

“Turn left and go straight, through the intersection.”

Kate gave him the direction, knowing she should feel relieved—as relieved as he looked—that the ride was nearly over. She ought to be glad she'd soon get to lie down. She ought to be glad to be rid of Sam Reese, with his puzzling moods and his testy personality. Yet she wasn't glad, and any relief she might have felt was mingled with disappointment.

Silly woman, she thought. The butterflies in her stomach were only the result of being around a man whose every look and gesture carried a latent sexual message. She shouldn't take those messages any more personally than anything he'd said. Still, it was a good thing he was a stranger, just another tourist passing through—not the kind of man she ever got involved with—because if she saw much of Sam Reese, she suspected the butterflies might get out of hand.

Turning her gaze out the window, she concentrated on the



familiar sights of her adopted home town. Although as a source of distraction from her various discomforts, it was woefully limited.

Bourner's Crossing, Michigan, population two hundred and thirteen, occupied a few dozen acres in the middle of Ottawa National Forest. It was literally a crossroads town, but neither of the roads in question appeared on any but the most detailed map. Unlike the rocky, mountainous coast along Lake Superior, the land surrounding the town rolled in gentle hills or lay in marshy fields. Like all of the Upper Peninsula, it was veined with rivers and creeks. A few dairy and cattle farmers made their living off the heavy soil, but the plan of the National Forest Service was to allow the wilderness to reclaim much of the developed land; many roads weren't being maintained, and farming, which had filled the economic gap when the iron mines had closed years before, was being replaced by controlled logging and a booming recreation industry.

Bourner's Crossing had seen its last dairy farm go under three years ago. The townspeople, and those who lived close by, were mostly either lumberjacks, small-business people who catered to the year-round needs of sportsmen, or sawmill workers.

The mill on Larry Bourner's property was located on Bourner's Mill Road, which crossed Main Street at the town center. Both were the wide dirt roads common to the Upper Peninsula. On the northwest corner of Main and Bourner's Mill sat the post office; on the southwest was Ed Davenport's general store; across from Davenport's was the First Lutheran Church; and on the remaining corner was Gibson's gas station and small-motor repair shop.

In addition to Main and Bourner's Mill, a narrow dirt track cut into Main by the Sandersons' house. Called simply the old lake road, the track wound its way in a southwesterly direction through the forest, providing local access to the eastern shores of Lake Gogebic. It was upon this time-worn trail that Sam's Jeep had brought them into town.

"Now what?" Sam wanted to know when they'd crossed the town center.

“My house is the last one on the right,” Kate answered. “The white one with the red pickup parked in front.”

She gave him a brief look. A muscle in his temple flexed as he repeatedly clenched and unclenched his teeth. He’d grown silent again, and she wished to heaven he’d done as she asked—gone to Erik Nielsen for help, rather than put himself out when he obviously didn’t want to be put out.

Sam parked behind her pickup and, without a word, removed her from the Jeep and carried her up the front steps, into the small one-bedroom cottage. As he ducked through the narrow hall on the way to the bedroom, she persuaded him to give her a few minutes alone in the bathroom, where she managed to maneuver in the confined space on one foot. The effort left her quivering, though, and she was glad he appeared to catch her the instant she called, before she fell and made things even worse.

“Is the place we passed, Davenport’s, the food store?” Sam asked, lowering her onto the patchwork quilt that covered her double bed.

“Yes,” she replied, “but I’m sure it’s closed. You can fix supper here and take some things with you for breakfast.”

He started to protest, but she stopped him. “Sam, I haven’t got enough fight left in me to argue. The refrigerator’s packed. Fix yourself something. All I want is my nightgown and robe out of that closet, and the pills in the corner kitchen cabinet called—No, wait, I’ll write it down.” She grabbed the pad and pencil on her bedside table, scribbled the name of the medication, and handed it to him. “If you just get me those things, I’ll be fine.”

He looked at the piece of paper, then asked, “Are you going to call Doc Cabot to look at that ankle?”

Kate shook her head. “Doc’s in Wakefield tonight, visiting his brother. I’m not going to bother him.”

Sam’s forehead creased in a dark scowl. “You should call somebody to help you.”

She pushed the hair out of her face with a trembling hand. “It’s nice of you to be concerned, but, really, I’ll be all right until tomorrow. Believe me, I’m not going to be stupid about

this. It's too important that I be able to get around."

When she looked at him, his gaze dropped to her ankle. He stood there glowering at it for several seconds. Then, abruptly, he turned toward the closet opposite the bed. He found her robe and gown hanging on the inside of the door and, snatching them off the hook, tossed them to her. Then, without a glance in her direction, he left the room, mumbling something about getting her pills.

Kate stared at the empty doorway, confused and unaccountably sorry that she'd met Sam Reese under such abysmal circumstances. In spite of his reticence and strange behavior, he was the kind of man a woman wanted to impress.

Sam strode through the small house, found the kitchen, and automatically flicked the light switch. But when he reached the cupboard, instead of opening it, he lay both palms flat on the counter, let his head drop forward, and drew a long, steadying breath.

The ride had been harder than he'd expected, and things weren't getting any better. He'd thought he had it all figured out, but Katie disarmed him at every turn. He had to get out of here. Soon. The war wasn't over yet, and he knew from experience that he could still lose.

He also knew that worrying about it would weaken his defenses. Confidence was crucial. Panic would doom him to failure. He had to *think* his way through this. He couldn't *react* like some green kid caught in his first street fight. The crucial thing to remember was that Katie's life was not in danger. She only had a messed-up ankle.

So he'd get her the pills. Then he'd fix her something to eat—and himself, too. It was the logical thing to do. He'd see to it that she let someone know she was incapacitated. Then he'd leave.

It was a good plan. He wasn't being cruel. He was just being practical, trying to survive.

Sam straightened to locate the pills amid the cabinet's variety of medical supplies. When he heard the phone ring faintly in Katie's bedroom, he hoped it was a neighbor, somebody she

could tell about her predicament. Grabbing a glass out of another cabinet, he filled it with water, spent another few minutes gathering his defenses, then headed toward the bedroom. He arrived in time to see Katie hang up the phone.

She had put on her nightgown and robe. Her discarded clothing was in a heap on the floor—except her jeans, which were bunched above her injured ankle. She'd obviously been trying to get them off, and her expression of pain and frustration nearly wasted him then and there.

"Sam, I need your knife again," she said, her voice raw.

His steps slowed as he approached.

She made a little exasperated gesture. "These jeans are too narrow to go over the swelling, and I don't think my sewing scissors will cut through the hem."

He set the glass and the pills on her bedside table and reached into his pocket, producing the knife and opening it for her. She took it from him without a word. As she started to slip it under the thick hem, though, he saw her hand tremble, and he reached out to cover her fingers with his own.

"I'll do it," he said, crouching in front of her. "You'll cut yourself that way."

He couldn't blame her for looking surprised. Hell, he'd acted like she had leprosy when she'd asked for help taking off her shoe. She handed him the knife, though, and her murmured thank you sounded relieved. Still, when he slid the blade under the cloth and saw how badly his own hand was shaking, he had to wonder which of them was in worse shape.

It would be so easy, he thought as his hand brushed her tender skin. So easy to give her what she needed—what he needed, too, to satisfy the gut-wrenching ache inside him. But then she would know, and that alone was enough to harden his resolve.

With a few careful movements, he sliced through the fabric binding her ankle, parting the leg of her jeans up to the knee. Then he paused to ask, "Do you want to try to salvage these?"

When she didn't answer right away, he glanced up. Her lower lip was caught between her teeth, and her eyes were

squeezed closed. She let out a shuddering breath and opened her eyes to look at him.

“No. Just get them off.”

His gaze fell to her mouth. Her lower lip was purple where she’d bitten it—probably to keep from screaming—and he knew he had to hurry up and get out of that room.

The sound of tearing cloth filled the silence as he worked the blade through the length of denim. When the waistband parted and the rent jeans fell to the floor, he closed his eyes briefly and took a shallow breath. Then, in one swift motion, he flicked the knife closed against his thigh, pocketed it, and stood. Turning away, he shoved his hands into his back pockets and cast his gaze over the cozy, feminine-but-not-frilly bedroom.

“Was that a neighbor on the phone?” he asked, barely recognizing his own voice.

“Yes,” Katie answered, easing her legs onto the bed.

She’d arranged two pillows at the bottom, on top of the quilt, and he watched as she cautiously lowered her injured ankle onto them. The ankle was a mess—bruised and swollen to the size of the sensually curved calf above it.

Sam cleared his throat. “So, are you going to get some help tonight if you need it?”

Reaching for the pill bottle, she replied, “Ruth Davenport’s going to stop over later, but I’m hoping I’ll be asleep. I really don’t feel like talking to anybody.”

He followed her movements as she took a white pill out of the bottle and swallowed it with the water he’d brought. “I’m going to fix supper. What can I get you?”

“Nothing. I’m not hungry.”

“You sure?”

She nodded, lying back on the pillows piled behind her. “I would like an ice pack, though. There’s one in the cabinet where you found the pills. Could you—”

“I’ll get it.”

He did so, quickly. And he delivered it to her—along with a towel from the bathroom to wrap it in—then turned around and left without pausing to see that she got it arranged properly.

As he rummaged through the refrigerator in the bright kitchen, he thought somewhat desperately about walking out the front door and driving away. But he couldn't. He had to get through this trial by fire. If he didn't, he'd only face another like it somewhere down the line with no more ability to handle it than he had now. Which was next to none.

Granted, the particular battle he was fighting was harder than most. Katie was a nurse, and his conscience was bothered by the thought that people depended on her. Besides that, he was having a damned hard time ignoring his attraction to her. He wanted her. And he wanted to help her. And it wasn't clear how much wanting he could stand before he gave in to it, one way or another.

Sam settled on scrambled eggs and leftover potatoes that he could fry up in a hurry. He had finished the meal and was washing his plate when the back doorknob rattled. With his hands full of soap, he turned to see a small, gray-haired woman enter, the key still in her hand.

The woman looked startled by the sight of him, but before he could explain his presence, her expression cleared and she smiled.

"You must be Sam Reese. Kate told me about you. I'm Ruth Davenport. My husband Ed and I own the general store."

Wiping his hands on a dish towel, he said a polite greeting and shook Ruth's hand.

She met his gaze with a worried look. "Mr. Reese—"

"Sam."

"Oh . . . thank you, Sam. I want you to know how glad I am you happened along and found Kate when you did. Storms off Superior can be bad business, and once in a while we lose somebody with winds like we had this afternoon."

"I can believe it," he said softly.

Ruth nodded. "She would have been in even worse straits tonight, since it's supposed to drop down close to freezing. I'm sure she's thanked you, but I want to thank you, too—for Bourner's Crossing. Kate means a lot to all of us."

He started to brush off Ruth's gratitude, but she peered anxiously around him. "How is she? Does she need anything?"

“I think she’s asleep.”

“Oh. Well, I’ll just go and check.”

Sam was washing the skillet he’d used when Ruth returned.

She bustled into the kitchen, snatched the butter dish off the table to put away, and let out an exasperated sigh. “That girl!”

“Is she all right?” he demanded, his battered nerves reacting instantly to Ruth’s tone.

“She’s fine. Well, she’s *not* fine, of course, but she’s sound asleep. I didn’t disturb her.” Ruth shut the refrigerator door, then proceeded to take his place at the sink, plunging her hands into the soapy water as she went on to say, “Kate exasperates me sometimes, that’s all. She works herself to the bone, doing for others, but do you know, if Sarah Winfield hadn’t called me to say she saw you carrying Kate up her front walk, and if I hadn’t called to see what was wrong, I bet she wouldn’t have said a word to anybody about being hurt, not if she could possibly have helped it.”

Sam didn’t doubt it. He’d heard Katie himself, lying through her teeth about how there was nothing wrong with her ankle an ice pack wouldn’t cure. No, she wasn’t a complainer.

“Not that she ever *needs* help,” Ruth continued, scrubbing at the potatoes and eggs stuck to the cast-iron skillet. “She’s as capable and dependable as the day is long. Comes from all those years of taking care of her family.”

A warning light went off in his head. He knew he shouldn’t listen to any more of this, but simple male curiosity about the woman who’d stirred his senses made him say, “Her family?”

Ruth was glad to satisfy his interest. “Her mother died in childbirth when Kate was twelve and left John Morgan with six children, including the new baby. Kate’s the oldest, so you see what I mean that she comes by her knack for taking care of others honestly. And a sweeter, nicer girl you’ll never meet. Of course, I imagine you’ve already figured that out.”

The bottom had dropped out of Sam’s stomach, and he offered no resistance as Ruth plucked the dish towel out of his hands to dry the skillet. Nor did he interrupt as she went on.

“Cal Drinker, in Ontonagon—he’s Kate’s family doctor and a friend of Bill Cabot’s—Cal says if it hadn’t been for her, John Morgan would’ve had to split up the children between his brother down in Grand Rapids and some cousins back east. But they got a neighbor to take care of the baby and the next youngest during the day, when Kate was in school. The rest of the time, that girl kept things running smooth as clockwork. Cal says they’d never have made it without her.” Pausing, a wet dishrag poised over the stove top she was about to wipe, Ruth murmured, “I hope things around here don’t fall apart without her.”

Then she gave Sam an anxious smile. “I imagine she’s just sprained her ankle some, don’t you think?”

His stomach was churning. “I’m no doctor, Mrs. D., but I’d guess it’s broken.”

“Oh, dear.” Ruth dropped her rag onto the stove and turned to face him. “I should call Bill Cabot. Kate said not to, but—”

“I don’t think one night’s going to make much difference,” Sam assured her. “And Katie said she couldn’t face riding to the hospital for an x-ray tonight. She’s had a pretty rough day.”

With her brow wrinkled, Ruth shook her head. “This could be bad. Laura Graff is due in a couple of weeks, and if this baby comes as fast as the first one did, Kate will end up delivering it. Of course, could be somebody besides Laura, too, since Bill and Kate are the only ones delivering babies in a hundred square miles, outside the hospitals.”

Ruth’s frown deepened. “I know she’s been keeping an eye on a few folks who live outside of town. Lord knows what’ll happen if there’s an accident at one of the campgrounds. She and Bill between them have picked up the pieces since they took the ambulances away—filling in until the ambulance gets here. But Bill isn’t up to traipsing over the countryside—arthritis, you know—though, knowing him, he’ll try to do it, anyway.”

So much for problems and solutions, Sam thought. Taking a step backward, toward the doorway, he began, “Well, listen, Mrs. D.—”

“Goodness!” Ruth shuddered. “The more I think about it,



the worse it looks. I guess you don't know until you face losing somebody how indispensable they've become. And Kate's gotten to be Bill Cabot's right hand—or I guess I should say his right knee, since it's his knee that gives him the most trouble.”

“Yeah, well . . .” Sam cast a glance toward the doorway. “I'm sure you'll all work out something. But, listen, I'm a little worried about getting back out that road in the dark. I think I'd better get going.”

“Now, hold on.” Ruth's anxious frown disappeared instantly, replaced by a no-nonsense look. “There's no point in your leaving town without the things you're going to need in that cabin. Kate told me you were asking about groceries, and Ed said to send you over to the store. He'll meet you there.”

Sam's heart was pounding as he thanked Ruth and said goodbye, leaving her in the kitchen to put away the dishes. He strode through the dining room, grabbing his jacket as he passed the chair where he'd left it, managing to get three feet from the front door. Then, most unwillingly, he came to a stop.

He stared at the door, his forehead and upper lip beaded with sweat, his insides twisted in knots. *Move it*, the voice in his head ordered. *Get out of here—now!* But he couldn't move, and he had that feeling in his gut that he wasn't going to make it.

*Dammit*, why did it have to be her? Why, of all the people who could have been hurt in that storm, did the one he'd found have to be the town nurse? The one person nobody could do without. Pregnant women who might not make it to the hospital, hunting accidents happening where the old doctor might not be able to get to them: Yes, people needed Katie, and it was going to make their lives miserable—if not downright dangerous—if she couldn't do her job.

And what about her? What about the woman who'd taken over raising her brothers and sisters when her mother died? Katie had gone on to make a career of taking care of people, but who was taking care of *her*? How was he supposed to turn away from her? How was he supposed to fight this thing inside him that urged him to give her back some of what she gave to others?

How could he justify walking out that door?

The answer came in hard, absolute terms: He couldn't.

"Ah, hell," Sam muttered, his hand skimming over his face and around the back of his neck. What was one lost battle, anyway? God knows, there'd be others—others he'd have a better chance of winning than this one.

Whirling away from the door, he walked purposefully toward Katie's room. When he got to the doorway, he paused, and the tortured expression on his hard features softened as his gaze swept over her, lying on the bed.

Her eyes were closed, and her hair lay fanned across the pillow. He'd never in his life seen such hair—a curtain of toasty golden-brown ripples—and it framed a face that maybe wasn't beautiful but couldn't have been any sweeter or more honest. A small, turned-up nose and soft, rosy lips and a stubborn little chin that all went so well with her warm brown eyes. Her bathrobe was long and pink; it tied at her waist and, above the belt, lay open far enough to reveal little rows of lace across the top of her white flannel nightgown. The nightgown had pink flowers on it, too, and Sam couldn't remember any woman he'd known wearing a nightgown like it. But then, he hadn't known many women like Katie, and it fit her just right.

As he stood there, his eyes taking in the lush, womanly, curves of her thighs and breasts, the torment and the gut-wrenching ambivalence drained out of him. The decision was made. He wasn't going to fight it anymore. And, oddly enough, looking at Katie, he didn't feel as if he'd lost a battle. No, for once, this just might end up being a pleasure.

Half awake, Kate sensed someone in the room with her. As exhausted as she was and as groggy as the pill had made her, the pain wouldn't let her fall asleep. She opened her eyes but couldn't quite focus on Sam, standing at the foot of her bed. He looked so tall, she thought, in her low-ceilinged house.

"I thought you'd lef'," she said, slurring the edges of the words.

"Not yet," he replied. "You're supposed to be asleep."

She yawned. "I am. Mos'ly . . . Sam?"

“Hmm?”

“T’morrow . . . when you go t’ Cressie and Steve’s t’ get your key . . .”

“Yes?”

“Tell Cressie I won’ be out, okay? She’ll hafta bring the baby in t’ see Doc.”

“They have a sick kid?”

“Uh-uh. New one. Due for three-week check.”

“I’ll tell her. Listen, Katie, about tomorrow . . . I’ll run you down to Ironwood.”

She looked at him, blinking in surprise. “Sam, you don’ hafta do that. There’s lotsa people—”

“I’ll take you to the hospital.”

“But—”

“No buts.”

“Okay, but—” Her breath caught, then left her in a sigh. “Well, I jus’ don’ know what t’ say.”

That bought her a crooked smile. “Try, ‘Thanks, Sam, I appreciate it.’ ”

There was no arguing with this man. He was more bull-headed than she was. With a tiny smile, she repeated his words.

“That wasn’t too hard, was it?” he said softly.

She yawned again. “Sam, you’ve been awful nice. I really do ’preciate it.”

“You’re a nice lady. You don’t deserve to hurt.”

Something in his tone caught her attention, something very determined, but her mind was too foggy to figure it out. It was getting harder and harder to keep her eyes open. She let them drift closed on a whisper. “Guess it was my turn.”

“Is that how it works? We all take turns hurting?”

“Seems like it . . . sometimes. Other times, seems like there’re people who get . . .” She trailed off, half asleep, then finally added, “. . . more than their share.”

“Which is why it’s a good thing there are people like you around to take care of them.”

“Sam, you really are a nice man. Don’ know why you preten’ t’ be so . . . What’re y’ doing?”

“Just looking. Relax.”

He'd lifted the ice pack from her ankle, and she felt the brush of warmth as he laid his hand on her swollen, chilled flesh.

"I won't hurt you, Katie."

"Doesn't hurt. Feels good. Kinda funny, though."

"You've had an ice pack on."

"Hmm. Makes your hand feel . . . hot."

Very hot. But it was a pleasant sensation, completely absorbing and not at all painful, and she sighed at the luxury of being touched with such tenderness. Who would have thought, she mused, that he could be so tender? Who would have thought, after all the hard things he'd said, that he could express, or even feel, such compassion? Oh, but he did feel it, and he somehow made her feel it, too, in the simple touch of his big, strong hand.

It seemed an eternity passed. Surely she'd slipped off to sleep and was dreaming. It was a lovely dream, filled with scenes of happy times, childhood memories she hadn't thought of in years. Sunshine on Lake Superior. Walks in the red-gold world of an autumn woods. Her mother's laughter.

The best memories, though, were the babies. Images of her much younger self holding her brother Josh, when he was an infant, sent a wave of pleasure wafting through her. There were other babies, too—tiny strangers, still wet and naked from their mothers' bodies—and one after the other, the memories of helping those new beings along their journey into the world flashed through her mind. What a gift it was to hold those precious pink bodies. What a humbling, thrilling moment when they slipped, helpless and wrinkled, into her hands. The touch, the flesh-on-flesh contact: She felt it even then, along with the awe and reverence that went with knowing she was the first person, the very first, to see and hold the new life.

She clung to those treasured memories. They were what she lived for, what she couldn't do without. They were also what broke her heart.

Kate sighed, vaguely aware that she wasn't dreaming anymore and that Sam had taken his hand away and replaced the ice pack. She sighed again, sorry that he'd stopped touching

her, yet filled with the oddest floating sense of well-being.

“You go to sleep, Katie,” he said. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Okay. But you won’t like me any better.”

“What kind of nonsense is that?”

‘T’morrow. I’ll be a wreck again. You won’t like me any better than t’day.”

“Honey, I liked you fine today.”

“Didn’. Made you mad.”

“It wasn’t you, Katie. I told you that. Now go to sleep.”

She had little choice. With a final shuddering sigh, she gave up her last hold on awareness. Not however, before one final irrelevancy crept through her mind.

He called her Katie. She’d never liked the name, but she hadn’t bothered to correct him. Of course, he’d call her anything he wanted, regardless of what she said. Still, there was something about the way he said *Katie* that made her inclined not to dislike it. He made it sound different. He made it sound . . . special.

## Three

“Doc, I promise you, I haven’t lost my mind. Last night that ankle looked like an overgrown eggplant.” Kate sat on the edge of her small kitchen table, her left leg extended below the hem of her denim skirt as she offered the ankle for inspection.

Bill Cabot’s pale blue eyes studied the appendage through the thick lenses of his black-framed glasses. Clucking his tongue, he shook his head. “Well, Kate, what can an old man say? Ruth Davenport called at seven and sent me scampering over here before I’d even drunk my coffee. She had me believing gangrene had set in, and here I find you bouncing around as if to say the woman’s gone senile on us.”

“I don’t know about gangrene,” Kate said, chuckling, “but it’s true, I couldn’t have walked last night if my life had depended on it. Doesn’t make a bit of sense.”

Wiggling her bare toes, she flexed the ankle in every direction, but it didn’t hurt any more than it had an hour ago—which was not at all. She’d woken up and jumped out of bed before she’d even remembered the injury. Yet the swelling was gone, and her skin was a healthy pink with not a bruise in sight. If she hadn’t found yesterday’s disheveled clothes neatly arranged over the shower rod, including the ruined jeans, she’d have wondered if she’d dreamed the entire incident. Somehow her ankle had recovered overnight, and while she found it awful darned strange, she wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“I think you were looking for an excuse to get a whole, uninterrupted night’s sleep.”

“Hmph!” Kate hopped off the table, tugging down her plum-colored knit top, then picking up her empty coffee mug to

carry it to the sink. "I'll remember that the next time you ask me to take your calls because your knee's bothering you."

"You'd doubt my word about my knee? Shame on you, girl!"

"Besides," she scoffed, "I haven't got a reason to complain about night calls. There aren't that many."

"You wouldn't complain if there were. Which brings me to something I've been meaning to discuss with you." Setting his coffee mug down on the bright yellow place mat, Doc turned in his chair to wag a finger at her. "You're a workaholic, Kathleen Morgan. Worse than I am, and that's saying a lot."

She put the milk in the refrigerator as she replied. "I'm no such thing. I just like what I do."

"Ruth told me you fixed dinner for Sarah Winfield three nights last week."

"Gretchen Brown and I agreed to help Sarah out in the evenings, but Tommy came down with an ear infection last Monday, and Gretchen couldn't do it."

"And yesterday morning you went grocery shopping for Laura Graff."

"For pity's sake! Laura's nine days from her due date, David can't take off work to shop, and Mr. D.'s closed by the time he gets off. I was just being neighborly."

"Maybe. And maybe you need something to occupy your time besides taking care of your neighbors."

Kate groaned, swiping toast crumbs into the sink with a sponge. "Doc, please, let's not start this again. Tell me how your talk went with the supply house. I've got about half a dozen disposable gloves left, and only one unit of Ringer's lactate. Are we going to get our order soon or not?"

"Don't change the subject." Doc arched one bushy eyebrow. "You aren't seeing Scott Gibson anymore, are you?"

Kate had known the question was coming, and she braced herself for the worst. "No."

"Good."

She gave Doc a startled look.

"Scott's a good sort," he explained with a sigh. "But he's got no grit—no *spirit*. He'd never know what to do with a

willful woman like you. You need a man who knows his own mind.”

She couldn’t resist a smile. “He knew he liked my blueberry cobbler.”

“Hmph. And what did *you* get out of it?”

“Well . . .”

“I’ll tell you what you got.” Doc tapped his fingertips on the tabletop for emphasis. “Every Friday night at eight-thirty, Scott walked out your door—after you’d fed him supper—and you got a buss on the cheek like the ones my brothers and I gave Aunt Letty when we left her house after Sunday dinner.”

“Doc!”

“Don’t look at me like that, girl. You know Sarah sits over there at her window, watching everything that goes on in this town—not that there’s much to see. I can’t imagine Scott’s notion of a good-night kiss made Sarah any dizzier than it made you.”

Kate gasped, but her indignation soon turned to mild reproach—which then became a reluctant grin. “Doc, you’re terrible.”

He smiled, a little too smugly. “That’s what my Lydia used to say. But I never did think it made sense to waste time, beating around the bush. And you don’t have time to waste. Not unless you’re planning to settle for lukewarm pecks on the cheek for the rest of your life.”

Kate wasn’t *planning* to settle for a passionless existence, but sometimes she was afraid that was how it was going to work out—pecks on the cheek or no kisses at all. Still, if she’d really resigned herself to that, she’d have been married long ago. Scott wasn’t the only man who’d liked her blueberry cobbler. The problem was, she didn’t want to marry someone who was more interested in her cooking—and in how well she listened to him talk about himself—than he was in her.

All her life she’d attracted men who wanted her to tell them what to do, and when and how to do it. They wanted her to be nice, not sexy. Gentle, not passionate. And, honestly, how passionate could a woman feel about somebody she constantly had to reassure? Her girlfriends in college had told her it was



her own fault men looked at her not as a lover but as a shoulder to cry on. She had to “assert her sexuality,” they said. Learn to flirt and be more mysterious. Stop being so straightforward—and straitlaced. Well, so, she’d tried. And the results had been disastrous.

At thirty-one, she was a lot less unsure of herself than she’d been at twenty-four. She realized her mistake with Rick Sommers had been one of naïveté, poor character judgment, and confusion over the difference between lust and love. She also knew that just because she’d made one mistake didn’t mean she had to make another one. But there were moments . . . moments when she thought of the men she’d dated since Rick, moments when she thought about how lonely it could be sometimes—how many mornings she made breakfast, wishing there were someone to share it with . . . how many winter nights she lay in bed, watching the snow pile up against the windows, wishing there were a warm, strong body lying next to hers . . . At moments like those, she wondered if maybe the pain she lived with as a result of that one mistake had made her too careful. Too wary.

Maybe she was too picky, too. But then, what good would it do to marry a man like Scott Gibson? She wouldn’t be alone anymore, but she’d be more lonely than ever.

“Well, I’ve had my say on the subject—for now, anyway.”

Kate breathed in relief when Doc levered himself out of the kitchen chair, hitching his trousers over his belly and picking up his black bag.

“I’ve got to go fight with that smart-mouthed clerk at the supply house,” he said. “Tell him to get that order out here before we have to start tearing up bed sheets for bandages. And Bert Andrews is coming in at nine. I think you and I have pretty much covered the ground as far as the weekend goes, so I guess we can dispense with our meeting. Are you going to see that new niece of yours today?”

She uttered a bewildered laugh. “Last night I didn’t think so, but I guess I am, after all.”

He nodded in approval, heading in the direction of the front door with her following him.

Passing under the archway between dining and living room, he glanced at her. "I forgot to ask—how was the Nielsen girl yesterday? You got there, didn't you?"

"Yes . . ."

Doc's thick gray eyebrows drew together. "Something wrong?"

"I'm afraid Lynn's doing too much," Kate admitted. "She's nineteen years old, she's never been sick a day in her life, and she's having a hard time accepting the idea that pregnant ladies in their third trimester get tired and need to slow down a little."

"Hmph." Doc's comment was to the point. "She ought to get out of that ramshackle hole she's living in, with no phone and no decent road, until that baby's born."

"I agree, but she feels she has to help Erik. My guess is, if he doesn't get the camp in shape to open by deer season, they'll lose it. And since he's doing all the work, it's slow going."

Reaching the front door, Doc shook his head. "The place is a mess. Has been since Andy Tibbs abandoned it. Trust a pair of foolish kids to think they can make something of it again."

Kate sighed. "Lynn and Erik are just young and naïve. They've got to prove everything to themselves, the hard way."

"Well, we all know how that goes," Doc muttered as he turned the doorknob. "Maybe you should have her— Well, what's this?" He opened the door wide. "You've got a visitor."

"Sam!" Her cheeks dimpled, and her lips curved into a welcoming smile. "Good morning."

Sam hesitated on seeing her, gave her a quick once over, then scowled as he mounted the last step to amble across the wide front porch.

"Katie, what are you doing on your feet? I expected to find you in bed, groaning."

"Me, too." Her smile deepened as she held open the screen door and motioned him inside. When he brushed past her and she caught that straight, leather-and-soap male scent, the butterflies set to fluttering in her stomach. They added a hint of nervousness to her voice as she said, "Sam Reese, this is Dr. Bill Cabot. Doc, Sam's the man I told you brought me home

last night.”

“The man who *carried* you home,” Sam corrected, his eyes still traveling over her as he shook the older man’s hand. “Good morning, sir. Katie, what the hell are you doing standing on that ankle? Trying to ruin it for life?”

“It’s all—”

“Dr. Cabot, last night this woman had an ankle you’d have thought was—”

“Sam, it’s all right!” Kate waited until he turned from Doc to scowl down at her, then she left his side to walk halfway across the room. With a whirl on her toes that made her calf-length skirt ripple out from its gathered yoke and her braid wrap around her shoulders, she turned to meet his stunned look with a grin. “See? My ankle’s fine. No swelling, no pain.”

His eyes narrowed. “Come on.”

“Really.” She nodded. “But I’m glad you’re here to tell Doc I’m not crazy. He thinks I made the whole thing up.”

Suspicion was etched into every harsh angle of Sam’s expression. “I don’t get it. That ankle was a mess. I saw it myself. At least . . . Well, hell, who am I to say?”

With a final look at Kate’s bare feet as she walked toward him, he shook his head. “Sir, Katie’s not making anything up. I came to take her for an x-ray. I thought she should go last night, but she was set on waiting.”

“I’m not doubting you, Sam,” Doc told him. “And Kate would be the last person I’d expect to hear crying wolf. But joints are funny things. I’ve been prepared to put a cast on more than one ankle I was sure was broken, only to find it wasn’t. Just count your blessings that you don’t have to make the trip to Ironwood this morning.”

“Thank goodness!” Kate exclaimed, then immediately felt a pang of disappointment when she realized that meant she wouldn’t be spending the morning with Sam.

In the clear light of day, without pain blurring her vision, it was impossible to ignore the charged, intensely male energy he transmitted or to deny how much he stirred her senses. Nor could she keep from noticing how well his jeans hugged his long legs and stretched across his narrow hips. His jacket was

unzipped to reveal a dark T-shirt molded to his chest, and as her gaze skimmed over him, the memory of that chest, with its strangely alluring mixture of tanned flesh, muscle, crisp hair, and scars brought a flush to her cheeks.

At the same time, another memory intruded—Doc saying Scott Gibson’s kisses hadn’t made her dizzy. No, Scott hadn’t made her dizzy. But Sam Reese could. If she let him.

She was being a complete fool, Kate knew, even considering such a thing, because she wasn’t about to get involved with an out-of-work stranger who wouldn’t even say how long he’d be in the area. Still, she couldn’t keep the disappointment from coloring her tone as she said, “I’m sorry, Sam. But it looks as if you came in this morning for nothing.”

“Oh, maybe not,” he drawled, and the long, slow inspection his gaze made of her said he had a good idea what was going through her mind. “As long as I’m here, if you’ve got the time, you can show me the way to your sister and brother-in-law’s. I still have to pick up my key.”

Flustered by his frankly approving look and the unexpected surge of electricity passing between them, Kate lowered her gaze. “Well, sure. That’ll be fine. I have to go out to Cressie’s, anyway.”

Doc cleared his throat and took a step toward the door. “If I don’t get over to the office, Bert’ll have the place reeking with cigar smoke just to spite me. I’ll let you know how I make out with the supply house, Kate.” Stopping on the top porch step, he turned to look at Sam, standing beside her in the doorway.

“You going to be doing much fishing while you’re here?” he asked.

“Some, maybe,” Sam replied.

“Hmm.” Doc studied him. “You got business in the area?”

“No, sir.”

“No? Hmm. Well, then—”

“Sam’s on vacation,” Kate said, hugging one side of the door frame with both hands and leaning forward to give Doc a meaningful look. “And he doesn’t need busybodies like you and me spoiling it with a bunch of questions. So why don’t you

go nag Bert to give up his cigars, and tell that supply clerk to deliver our order, like he promised three weeks ago, and let me get to work. I've got a million things to do."

Doc frowned, then delivered his parting shot as he started down the steps. "Sam, you watch out for this girl," he said. "She's a bossy one."

"Oh, you—" Kate began, but her affectionate scolding was cut off by Sam's earthy chuckle.

"Don't worry," he called after Doc. "Katie already knows how poor I am at taking orders." Then, with a slight pause, his voice dropped low to finish. "Then again, I can think of some things I wouldn't mind her telling me to do. . . . No, I wouldn't mind at all."

His meaning was unmistakable, and her cheeks burned as she stared, unseeing, at the empty front walk. No man had *ever* made her such an obvious proposition—and on such short acquaintance. It was unnerving—and a little frightening. It was also wildly exciting. But for a woman who was used to thinking she inspired men's appetites, not their passion, it was mostly confusing.

She felt his gaze upon her. She tried not to look at him as she turned, mumbling something about getting her shoes so they could leave. But her gaze skittered upward briefly, and then she was trapped, unable to look away from or to deny the hot message his clear gray eyes conveyed.

The rules had changed. Yesterday was a bad dream. Today she was at no disadvantage that would protect her from having to deal with this; he wanted her, and if she didn't want him, she was going to have to tell him so directly. But with her knees feeling so rubbery and a flush of sensual awareness curling through her, she couldn't utter a word.

"Get your shoes, Katie, and let's go," Sam said softly. "Ed Davenport tells me they're expecting another storm tonight, and I've got a window to fix."

## Four

Kate spent the ride telling Sam about her sister and brother-in-law, who lived in an old farmhouse three miles east of Bourner's Crossing. She explained that Cressie—named Crescent by their romantic mother for having been conceived under a crescent moon—had met Steve when he was flying seaplanes on Lake Superior, using their father's marina as a port of call for his fishermen clientele. For various reasons, mostly Cressie's fear of flying, Steve had sold his two planes and taken a job with the National Forest Service. The money from the sale had bought the newlyweds two houses—a dilapidated farmhouse and a hunter's cabin—and they'd made enough improvements to live in the cabin for a year while the farmhouse was being renovated.

"Seems like a damn shame," Sam commented, pulling to a stop in the Fourniers' side yard.

"What does?" Kate asked.

"That a man would give up his planes for a two-room cabin and a rundown farm."

Kate looked at him askance. "I don't think that's quite the way Steve saw it. Besides, he never really gave up planes—at least, not to Cressie's satisfaction." Climbing out of the Jeep, she reached into the back for her knapsack, then stopped, her eyebrows rising at the sound of Sam's muttered oath.

He was standing on the other side of the Jeep, staring toward the field beside the red barn, where a trim, single-engine airplane basked in the morning sunshine.

Kate's knowledge of planes could be stated in one sentence—they went up, and they came down—yet she knew there was something special about this particular old military

plane, decked out in its camouflage paint with yellow tail and wing tips.

"I think it's called a T-34 Mentor," she said.

Sam replied with an affirmative grunt. "Right, but what's it doing in the middle of nowhere? There can't be more than a couple hundred of them in civilian hands."

"Steve bought it at an auction," she explained. "He's spent the past year taking it apart and putting it back together, with a bigger engine and bigger fuel tanks and all sorts of updated instruments that cost a fortune. The plan was to make money selling it, but when he finished it, about a month ago, he told Cressie he wanted to fly it in air shows—and she just about went through the roof."

Still looking at the plane, Sam shook his head slowly. "If he's done as good a job on the inside as he has on the outside, that plane's worth a bundle."

"Steve's had offers," Kate admitted. "In fact, I think he's considering one. Since he took a part-time job at Gibson's Garage, and since they've got a new baby, he doesn't have much time to fly. Besides, I think Cressie is wearing him down."

Watching Sam's back, Kate saw his shoulders rise and fall in a deep breath. Then, abruptly, he turned away, walking around the front of the Jeep to take her knapsack from her.

"Thanks," she said, and as they began walking toward the front of the house, she added, "I should warn you about Francis."

Sam glanced down at her. "Francis who?"

"Cressie and Steve's two-year-old. He's deaf, and Cressie's a little—"

"Deaf?" Sam stopped in his tracks.

"Yes, and Cressie's sensitive about it, so—"

"What happened to him?"

She paused briefly to let him catch up; then, casting a glance toward the tall porch windows of the white frame house, she spoke quietly. "About eight months ago, he had a viral infection. It didn't seem like anything too unusual—just a bad stomach thing—but it left him deaf."

Sam's hand shot out to stop her when she started up the front steps. "Can't they fix it?"

“Nerve deafness is permanent,” she answered, her voice heavy with regret. “There isn’t a specialist in the world who could do anything about it.” She started up the steps again, whispering over her shoulder, “Cressie gets nervous sometimes, in front of strangers, so I thought I ought to warn you. Just in case.”

Cressie met them at the front door, and Kate saw Sam’s gaze slide from her sister to her and back again several times, taking note that Cressie looked very much like her, but for having short hair and being a half-dozen years younger. Cressie had been expecting them, but not together, and Kate’s explanation of the day before led to Sam’s apology for the broken window and his assurance that it would be fixed that afternoon. Cressie wasn’t worried about the window; she was too upset over Kate’s being hurt, and she showered Sam with gratitude as she ushered them into the living room and gave him his key.

They stood talking in the large, toy-cluttered room until a small, rosy-cheeked face appeared around the edge of the doorway to the foyer. Kate saw Francis first, and she opened her arms to him with a smile as he came running toward her.

Scooping him up, she planted a kiss on the top of his curly blond head. “How’s my sweetheart?” she asked, chuckling. “And how are you and your new sister getting along?”

“Not too well, I’m afraid,” Cressie answered, her gaze darting nervously from the little boy to Sam.

Kate noted Cressie’s discomfort but decided the best plan was to ignore it. “Oh? How come?” she asked.

“He doesn’t understand why I can’t just put April down whenever he wants me to play with him. And it’s so frustrating, not being able to explain it to him. I suppose I should try, but I just don’t know how, or what good it would do, when he can’t—”

“Has he held her yet?” Kate asked.

Cressie’s expression became horrified. “Oh, no! I mean, I don’t think he should.” Hesitantly, she added, “Do you?”

“Sure,” Kate replied easily as Francis snuggled in her arms. “He’ll need help, of course. But I’m sure he’d be tickled to



hold her. It would make him feel important—like you trusted him.”

“Well . . .” Cressie looked at Francis doubtfully. “I guess if you think so . . .”

“So, are you ready to be a big brother?” Kate mused while Francis examined the thick braid hanging over her shoulder. “When you’re a little older, I’ll explain the pros and cons of being the oldest to you—except you’ll probably have them all figured out on your own. Won’t you, my smart little friend?”

She put a finger under Francis’s chin to lift his face to her. He looked at her intently for a moment, then placed one stubby finger on her left cheek where her dimple lay hidden. It was a game they’d played before, and Kate grinned in compliance with his request. The dimple magically appeared, and Francis made a pleased sound as he touched the small indentation.

“Francis.” She spoke slowly, setting him down so she could “sign” the words. She’d been teaching herself to sign and was pleased that Cressie and Steve were, too. “This is Sam,” she told Francis, indicating the man standing beside her. “He’s a friend of mine.”

Francis’s gaze followed her gesture, and he promptly gave Sam a wary scowl. When she looked up, she understood why. Sam, who’d been silent since Francis had run into the room, was scowling at Francis just as warily. She stared at him in disbelief. Why on earth would he frown like that at a child? How insensitive could he be?

But Sam wasn’t insensitive, and as though she’d willed him to shape up and prove it, his piercing look softened. Slowly, with a sparkle creeping into his prism-like eyes, he gave Francis a broad smile.

“Hi, buddy.”

The little boy hesitated, then smiled back. And an instant later, he let out a sound that, in spite of its harsh, unmodulated tone, couldn’t have been anything but a laugh.

The sound tugged at Kate’s heart. Despite Cressie’s over-protectiveness, Francis was an especially friendly child.

“He doesn’t talk,” Cressie explained to Sam. “He knew a few words when he was one, but then he caught this terrible

virus and—”

“I told Sam already,” Kate said gently, going on quickly to ask, “Where’s April? I should see her soon, because Sam wants to fix that window before it rains tonight.”

“She’s upstairs in her crib,” Cressie replied. “Let me bring her down.”

Kate shook her head, smiling. “Why don’t we both go on up, and I’ll examine her where she is.”

“All right, but let me put Francis in his room.”

When Cressie stepped forward to pick up her son, Kate put a hand atop his head, saying, “Maybe we can persuade Francis to keep Sam company.”

“Oh, no, Sam won’t want to—”

“What do you say, Sam?”

His expression said he thought she’d lost her mind. His features were rigid with shock, and if she hadn’t known better, she’d have said he was scared. Scared of a little boy? Ridiculous.

“You and Francis will be all right while I examine the baby, won’t you? It’ll only be about fifteen or twenty minutes.”

Sam’s lips drew into a straight line, and she saw his throat move as he swallowed.

“Sure,” he rasped. “Sure, we’ll be fine. Won’t we, buddy?”

“Oh, Kate, I don’t know. . . .”

She grabbed the advantage while she could, bending to explain to Francis in both words and sign, “Sam wants to see your blocks. Will you show them to him?”

Then, pointing toward a pile of wooden blocks, she grabbed Sam’s hand and pulled him in that direction, her eyes never leaving Francis. The child followed with a bright-eyed look—he adored his blocks—plopped down on the floor, and tilted his head way back to look at Sam.

“Have fun!” Kate dropped Sam’s hand and flashed him a smile as she turned and stepped lightly toward the foyer. When she reached Cressie, hovering in the center of the room, she linked an arm through her sister’s elbow to coax her along. “Come on, Cress, let’s see that little girl of yours.”

She didn’t look back, but as she followed Cressie up the

stairs, she prayed like mad that her intuition about her sexy but puzzling stranger wasn't wrong.

It was another lost battle. Sam had known it the minute he laid eyes on Francis. Kids got to him every time. He didn't mind that so much—kids got to everybody, didn't they?—but it was starting to feel like he'd jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire. Hell, he'd come up here to get away from all this.

An instant later, his mouth slanted in a dry smile. It served him right, getting the hots for a nurse. He could have been holed up in the woods right now instead of sitting in the middle of a pile of blocks. It occurred to him there might be some sort of weird irony to the scene. Like someone—or Someone—was telling him that, if he thought he could go hide in the woods and forget what he was supposed to be doing, he had another think coming. That wasn't part of the deal.

But, dammit, he wasn't trying to squirrel his way out of anything; he was just trying to survive. And, by God, he could *still* hide in the woods. He wanted anonymity? Ha! With Francis, it was guaranteed. The kid couldn't talk.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor opposite the round-faced, blue-eyed boy, Sam picked up a block and placed it atop the tower Francis had constructed. The toddler looked at him, his blond lashes and curly hair shining in the sunshine coming through the window.

Suddenly, with a whack of his chubby hand, Francis sent the block tower flying, an act accompanied by excited, incomprehensible chatter. He grinned broadly at Sam, who grinned back in approval. And together they began constructing the tower again. They built it two more times, each time with Francis taking great pleasure in destroying it, before Sam decided he'd established what they called rapport with the boy.

He began looking for a way to make his next move, but before he'd figured it out, Francis scrambled to his sneaker-clad feet and toddled over to the bookshelf beside the couch. Yanking a book from it, he toddled back, and, to Sam's astonishment, climbed into his lap. He perched himself sideways on one thigh, then opened the book across his own small lap. Point-

ing at a picture of a tractor with one finger, he made some noise that distinctly ended on a question mark.

Sam blinked, thoroughly disarmed, a flash of awkwardness making him uncertain. But then, while he was wondering what to do with his arms, a strange, warm feeling stole over him, the child's boldness and trust taking a chunk out of the wall he'd spent years constructing around himself. It felt good having Francis's sturdy little body close to his. Letting instinct take over, he put an arm around the small, straight back. Francis promptly moved closer, sliding a diapered bottom higher up his thigh. Sam tucked him closer. And when Francis craned his neck to look up at him again, he smiled, lifting his hand to ruffle the child's blond hair.

It was as easy as that. Sam nearly laughed, thinking this was going to be a piece of cake.

Francis looked at the book, pointing to something else—a car this time. Sam said the word aloud and nodded, turning pages slowly with one hand, all the while stroking the silky locks on the small head, his fingers tangling gently in the curls, tracing them as they curved around the child's right ear, resting lightly there . . . lingering. . . .

Lingering as the sunshine poured through the lacy-curtained windows to warm the air, to warm the pages of the book upon which it fell, to warm the golden curls on a little boy's head and the flesh of a man's strong, gentle hand . . .

Kate pronounced her new niece healthy and flourishing, then, giving April to Cressie to nurse, packed up her things and went to "check on the boys." Halfway down the stairs, she heard Sam's voice. At first she thought he was reading to Francis—and activity her nephew enjoyed if there were pictures to look at. Then, however, she realized Sam was making up the story, and it surprised her not to hear blocks clattering or other impatient sounds indicating that Francis was bored with the sound-oriented exercise.

What surprised her more, though, was the sense of drama, the feeling, in Sam's gravelly voice. By the time she reached the bottom of the stairs, she was caught up in the story, whether

or not Francis found it interesting.

“And, you know, buddy, it was a dream come true,” Sam said. “Oh, sure, the boy had flown other planes, but *this* plane was the one everybody said was the greatest revolution in aviation in decades. And it was a beauty. Nothing like anybody had ever seen. A hundred feet wide and only thirty feet long, and shaped like the wings of a huge white bird. Nothing stuck out on it anywhere—no engines, nothing. They’d buried everything inside, so it all sort of blended together in this giant, sweeping curve. And you just knew it was built to punch holes in the sky that hadn’t *ever* been punched before. . . .”

Moving to stand by the arched doorway, Kate remained silent, blatantly eavesdropping. She knew Sam would close up instantly if he realized she was listening, and for some reason it seemed very important that she hear his pilot’s fairy tale. She was stealing a glimpse of the inner Sam Reese, a glimpse she suspected he rarely gave anyone. In fact, he wasn’t giving it to anyone now. Not knowingly. To whom was he speaking, after all? A deaf child.

Leaning against the wall, she closed her eyes, wondering at the openness, the intensity—the joy—in Sam’s voice.

“Well, Francis, that kid was pretty excited. But he was smart enough to play it cool, because if he’d acted *too* excited, they’d have thought he wasn’t taking the whole thing seriously. And he took it seriously, all right. Wringing out a plane for the first time always gets to you. He knew he’d be testing the creases of a brand-new kind of envelope. Nobody knew where the outside of it was or how far it would stretch. So, naturally, he was a little nervous—not scared or anything like that, but nervous. He wasn’t about to tell anybody, though, because he wanted them to think he was . . . well, a man.”

Is that what it took? Kate wondered. You had to be a man to want to do what Sam’s fictitious young hero was about to do? It certainly was true, the thought of flying a plane no one had ever flown made *her* stomach knot, but she very much doubted it had anything to do with gender.

“Well,” Sam continued, “the big day came. The boy climbed into the cockpit and started down the runway. And the next

thing he knew, that big white jet went up like an angel lifting off for heaven. It was something else, going almost straight up. All that sky and those piles of white clouds and, above the clouds, nothing but deep blue space.”

Sam paused, and Kate heard him sigh.

“The timing was perfect. It was just before dawn, and he was over the water flying at sixty thousand. So he rolled off into a dive and leveled at ten thousand, into an eastward cruise—and he shot right into the sunrise. Well, I tell you, it burst on him all at once, and for a couple of seconds it blinded him. It’s not like it is down here, all pink and gold and kind of mellow. Up there it’s . . .” He trailed off briefly, then continued with a soft, nearly wistful inflection. “Up there is where you get to see the white light. It’s so clear. So . . . pure. And I’ll tell you a secret, buddy. Once you’ve seen the sunrise from up there, you know almost what it’s like to be looking at the gate to heaven.”

The gate to heaven. Sam painted the picture with clean strokes that lent the image a simple beauty. When he fell silent, Kate thought he must be finished, but then he began again on a quiet, strangely solemn note.

“Course, the boy didn’t know anything about heaven. He just knew he wanted to fly that plane forever. He hated the thought of coming down because . . . well, he was kind of alone, you see. But up there, being alone didn’t matter. In fact, it was better that way. He was in charge, and he didn’t have to worry about anybody letting him down or making him feel bad. When he was flying, he felt good inside. Happy and kind of peaceful. He wished sometimes that it could be that way down here, but it never was. And so he kept on flying. He flew every chance he got until . . . until the day he died.”

Sam ended abruptly. So abruptly that Kate felt an almost physical pain. It might have been only a fairy tale, but it seemed to her that he’d instilled in it an intimate view of himself—a view that made her want to cry. Then, however, he spoke in a matter-of-fact, nearly lighthearted tone, and the tightness in her throat gradually lessened.

“Has your dad ever taken you up with him in the Mentor?” he asked Francis. “Maybe not, huh? You’re a little young yet.

But I'll bet you've got a plane somewhere in this toy box, haven't you? I mean, what decent toy box hasn't got at least one plane in it? Let see. . . . Ah! I knew it."

Hearing the clatter of Sam rummaging through the toy hamper, then his satisfied declaration, Kate smiled.

"A P-51 Mustang," he announced, sounding positively reverent. "This is one neat little fighter, buddy. A mite slow by today's standards, but back in World War Two, it was a real razor blade in a fight. Like this, see? Brrrr. . . ."

Impressed with the authenticity of Sam's audio effects, she could almost see the plane climbing, banking, diving through the air. But she blinked, then frowned in puzzlement when Francis added his own buzzing drone—a second engine to Sam's single-engine plane.

"Hey, that's the idea," Sam said. "Here. You take the controls. Come on, now, there's a German Bf 109 at two o'clock! Go for it! Brrr. . . ."

How odd, she thought. And how disappointing. For a minute it had seemed as if . . . But, no. Francis obviously thought Sam was playing a spitting game, blowing out air and letting his lips vibrate. The child was quick to mimic actions, and in this case the noise simply followed by accident. Yet as Sam continued to vary the pitch of the toy plane's flight, Francis promptly followed his lead, duplicating Sam's noises almost exactly.

Exactly . . . *Too* exactly.

"Look out! We're hit, we're hit. And we're leaking fuel! Brr . . . brr—" Sam choked out a vivid rendition of engine cough.

"Brr . . . brr—" came the high-pitched voice of the younger pilot in a nearly perfect counterpoint.

Kate swung around the corner into the living room, her heart suddenly racing. Sam was sitting cross-legged on the floor, and Francis, plane in hand, was running around him in circles. Her gaze was glued to her nephew when Sam spoke.

"Hey, there, Katie. All finished upstairs?"

Her gaze flickered to him briefly. Then, seeing that Francis hadn't yet noticed her, she called loudly, "Francis!"

It was as if the child were attached to a rope and she'd

jerked it. He nearly fell over trying to stop as he cast his startled, almost frightened gaze around the room. When he saw her, some of the confusion left his features, but he looked as if he might cry, and she forced herself to give him a reassuring grin and a wave. He looked at her a moment longer, then his expression cleared, and he returned the smile and the wave before taking off with his airplane again.

She didn't believe it. Lifting her foot, she slipped off her flat, leather shoe, waiting until Francis's back was turned, then tossed it across the room. It hit the wall and landed with a clatter on the bare floor—and Francis whirled, his startled gaze shooting across the room, searching for the source of . . . *of the noise.*

Kate's first impulse was to yell for Cressie. Instead she drew a steadying breath and told herself to stay calm. She didn't want to frighten Francis with any more loud noises. The very thought that she *could* frighten him that way was staggering.

Slowly, her gaze shifted to Sam.

"He heard me," she said, her voice weak with shock.

Sam unfolded his lanky form from the floor and strolled toward her, his hands stuck in his back pockets. "We've been having a fine time," he said. "You're right, this is one smart kid. He doesn't miss a trick, and—"

"Sam, I said he *heard* me! He heard me call him, and he heard my shoe hit the wall! He heard your airplane noises, too, and he *imitated* them. But how could he?" She shook her head, glancing once more at Francis, who had abandoned the plane and was busy constructing a block tower.

Sam shrugged. "So? I know you said he had some problems with his hearing, but—"

"I said he was deaf. Permanently, totally deaf."

"Well, you sure could have fooled me."

"This isn't possible," Kate insisted. "It just isn't."

"Who says so?"

She shot him a quick look. "Some very good doctors and audiologists say so. It has to be a mistake."

He snorted. "Right, and I bet it's those 'very good doctors'



who made it.”

“No, you don’t understand—”

“Katie, let me tell you something.” Crossing his arms, he leaned a shoulder against the door frame. “Four days after I crashed that plane, I woke up to find out the right side of my body was more or less wasted. Besides the burns and a concussion, I had a broken back, a crushed leg, a slew of cracked ribs, and a punctured lung. I was missing a kidney, part of the liver, and various pieces of intestines. Just about everything else was being held together with sutures. They waited until my head stopped spinning, mostly. Then the neurologist and the orthopedist told me, *if* I made it, I probably wouldn’t walk again.”

In the face of her shock, he noted calmly, “But they were wrong. So, I’m sorry it if offends you, but I don’t put much stock in what doctors say. I’d be in a wheelchair, looking at life through a cloud of painkillers, if I’d listened to them.”

No, Kate thought, if he’d listened to them, he’d be dead. The Sam Reese she was coming to know wouldn’t have tolerated such extensive disability. If he hadn’t been able to will himself to walk, she suspected he simply would have willed himself to die. As her gaze skimmed over his tall, straight, and obviously healthy form, it occurred to her to wonder how on earth he could have recovered, not only so well but so quickly. A year ago, he said it had happened, and yet . . . dear Lord, yesterday he’d carried her a good quarter of a mile without so much as a grimace.

It seemed impossible, inconceivable. And yet everybody had heard at least one story of someone who’d defied a bad prognosis to prove the doctors wrong; made-for-TV movies and women’s magazine articles about athletes were full of such inspirational tales. “They said he’d never walk again,” the stories always began. So, Sam’s story wasn’t *impossible*. It was only extremely unlikely.

Hearing loss from nerve damage was a different matter.

She gave her head a quick shake. “Sam, it’s almost too amazing to be true, and I’m really glad you had the persistence not to give up after hearing the worst. But this isn’t the same

thing. Nerve deafness is a medical fact—not something you can just *overcome*.”

“Is that so?” He looked at Francis. “Well, I guess somebody better check those facts again. But, listen”—his gaze dropped to his watch—“it’s getting close to lunchtime, and I have to pick up the glass for that window. Why don’t you go tell Cressie the good news, so she can get over being excited—and so you can see to it that Francis gets to hold his sister, which I know you’re going to want to do—and we can get out of here sometime before dinner?”

Clearly, Kate thought, his own nearly miraculous recovery had jaded him. He must believe that if he could get better, so could everyone else. Regardless, why was she standing here arguing?

With another quick look at Francis, Kate turned and ran toward the stairs, calling for Cressie.

## Five

An hour later, when they started to town, Sam settled behind the wheel and let out a sigh. “That baby’s a real doll, isn’t she?”

With a smile flirting at the corners of her lips, Kate agreed. “She sure is.”

“It’s hard to believe people are ever that little.”

“It is pretty amazing.”

“You know, Katie, it was a pleasure seeing you with those kids this morning. You’re really good with them.”

“You’re pretty good yourself.” She eyed him thoughtfully. With his jacket discarded, one arm draped over the steering wheel, the other resting loosely on the stick shift, and a warm breeze whipping through the open Jeep to ruffle his sun-streaked hair, Sam looked young, almost carefree—not so tough and hard. A result of his time with Francis, she figured. It seemed the tough guy was a sucker for kids. And she was rapidly becoming a sucker for tough guys.

“I like kids,” Sam told her. “But liking isn’t the same as understanding. And you really seem to understand them, if you know what I mean.”

“I think so,” she replied. “But, heavens, don’t compare yourself to me on that score. I’ve had a lot of practice.”

“Yeah, Ruth Davenport told me you’re the oldest of six.”

“That’s right.”

“Do any of them besides Cressie live around here?”

“No, Dad still owns the marina in Ontonagon. My oldest brother, Kyle, is married with two kids, and he works with Dad. Wayne and his wife got transferred four years ago to Vermont by the lumber company he works for. My sister Linda

and her husband and daughter live in Chicago. And Joshua is a freshman at Western in Kalamazoo.”

“That’s quite a lineup,” Sam remarked. Pausing briefly, he added, “Mrs. D. also told me your mom died when you were a teenager.”

“I was twelve.”

“And you took care of the crew after that?”

It must be paranoia, Kate thought. Had a year of listening to Scott Gibson talk about himself made her that suspicious? Maybe, because she couldn’t help wondering if Sam was only filling the silence or if he was genuinely interested in her. It was hard to guess with this man. He could communicate volumes with a look. He could also be as unrevealing as a stone wall.

“You and Mrs. D. must have had quite a talk,” she said.

Sam offered a sketchy shrug. “So, is it true? Did you take over when your mom died?”

“I wouldn’t put it that way,” she hedged. “Dad was there as much as he could be, and we spent summers with our aunt and uncle in Grand Rapids. But the marina took up most of Dad’s time. He couldn’t afford to hire a manager. So, with Kyle helping him, it was natural that I’d take care of the house and the other kids.”

Sam was silent for a moment. Then he said, “My mom died when I was two. But I didn’t have any brothers or sisters. Seems to me yours were damned lucky they had you. Still, it makes me wonder if having to raise them all is the reason you haven’t got any kids of your own.”

She started to speak but couldn’t. With a few succinct words, he had paid her a compliment that meant a great deal because it came from someone who’d ‘been there.’ Then, when she was about to tell him how much she appreciated it, he’d plunged a knife into her and twisted it.

“I know a guy,” he continued, unaware of her stricken expression, “another pilot, who married a woman who was the oldest in a big family like yours, and she told him straight out, before they got married, that she didn’t want kids. Said she never wanted to see another diaper. I always thought she was

sort of cold anyway, but I could see her point. If you spent your childhood raising one family, why do it all over again?" Sam shook his head. "But you're nothing like her. You're anything but cold, and you like kids. Hell, you even deliver babies for a living. But you're the only one of six kids, besides the college freshman, who isn't married. And you're—what? Twenty-eight? Twenty-nine?"

"Thirty-one."

"Yeah? So, I wondered if going through all that with your mom dying left you feeling like you've already done your share of diapering."

She couldn't blame him for his curiosity. Everybody else was curious, too, given her choice of careers, about her apparent lack of interest in marriage and a family of her own. But for some reason, it was hard to offer Sam the standard response she offered others: "*Oh, I'm too busy delivering babies to think about having them, and besides, I haven't met a man I want to marry.*" It was a lie—all of it. She thought about having babies a lot, especially when she delivered one. And she had wanted to marry Rick Sommers, regardless of how foolish it might have been.

Gazing out the side of the Jeep, Kate watched the posts of a split-rail fence flash by, as she murmured, "Just because I don't have a family doesn't mean I wouldn't like to have one."

Her eyes closed briefly to block out the pain of knowing what might have been. They snapped open, though, when she felt her hand, lying clenched in her lap, being covered by Sam's.

"Katie, I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I guess I'm the one being too nosy today. I should've kept my mouth shut."

Lowering her gaze to look at his hand resting familiarly on hers, she felt the strongest desire to tell him the truth. It wouldn't matter if he knew; he wouldn't be here long, and no one would be hurt by his knowing. And it had been such a long time that she'd carried the secret locked inside her.

Yet voicing it smacked of feeling sorry for herself, crying about something she couldn't change.

With a flustered wave of her free hand, she said, "It's okay. You don't have to be sorry for asking. Everybody asks

me the same thing. Maybe I'm a little sensitive about it because of that."

The woods had disappeared, and the houses of Bourner's Crossing greeted them. Sam gave her hand a little squeeze before letting go to pull the Jeep to a stop at her front gate.

"Tell them all to go to hell," he said. "And you can tell me to go to hell, too. But first"—he shifted in his seat to face her—"I'd appreciate it if you'd tell me if there's a town within sixty miles that's got a decent restaurant."

She smiled, her good humor restored by his no-nonsense yet sensitive apology and his clever shift of topics. "Sure. This is tourist country, remember. But if you want fancy"—she grimaced—"well, then, you'll have to drive for it."

"It doesn't have to be fancy, as long as the food's good."

"Casey's, in Ontonagon, is my favorite. It's about an hour's drive."

"So, go with me Friday night."

Her smile froze on her lips, and her heart jumped to her throat. All morning, she'd sensed something like this coming, but still, he'd caught her off guard. She had a feeling he would *always* catch her off guard, which was, after all, one of the things that made him both exciting and a little scary. Swallowing the lump in throat, she determined that, before this went any further, they needed to get a couple of things settled between them.

"Sam, I . . ." Looking away from the disturbing heat in his eyes, she began again. "I meet a lot of men who come up here for hunting season or to fish. I don't usually go out with them, because I'm not very good at, well, casual acquaintances. So before I answer you"—she raised her chin slightly and met his gaze—"I guess I'd like to know what your intentions are."

His mouth twitched in amusement at her choice of words, but when he spoke, his tone was serious. "My intentions, huh? Katie, I'll be real honest. I spent a good part of last night and a lot of this morning thinking about going to bed with you." His gaze drifted downward, lingering over her breasts and thighs. "You are one sexy lady. And if you said, 'Sure, Sam, let's do it,' you can bet I damn well wouldn't argue."

Her skin tingled every place his gaze touched, and she knew she was blushing. She forced her gaze to remain steady, though, as his rose once more to meet it.

“I know that’s not about to happen,” he continued. “You aren’t the kind of woman who’d jump into bed with a man she hardly knew. And I guess I ought to tell you, I’m thirty-eight years old, and I’ve never been married. In fact, I’ve never had anything with a woman that lasted more than maybe a year—and most lasted a lot less.”

The news didn’t surprise her, but Kate still felt compelled to ask, “Why not?”

The frown that appeared on Sam’s brow was puzzled. “I’m not sure I know why not.” Then, his expression clearing, he added, “I just haven’t given settling down much thought. And anyway, I think I’d’ve had a hard time finding a woman who wanted to settle down with me. I work for a man who builds planes that don’t look or behave like anybody else’s, and my job is to prove they’re *better* than anybody else’s. But most women aren’t real excited about the idea of getting attached to a man who tests out the latest experiments of some modern-day Wright brother.”

Experiments? As in *untried*? As in the plane in his pilot’s fairy tale?

Alarmed curiosity had her murmuring, “I see what you mean.” She also saw that flying had been more important to him than anything else that had come along—like a woman. But then, that had been the point of the fairy tale; the only thing that had mattered to the imaginary young pilot was flying. Down here, on the ground, he hadn’t been able to make things work. She began to wonder exactly how much of that fairy tale was, indeed, true.

“After the crash,” Sam continued, “I spent almost seven months in the hospital. And since then I haven’t—”

“Sam, you don’t have to explain yourself to me.”

“Dammit, Katie, yes, I do!”

She jumped at his frustrated outburst.

He went on in an only slightly more moderate tone. “You deserve answers to those questions you asked yesterday about

what I'm doing here and how long I plan to stay. And all I can tell you is that I've got some things on my mind that I've got to work out, and this seemed like a good place to do it. I don't have any idea how long it's going to take."

They stared at each other, her brown eyes wide and serious as she studied his face, which was set in a troubled frown.

Then, quietly, she said, "I understand."

Gradually, the lines in his forehead smoothed, and his look became strangely sad. "Honey, even *I* don't understand."

She felt as if the door was opening a crack, but before she could think of a way to prod him into expanding on that cryptic remark, he sighed heavily.

"What I said yesterday about you being a home-and-family kind of woman—partly what I meant is that you're the kind of woman a man feels he has to make promises to. And the fact is, I can't. I can only say, I'm not out to get you in the sack for a one-night stand." His gaze roamed her features. "I'm not out to hurt you, Katie. I want to see you. Anything else is up to you."

She tried to pretend she wasn't shocked by any of his frank little speech, but it was hopeless. She knew she was way out of her league here, and he had as much as said that he, too, realized it. She was certain he was accustomed to far more experienced—and far less cautious—women than she, and, probably, there had been quite a few of them. Common sense told her that she should thank him for his invitation and politely decline.

Yet something stopped her. Something that looked very much like uncertainty hiding in the deepest recesses of his gray eyes, uncertainty in a man she doubted ever wavered from his beliefs or goals. A man who scorned fear and would never, even under the most dreadful circumstances, admit to pain. Oh, yes, his machismo was real enough. Yet there was a hint of brittleness, a frayed-around-the-edges quality, about him that came through the tough-guy demeanor every so often. It had been there, in his voice, as he talked of the boy who was mostly alone and felt best when he was flying. It was there now, in his eyes, as he waited for her



answer. And she found that scrap of vulnerability immensely appealing. She also found it reassuring. He wasn't really so all-fired sure of himself. And maybe she wasn't so far out of her league after all.

Besides, she wanted to know the man who talked about jets racing down a runway like angels lifting off for heaven.

Meeting Sam's gaze directly, Kate said, "I can't go to Ontonagon Friday night. That's Doc's night to play pinochle with Cal Drinker in White Pine, and I'm on call. But if you don't mind spending the evening at my house"—she offered him a smile—"I'd be glad to fix dinner for us."

His lips curved slowly upward. "That sounds fine."

"Six o'clock?"

He nodded. Then, he glanced at his watch. "Now I've got to get over to the store and pick up the glass Mr. D. ordered for me. He said it ought to be in by noon."

She swung open the door of the Jeep. "And I've got to see what Doc found out this morning about our back-ordered supplies. If they don't come in soon, we'll— No, don't bother getting out. I lug this pack around all the time." Hauling her traveling medical kit out, she added, "Just give me some ideas about what you'd like for dinner on Friday."

When Sam didn't answer, she glanced at him, and it confused her to see him scowling as he stared at his hands wrapped around the steering wheel. What on earth was wrong now?

"How about spaghetti?" he asked. "Or maybe something with cheese."

He'd said it as though he expected prison rations, and she tried not to laugh. "Are you sure?"

His tone was anything but certain as he grumbled, "Yeah, well, I don't like too many kinds of meat, and I wouldn't want you to go to a lot of trouble to fix—"

"That's fine," she put in gently. "And it's no trouble. I'll see you at six on Friday. Now you should go before Mr. D. closes for lunch."

Kate stood at her front gate, watching as Sam drove up Main Street. Slowly, a bemused smile formed on her lips. What was a woman to think when a man she had pegged for steak

and potatoes admitted, nearly blushing, that he'd rather have a spinach pie?

Sam stopped at Davenport's, where he picked up the ordered glass, a can of window putty, and the tools necessary to do the job, then headed out to the cabin. Since he hadn't felt like settling in the night before, after fixing the window, he unpacked his few belongings and spent some time familiarizing himself with his temporary quarters.

The cabin was spotless and furnished to suit the needs of men who came to hunt the northern woods in the fall—inexpensive but comfortable furniture, braided rugs partially covering the pine floors, and a noticeable lack of fussiness. Overhead, the rough-hewn beams of the rafters were exposed; the walls were paneled in light pine and decorated with prints of Canada geese and loons. An antlered buck's head hung over the door, and a black bear rug separated the dining and sitting areas of the main room.

The small bedroom contained two twin beds, which didn't suit his six-foot-two frame, so he moved the nightstand from between them, pushed them together, and decided he could live with the makeshift king-size results. There was no phone, but the generator's heat, light, and well-water system provided all the amenities he required. He didn't want to talk to anybody, anyway.

No, that wasn't true. He wanted to talk to Katie. He'd have liked having her there with him, helping put away the groceries he'd bought the night before and teaching him how to use the damned gas stove, which wasn't anything like the electric one he was used to. She'd have found his efforts at making pancakes funny—though she'd have tried not to laugh.

But she might have smiled.

Oh, that smile. Those irresistible, apple-pie dimples. He'd have happily burned the entire batch of pancakes for the pleasure of seeing them. He wanted to touch them—not with his finger, as Francis had done that morning, but with his mouth. Hell, he wanted to touch all of her, with his mouth and his hands and every other part of him. One part in particular was

just itching to touch her. In fact, he thought as he slapped the last pancake on top of the six on his plate, she turned him on faster and harder than any woman had in a long while. Maybe because he knew he turned her on, too. It was tough not to want a woman who responded so obviously and with such melting honesty every time he looked at her. It was impossible not to wonder how she'd respond if he did more than look.

Sam drowned his pancakes in maple syrup and began digging his way through the stack. As he ate, he thought about how stupid it was to have asked Katie out—and how stupid it would be to spend an evening at her house. He was crazy for starting something with a woman when everything about his life was up in the air. Especially when the woman was the type he was sure would want a commitment, at least vows of love, before she'd even let him kiss her.

He didn't know anything about those kinds of commitments. He knew even less about love; it was an elusive thing other people always seemed to be in some stage of wanting or getting or having. If he'd ever wanted it, it had been a long time ago, so long that he had no memory of missing it. And it sure wasn't something that had entered into the picture with the women he'd known over the years.

What was he used to, anyway? Women he'd met at Willy's Bar. Divorced friends of his buddies' wives. There had been that cute redhead who worked ground crew at Rutgers. And maybe any one of those women might have turned out to be one he stuck with if he'd given himself and them a chance. Some of them sure had dropped hints in that direction. But when a woman started acting like she might be thinking in permanent terms, that had always been his signal it was time to call it quits. He'd told himself it was because he wasn't ready to settle down. But now . . . well, like a lot of other things, he just didn't know.

He did know that he couldn't bring himself even to consider having a hot but meaningless affair with Katie. And he knew why. In light of all the other changes he'd been going through, it fit right in that his taste in women had suddenly taken a drastic turn toward the conservative.

Sam cursed silently—and somewhat guiltily—at the quirk of fate that had ripped the rug out from under him. The day he'd crashed that damned plane, his way of thinking and acting, his entire frame of reference, had been taken away from him. Maybe he could have handled that, if somebody had seen fit to replace it with something else. But, no. He'd been squirming for five months, since he'd gotten out of the hospital and found out just how different things were going to be. He'd tried to go on with his life, but it seemed that, piece by piece, everything he'd been and done was being examined, then tossed out, having been declared worthless. Now it looked like he was being told, if he wanted to end his long abstinence and get involved with a woman, he'd have to start from scratch.

And Katie Morgan was it. The bottom line. Exactly the kind of woman he didn't know a thing about and had spent all of his adult life avoiding. Hell, she could even be a virgin. And wouldn't that just give his conscience something to chew on?

Sam didn't know what he'd do with Katie, how he'd ever fit her into his mixed-up life. But he knew the memories of his past relationships didn't satisfy him anymore. He didn't want another woman who wouldn't care when or if he came or went. He didn't want one who tried to use sex as a way to tie him to her. He didn't want one he had nothing to say to when the sex was over. He didn't want another woman who left him feeling empty.

He wanted Katie. And instinct told him that he could have her. All he had to do was keep her from finding out that the man who turned her on was a freak. A medically, scientifically verified freak, who had already altered the course of dozens of people's lives—her own and Francis Fournier's included.

## Six

“What did you say that’s called?”

“Russian vegetable pie.” Kate set the bubbling, golden-crusted dish atop the stove and closed the oven door. Then, pot holders in hand, she picked up the pie and started toward the small dining room, where her grandmother’s old pine table was set for two.

Sam, who was leaning casually in her kitchen doorway, didn’t budge as he eyed his dinner warily. “And what exactly is in this pie?”

“Well . . . cabbage and mushrooms and cream cheese and hard-boiled eggs and—”

“Stop.” His gaze came up to meet hers. “It smells great. Let’s leave it at that.”

Kate tried—and failed—to hide a grin as she took another step toward the dining room, but when he didn’t move to let her through the doorway, she stopped in front of him to give him an expectant look.

“Do that again,” he said.

“Do what?”

Sam reached up and touched her cheek, and for an instant she couldn’t breathe, though she was mortified for reacting so idiotically to such a simple gesture.

“Well?” he said.

“Well what?”

“Where is it?”

She stared at him, eyes wide, lips slightly parted, until suddenly it dawned on her what he was waiting for. Then she blushed a rosy pink. The smile she gave him was a little flustered and a little shy.

His eyes held a look of satisfaction as his finger trailed over her dimple, then traced the line of her jaw. "That's better," he murmured. "Now I can stop feeling guilty."

"Guilty?"

"Yeah. For being jealous of a two-year-old. I've been wanting to do that since I saw Francis do it Wednesday morning."

*Well, Kate, here is—a man who's more interested in you than he is in your cooking. So what are you going to do with him?* With her gaze holding his, she whispered, "Sam, the dish . . ."

His gaze dropped to the casserole she held, and with a growled "Sorry," he moved out of the way.

As they sat down and began to eat, Kate pondered what she might be in for when it came time for him to go home. More, she suspected, than a lukewarm peck on the cheek.

"Katie, you know, this is good." His tone was amazed as he stuck another forkful of the steamy concoction into his mouth. "It sure tastes better than it sounds."

"Most food does," she chuckled. Then, pausing to give him a quick glance, she asked, "Would it be too nosy to ask about your family?"

He helped himself to a biscuit as he replied. "No, but there's not much to tell. My dad works on an assembly line at the GM plant in Detroit. I've got an aunt—my mother's sister—I haven't seen in about fifteen years. And my father has a brother. I see Uncle Harvey and his wife and kids sometimes at Christmas.

Reaching for the blue Fiestaware pitcher to fill their water glasses, Kate said, "You told me your mother died when you were two. Who took care of you after that?"

"The Happy Days Day Care Center. It was close to the GM plant and cheap, which meant it was mostly full of kids whose parents worked for GM." He frowned as he examined a piece of hard-boiled egg on his plate. "Katie, what are these little green specks?"

"Dill weed."

"Dill *weed*? Never heard of it. But, hell, you can't argue with success."

“Thanks. Remind me to give you some to take home—you put it on eggs and cucumbers. So, did you like this day-care center?”

“It was okay,” he answered. “There was one older lady, Mrs. Montague—we called her Miz Monty. I liked her a lot. But she was only there part-time. Then, after a while, she left. I guess she retired.” He tilted his head thoughtfully, remembering. Then, with a shrug, he dismissed the matter.

Kate thought that careless shrug said a lot about how Sam had learned to cope with the harder side of life. Everything was “no big deal.” Except, of course, that wasn’t true. The picture of the alone, and surely the lonely, fictitious young pilot had lingered in her mind since Wednesday morning. As he continued to relate the bare-bones facts of his life, the picture came into better focus.

He’d grown up in an old apartment building in a rough section of Detroit. His father, Carl Reese, was fair and honest but strict in an old-school sense. Things were either right or wrong in Carl’s book; Sam learned early that it was easy to make a mistake and that the consequences of making one were tough. He’d done okay in school but didn’t really like academics, except for math and history; he wouldn’t have bothered with college, but he’d had to have a degree to get the Navy to teach him to fly. So he’d gone to Wayne State, graduating with a degree in math, then headed straight to Aviation Officers Candidate School.

He’d been in the Navy for a little over seven years, much of it spent overseas, nearly all of it spent racking up flight time in fighter jets. And he’d probably have stayed in if he hadn’t been offered a job he couldn’t turn down. No, it wasn’t the money that had tempted him—it was the planes he’d be flying. He’d traded the Navy and F-14 Tomcats for the Mojave Desert and a strange list of mostly unheard of, experimental aircraft designed by a man others in the aviation industry considered a renegade. He’d never regretted the decision.

He didn’t see much of his father; he wrote now and then but didn’t usually expect a reply—his father wasn’t big on communicating. Carl Reese had remarried eight years ago,

and Sam described his stepmother, Susan, as a “real spitfire.” He smiled as he admitted he’d never have dreamed his father would tolerate a woman who refused to iron shirts. But Sam liked Susan and was glad to see his father enjoying himself; they even had a vacation to Florida planned for the winter, which surprised Sam, since the farthest his father had ever been from Detroit was the Upper Peninsula.

“Did he come up here to hunt?” Kate asked.

“No.” Sam laid his knife and fork across the top edge of his empty dinner plate with a satisfied sigh. “We came up here on fishing trips when I was a kid. I remember it being real pretty, especially in the fall.”

“That’s my favorite time.” Resting her elbows on the table, she wrapped her hands around her water glass and gazed wistfully over the top of it. “I had a friend in grade school whose father ran a seaplane service. He flew people all over Lake Superior—Isle Royale, Thunder Bay, even into the Boundary Waters in Minnesota. On my eleventh birthday, he took Patsy and me for a ride. I’ll never forget it.” She glanced at Sam and smiled. “My birthday’s in September, and the birch forests were at peak. Looking down on those trees, I thought we must be flying over the Land of Oz, following the yellow brick road.”

His mouth slanted in a crooked grin. “The yellow brick road, huh?”

“Well, it was beautiful.”

“I know. I’ve seen it. I’ve seen aspen groves in the Rockies, too, from the air. And pine forests covered with snow . . . and whales migrating south along the Pacific coast . . .” He looked away, his grin slowly fading, and for an instant his eyes lost their focus, the gray irises turning clear as crystal. An instant later, his countenance changed, quickly assuming its usual unrevealing lines.

Shifting his gaze to her, he asked, “So is that why you’re still up here? You’re bent on following the yellow brick road?”

Kate had to fight to swallow her disappointment. Sam had given her another peek at that side of him he kept so carefully guarded—but then he’d snatched it away.

“Well, maybe that’s part of it,” she said. “I really do love



the U.P., no matter what time of year it is.”

“You must have gone away to school.”

She nodded. “When I was twenty, I went to Ann Arbor and did my bachelor’s and first master’s degree at the U. of M. Then I went to the School of Midwifery at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. for my master’s in nurse midwifery. I was away eight years, total.”

“But you came back. Because of your family?”

“Yes, and because I don’t like living in big cities. And because they need good medical professionals here. I suppose I could have found another isolated spot where I’d be just as useful, but Cal Drinker—he was my family’s doctor until he retired, and he helped me through school—he told me about Doc Cabot needing help, and . . .” She trailed off with a palms-up gesture.

Sam completed the thought for her. “You felt like you owed it to him.”

“Partly. Cressie was here, and that made a difference. But I wanted to do it, too.” Dropping her gaze, Kate added, “I wanted to come home.”

When she looked up, she found him studying her closely.

“In that talk I had the other night with Mrs. D.,” he began, she said your mom died having a baby. Does that have something to do with your being a midwife?”

Kate drew a quiet, steadying breath. “If you mean am I on some kind of crusade to improve obstetrics in the area because of what happened to my mother, no, I’m not. First of all, she didn’t die from lack of medical care. She had heart failure during delivery, and there wasn’t any reason to suspect ahead of time that it might happen. Besides, I don’t really perform that many deliveries—only when there’s no way the woman can get to the hospital. I just—” She tried to smile. “I just like babies, that’s all. And I like taking care of women who are getting ready to have them. It’s such a . . . a happy time.”

Sam’s gray eyes remained unblinking as he continued to search her features. “You spent a good part of your childhood taking care of people,” he said. “And I think most people in your shoes would’ve been pretty damned resentful. But you’re

not. And when you were given a choice, you decided to be a nurse and go on taking care of people. You get real pleasure out of it, don't you?"

Her lips parted, and a bewildered frown appeared on her brow. "Of course, I do." With a little flap of her hand, she added, "Oh, I guess maybe if the reason I had to help my family was somebody's fault, I'd feel resentful. But it wasn't. My mother's dying was just a horrible thing that happened. Dad loved us, and we loved him, and we all did what we could to make things better. As for my being a nurse—" She paused, looking for words that explained what she'd never really thought about consciously. "Sam, I *like* taking care of people, and I think I'm pretty good at it. And I truly believe a person ought to do what he—or she—likes and does best."

He gave her the strangest look, one that reflected a great deal of respect; but there was something troubled, too, hiding in the depths of his eyes, something she had the most compelling desire to understand.

"Yeah," he said quietly. "A person ought to do what they like and do best. Can't argue with that."

She sensed she'd said something very important. Encouraged, she started to ask if that was how he felt about flying. Before she could speak, though, she heard a sound that made her heart skip a beat.

Sam straightened in his chair as she jumped from the table and hurried toward her bedroom.

"Is that your CB?" he called.

"Yes." She tossed an answer over her shoulder. "Sounds like Bob Bradley over at Wanagan Campgrounds."

The CB sat on a small table in a corner of the bedroom, and by the time she grabbed the handset, she was aware that Sam was standing in the doorway behind her, listening.

"KRT17 calling KMP— Ah, the hell with it. Kate! Kate, are you there? Over."

"I'm here, Bob. What's wrong? Over."

"I've got a bad one for you." Bob's voice was raw as he rushed to explain. "A bear wandered in, and these two guys I've got staying down in section three tried to shoo him out.

Well, you know all they did was rile him, and he attacked one of them, and— Oh, God, Kate—” His voice broke. “He’s bleeding like crazy—from his leg, mostly. Over.”

“How far up the leg?” she asked.

“Just above the knee.”

“Have you radioed for a medevac?”

“Yes, but I had a hell of a time getting it. Big truck wreck down on Route 51. All the crews are out. Lord knows what they’re sending us—or when. I don’t know if this guy’s going to make it.”

“Bob, do what you can to stop the bleeding. Keep him warm. Elevate his legs. I’ll be there in ten.” Signing off, Kate dropped the radio mike, snatched her pager off her nightstand, grabbed her jacket out of the closet, and rushed past Sam, who was still standing in the doorway. “I’m sorry, Sam. I have to go. There’s pie in the kitchen. You’re welcome to stay and have some.”

“You’ve got a chopper coming?” he asked, grabbing his jacket off the couch to follow her.

“I hope so.”

“What’s flight time to the trauma center?”

“About forty-five minutes, over to Marquette.” She pulled on her jacket over her yellow blouse and linen skirt as she ran down her front steps; she’d dressed for Sam, not for work—a mistake, she realized, but one she’d have to live with.

“Listen,” she continued, “you don’t have to rush off. It’s fine if you—” She stopped with a hand on the door handle of the pickup. “Where are you going?”

“With you,” he said, opening the passenger door and swinging into the front seat.

“But—”

“I’ll stay out of your way. Let’s go.”

She wasn’t about to waste time arguing. She hopped into the truck and turned the key waiting in the ignition. The wide truck tires sent gravel spraying in all directions as she made a U-turn in the middle of the street, hung a left at the intersection onto Bourner’s Mill Road, and tore out of town, headed east. It was eight o’clock and dark and, when the road passed into

the woods outside of town, darker still. In the shadowed interior of the pickup's cab, she cast Sam a quick glance.

"You know, this man's going to be in awful shape," she said.

"I got that idea," he replied.

"The chopper's probably coming from Ashland, Wisconsin and isn't going to get there for a while. I'm going to be busy until it does."

"Katie, what's your point?"

She spared him another look to find him staring intently at the road ahead. What *was* her point? She remembered that seeing someone in pain bothered him, but she also remembered that he moved quickly and confidently when something needed doing fast. He might not know a thing about emergency medicine, but his pilot's training would give him an edge over most people in controlling the urge to panic. The more she thought about it, the more she realized, if she needed help, she couldn't think of anyone she'd rather have with her than Sam.

"I'm sorry the evening got ruined this way," she answered finally. "But I'm glad you're here."

And she was glad. It felt strange, but in a good way, racing off on an emergency with someone riding beside her. The next few hours had the potential for being a nightmare come to life, and no matter how the story ended, it would be nice, for once, not to have to face it all alone.

Sam's heart pounded, the adrenaline pumping through his veins at a furious pace, as he rode beside Katie. It was a jarring ride, and he kept one hand braced on the door and the other along the back of the seat. His respect for Katie's driving grew with each passing mile, though it never surpassed his respect for her composure.

He wondered what it would take for him to feel the way she looked. But then, if she had his problem, would she be so calm? She only had to worry about whether her training, time, and luck would be enough to save the man's life. If they weren't, she'd feel terrible, but she wouldn't be called upon to violate

the laws of nature to snatch the guy back from the grave. He'd try to get through this without giving himself away. But if he couldn't, well . . . it wouldn't take long to pack his things and leave.

Yet as Katie spun the pickup onto a rutted dirt road, where a wooden sign read WANAGAN CREEK CAMPGROUNDS, Sam had the craziest moment of wishing that she did know the truth about him. He didn't have any choice in this business, no more than he'd had in California. But maybe, he thought briefly, it would be easier to live with that reality if he didn't always have to go into these situations feeling so damned alone.

## Seven

Kate dropped to her knees in the blood-soaked dirt beside the unconscious man. He was covered with a blanket, his lower body elevated by a board, and in the light cast by the Coleman lantern someone had lit, she quickly observed her patient's cold, white skin and his shallow, rapid breathing. His pulse was barely palpable, and she didn't have to take his blood pressure to know it was dangerously low. He was in shock from loss of blood, close to death.

Clenching her jaw in rebellion against the voice that said she was too late, she did a quick check of the man's upper body, noting abrasions and bruises, none of which were life-threatening, before turning to focus on the one wound that was. Across from her, Bob Bradley swore, his hands slipping on ragged flesh as he tried to staunch the flow of blood from the man's left thigh.

"He was on his face," Bob rasped. "I turned him over and tried to get the dirt out of his nose. But I can't stop the bleeding!"

"Lift his leg," Kate said, her steady voice giving away none of her anxiety.

Bob complied as she opened the lid of her emergency kit and grabbed her last pair of surgical gloves and a bandage that would serve as a tourniquet. Pulling on the gloves with a practiced snap, she slipped the strip of cloth under the injured man's thigh, securing the tourniquet in seconds flat. Then, with a sinking feeling, she reached for the only bag of IV solution she had—250 cc of Ringer's. It wouldn't be nearly enough. Yet if she thought now about her frustrations over getting medical supplies, she'd go nuts. So she set up the IV, telling herself it

would have to do.

The man's shirt, like his jeans, was in tatters, and it was easy to rip off the sleeve, but when she tried to find a vein for the IV needle, she was hindered by the growing darkness. She started to call for more light, but the sudden brightness of a high-power flashlight beam, focused directly on her patient's arm, made the request unnecessary.

Kate looked and saw Sam, crouched next to Bob, holding the flashlight for her. Offering a quick thanks, she finished setting up the IV, then, with a wad of gauze bandages in hand, turned to have a closer look at the leg wound. What she saw, after she'd mopped up the pooled blood, made her stomach lurch.

"Oh, my God," Bob muttered, then quickly turned away.

The chunk of flesh the bear had ripped from its victim's leg went down to the bone. He wasn't a big man—probably five foot seven or eight and less than a hundred and sixty pounds—and he'd already lost a tremendous amount of blood.

With a worried glance at her patient's pale face, Kate's gaze dropped to his chest as she picked up his wrist to check his pulse. She had done all she could do, and it wasn't working. He was getting worse.

"What's the ETA on the chopper?" she asked.

The man standing behind her answered. "Thirty minutes. I've got a CB in my truck, and I checked the time just before you got here."

"Are you this man's friend?"

"Yes. I'm Jeff Lindstrom. His name's Ray Cooney. We're up from Chicago on a fishing trip. Is he . . . ? Well, should I call his wife?"

She held Cooney's wrist with one hand as her other moved in an unconsciously soothing gesture across the blanket that covered his chest. "You'll have to fly with him to Marquette," she replied. "You can call her from there." *And pray it isn't to tell her that her husband's dead.* But with every passing second, she grew more certain it would be.

Time. She needed more time. She needed an emergency room ten minutes away. She needed an ambulance that didn't

take an hour to arrive on the scene. She needed more Ringer's, because the 250 cc was almost gone. And what she needed most was a miracle.

"Kate, I've got to set up flares in the meadow for the chopper."

She acknowledged Bob's statement with a nod, then, with a glance at Lindstrom, said, "Could you try to get an update on the chopper? Maybe you could hurry them along."

Looking grateful for something to do, Lindstrom took off toward the pickup parked on the far side of the clearing. That left Sam, kneeling across from her, the dying man between them.

His voice was low and rough. "Katie, is this guy going to make it?"

"Not if the chopper doesn't get here in the next five minutes with more Ringer's," she muttered. "He's in severe shock and—"

"Move your hand a little."

"—he's barely— What?"

She broke off when Sam reached out to nudge her hand holding the blood-drenched gauze away from the tourniquet. Flicking the gauze aside, he placed his own hand directly over the gaping leg wound, while his other hand rested on the unconscious man's chest. Then, with a long, shuddering sigh, he closed his eyes, and his head dropped forward.

At first, his actions merely baffled her. Then she wondered, somewhat doubtfully, if he could be praying. But when he lifted his head and she saw the expression on his face, her thought was not that he was praying but that he was fighting the devil himself. He was covered with sweat, and the sharp angles of his features were drawn in lines of pain.

Casting a quick glance around to see that Lindstrom was still in his truck, fifty yards away, and that no one was witnessing this bizarre scene, she whispered, "What on earth are you doing?"

"Watch," Sam whispered back. "Just keep acting busy and . . . watch."

Her mouth dropped open. "Sam, what are you talking



about? You can't—"

"Shh. Quiet."

She might have gotten angry then, but at that moment his face contorted in a grimace of agony, and he threw his head back, his breath rushing out in a hoarse groan.

"Katie, it's okay," he rasped. "You'll see . . . I can't—I've got to—"

"I'll see *what?*" she demanded, her voice breaking with panic. It was bad enough that she was facing the loss of a patient. It was more than she could handle to discover that Sam had lost his mind.

Reaching out, she grabbed his hand to pull it off the wound, but the instant she touched him, she jerked back, gasping. His skin was hot—burning hot.

"Katie . . ." His whisper was barely audible. "Trust me. It's going to be all right now."

His words didn't register. Her mind was in a state of terrible confusion as she stared, speechless, at his blood-drenched hand. Telling herself she must be wrong, she reached out to touch him again, but before she could, something happened that drove all other thoughts from her mind.

Her fingers, pressed to the chilled flesh of Cooney's wrist, had been keeping tabs on the deteriorating pulse, and it suddenly penetrated her awareness that it wasn't deteriorating anymore. In fact, it was a little stronger than it had been a few moments ago.

Her gaze fell to the injured man's chest, and she was stunned to see it rising and falling as he drew deeper and deeper breaths; they were ragged breaths, to be sure, but far stronger than any she'd expected him ever to draw again. A glance at his face made her eyes widen, and she dropped his wrist in order to lay her palm against his cheek, unable to account for his improving color—or the fact that he was no longer so cold.

"Sam . . ." she began brokenly.

"Shh."

"Sam, he's breathing better, but what—"

"Shh," he repeated softly.

Her gaze flickered upward to see that his eyes were still

tightly closed. As she watched, though, his countenance underwent a dramatic transformation. The marks of pain and suffering began to fade. His jaw relaxed, and his lips, which had been pressed together, slowly assumed their sensual contours. His brow smoothed, and a few seconds later, his eyes opened.

When he met her gaze, she uttered a soft, startled cry. Compassion, tenderness, and a kind of vulnerability that took her breath away: not the defenselessness that came from innocence, but the fearlessness that came from having faced the worst and won. His very soul lay open for her to see in the almost ethereal light shining from his eyes. *This* was what she'd glimpsed all those other times. *This* was the thing he tried so hard to hide from her. Yet even as she realized that he was hiding nothing at that moment, she balked at naming what she saw.

"Loosen the tourniquet," Sam said quietly, urging her with a nod when she merely continued to stare at him.

Kate's heart was pounding as she let her gaze drop to the blood-soaked bandage. Rationally, she knew what would happen if she loosened it; not nearly enough time had passed for the torn veins and arteries to close off. And yet . . . She reached for the bandage hesitantly, then pulled back, filled with an unaccountable fear—not that the man would bleed to death but, absurdly enough, that he wouldn't.

"Go on," Sam coaxed. "It's okay. I promise."

He sounded so certain. And so calm. Still, her insides churned as she reached for the tourniquet. Her cold fingers shook, making her clumsy, and she let the pressure off in slow increments, not trusting her intuition. Finally, though, the ends of the cloth were untied, and she dropped them, pressing a clenched fist to her middle as she whimpered in shock.

The bleeding had stopped—completely. And for several long seconds, she stared at the open wound in Ray Cooney's leg, her common sense trying to account for what her eyes beheld, at the same time a quiet voice inside her insisted that she accept the impossible.

“Katie, don’t be scared. It’s all right.”

Sam’s gentle reassurance sank in slowly, and her gaze rose to his. He met her numbed look unwaveringly, his stark features awash with tenderness and concern. She couldn’t help being afraid—afraid of what she didn’t rationally understand and couldn’t accept. Yet she also couldn’t deny what she had seen or the conviction growing within her that, somehow, against all odds and biological laws, he had saved Ray Cooney’s life.

She tried to speak but couldn’t, and an instant later, Bob came racing toward them along the path that ran through the woods. Following him were two state troopers, carrying a stretcher. She hadn’t even heard the helicopter arrive.

Abruptly, Sam pulled his hands off Cooney’s unconscious body and shoved himself to his feet, taking a couple of steps backward. His eyes continued to hold hers, but before she could think of anything to say, the others were there.

“They sent a police chopper,” Bob announced breathlessly. “No medics.”

“Sorry, Miss . . . ?”

“Morgan.” She offered her name tonelessly.

As the men went into action, strapping Cooney to the stretcher, the trooper told her about the interstate accident that had tied up all the medevac crews. She didn’t hear a word he said. Her eyes were glued to Sam’s as he gave her a long, piercing look; she knew he was asking her not to tell anyone what had happened.

How could she? She didn’t know.

At that moment, though, it didn’t matter whether or not the past twenty minutes made a scrap of sense. It only mattered that a man she had expected to be dead by now wasn’t. And she wasn’t responsible for his being alive. Sam was. She didn’t know how, but she knew it was true, just as she knew that, should it become necessary, he could do whatever he’d done again.

With a strange sense of calm stealing through her, Kate turned her attention to helping the others get her patient ready for air travel.

In less than a minute the rescue crew was hurrying through the woods, the troopers carrying the stretcher as she trotted beside it; Sam, who was carrying her emergency kit, followed with the other men. The helicopter awaited them in a meadow, inside a ring of glowing flares. The wind created by its whirling blades hit her full force, and she ducked, gathering her hair in her fist to keep it from blinding her. There was no protection from the deafening noise. She ran with the others under the blades, grabbing for a hold to step aboard as Bob and the state troopers loaded the stretcher. With an instant's hesitation, Jeff Lindstrom climbed in after her.

Then, crouching in the doorway, Kate pivoted on her toes to take her emergency kit from Sam. He slid it in beside her, and she pushed it out of the way to make room for him in the confined space. When he hung back, making no move to climb aboard, she blinked in confusion. He must not understand, she thought, that it was okay for him to come. It wasn't really, but she would *make* it okay if anybody said anything. She held out a hand, beckoning him to get in.

Instead, he hesitated, looking at her, then casting his gaze over the helicopter. When he took a step back and shook his head, her heart thudded into high gear.

"You're coming, too!" she shouted over the noise.

He took another step in the wrong direction as he yelled, "He'll be all right! You don't need me!"

But she *did* need him. He'd become indispensable to her. Didn't he realize that? What if Cooney started bleeding again? What if he wasn't really as improved as her mere clinical assessment indicated? Would Sam save a man's life, then let him go on, to the hospital, without him?

Would he let *her* go on without him?

He answered the question with another backward step. And when a trooper closed one of the double doors, he turned and ran out of the way. The other door closed as the chopper prepared to take off, and Kate was left staring at solid metal. It made no more sense than anything else that had transpired in the past half hour, but she felt, in that instant, as if she'd

been abandoned.

It was a bleak and wretchedly familiar feeling.

Sam trudged across the dark field and through the woods to Katie's pickup, fighting nausea every step of the way. He had a knot in his stomach the size of a football, and it didn't go away during the drive to Bourner's Crossing to get his Jeep, or during the drive to the cabin. When he stripped off his bloodied clothes and climbed into the shower, it was still there, and it kept him awake long into the night, as he sprawled naked across the bed, staring through the darkness at the beams above him.

There was no avoiding it. No way to deny or rationalize it. He'd been lying to himself long enough, passing off the couple of minor incidents since the crash as residual effects of a bad experience. He'd been sure they were no big deal, just a temporary thing that would take care of itself. But he couldn't pass this one off. It had hit him smack in the face, standing there next to that chopper, when he'd wanted to climb in and go with Katie—and couldn't.

He had a problem. A bad problem. Far worse than anything he'd imagined. Sure, the other things he'd had to put up with lately were annoying and a little embarrassing. He didn't like not being able to eat a steak or to drink a cold beer on a hot afternoon. He missed the smell of brewing coffee and the rush that first cup in the morning gave him. He missed smoking, too, as bad a habit as it might be. In the long run, though, those things weren't all that important, and he could accept having to give them up.

But this? No. He'd never be able to accept it.

And he'd never forgive himself, either. For the first time in his life that he could remember, he'd truly let a woman down. Worse, she was maybe the only woman he'd ever been aware of wanting not to disappoint. He'd seen the look of confused panic on Katie's face when she'd realized he wasn't going with her to the hospital, and if that look hadn't been enough to make him grit his teeth and climb into that damned chopper, he wasn't sure anything ever would be.

He rolled over in bed, exhausted but unable to sleep, and

he thought about the woman he'd deserted that night, and about the way she'd handled herself in the face of imminent tragedy. He thought about the wholehearted manner in which she'd given herself to an unconscious stranger, who would have died on her. And he thought about the others to whom she gave so much.

He'd healed a man tonight who'd been more dead than alive—something he'd have done whether or not Katie had been there—and he had a gut-level knowledge, however recently he'd acquired it, of the things that went through a person's mind when faced with another human being's suffering. He knew how Katie had felt, kneeling there, watching that guy die, and he wondered how she stood it: the pain of knowing that, sometimes, what she gave wouldn't be enough, the fear that there would never be enough of her to go around to all the people in need.

Which was why he felt so god-awful about deserting her. He'd known how she felt. He'd wanted to help her. But it would have meant flying with her to Marquette. And that he hadn't been able to do.

Staring out the window at the three-quarter moon rising above the trees, Sam let out a ragged sigh. *Face it, Reese, you're not a man anymore. You're a coward. And the last thing Katie needs is a gutless bastard like you to add to her list of burdens.*

## Eight

In the light of day, things didn't look much different. If anything, the slate-gray sky heightened Kate's sense that she'd been snatched out of the real world and plunged into a world of illusion. All night long she'd managed to behave as though everything were normal, following the hospital's routines, filling out forms for the chopper crew. Meanwhile, a voice inside her kept asking, *Don't they know? Don't they realize something strange is going on here? Why aren't we talking about that instead of filling out these silly forms?*

If she could have believed that what she'd seen Sam do was an illusion—merely a misunderstanding on her part—it would have been easier, but the facts refused to allow it: Ray Cooney was alive and in astonishingly good condition. Indeed, she'd had a heck of a time explaining his condition to the trauma unit's attending physician. The doctor simply couldn't understand how Cooney had survived so long, and so well, with so little body fluids. Well, she didn't understand it, either.

Something incredible had happened. Something she couldn't describe or name. Something that made her insides tremble. And she desperately needed to know what it was.

A state trooper brought her home at 8:00 a.m., and she went straight to her bedroom, shed her blood-caked clothes, and got into the shower. Then, giving her long hair a lick and a promise with the dryer, she left it unbraided to finish drying on its own and pulled on a pair of jeans and an oversize shirt of soft, dark green chamois. She was dead tired, but she couldn't have slept if her life had depended on it. So at eight-thirty, she clipped her pager to the waistband of her jeans and headed out the front door.

The air was warm, despite the promise of rain, and as the pickup bounced over the old lake road toward Sam's cabin, Kate rolled down the window, thinking the fresh air might clear her head so she could figure out what to say to him.

She knew what she wasn't going to say. He couldn't have realized how upset she'd been that he hadn't gone with her to Marquette, and there was no reason to tell him. Ray Cooney hadn't needed him, and, therefore, neither had she—not really. She shouldn't have taken his refusal to go personally. Yet, after pulling to a halt in front of the cabin, she approached the door hesitantly, afraid of discovering her feelings weren't foolish at all but an accurate measure of the way things stood between them.

The door was slightly ajar, and she knocked as she called, "Sam? It's Kate." The grumbling response she heard was not encouraging, but she ventured to ask, "Can I come in?"

Several seconds later, he called something vaguely positive, and she pushed the door open.

At the far end of the big room, dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt, Sam was standing, absolutely still, staring out the window over the kitchen sink. She walked toward him, her wariness increasing when he didn't turn to acknowledge her presence. Stopping beside him, she took in his worse-for-wear appearance—the rumpled hair and a day's growth of beard darkening his jaw.

"Good morning." She greeted him on a questioning note.

"Morning," came his gruff reply.

Still he didn't look at her, and she wondered if she ought to leave. For a moment, her need to talk to him warred with her suspicion that he didn't want to talk to her. The decision between the two was postponed, though, when she caught a whiff of a familiar odor, and her gaze dropped to the sink.

"Oh! You went fishing this morning," she remarked with forced cheerfulness. "Those are beauties. Four pounds apiece, I'll bet, even after you've cleaned them."

"Do you eat fish?"

"I love them," she answered, lifting her gaze from the two walleye pike to Sam's oddly still face. "I like to fish, too, but I



don't get much chance these—”

“Take them.”

Kate broke off, blinked at him, then began a protest. “Oh, Sam, that’s really nice of you, but you’ll want—”

“Take them. Please. Just . . .” He swallowed hard, squeezing his eyes shut.

Her eyes widened as she noted his growing pallor, her gaze shifting from his face . . . to the knife in his hand . . . to the fish.

“Katie, I hate to tell you this, but—”

“Leave the room, Sam.” Taking his arm, she spun him around and pushed him gently away from the sink. “Go shower and change your clothes. I’ll take care of this.”

He muttered something crude under his breath, but he followed her directions, striding across the cabin to disappear into the bedroom.

Kate rolled up her shirt sleeves and set about disposing of the problem. Wrapping the fish in a brown paper bag, she put them in her truck. Then she opened two cabin windows for ventilation and gave the sink and countertop a thorough scrubbing with a bleach cleanser. When the cabin was rid of all traces of fishy smell, she dried her hands and went to check on Sam.

She stopped in the bedroom doorway, taking in the scene: the unmade bed, its twisted blankets evidence of a restless night; a dresser drawer hanging open, clean underwear and socks stacked in the front of it; and, in a pile near the bathroom door, the clothes he’d worn last night, jeans and shirt both stiff with dried blood. He was standing by the open window, one bare shoulder against the frame, hair still damp but neatly combed. He hadn’t put on a T-shirt, but a fresh pair of jeans was slung low on his hips without a belt, his hands shoved deep into his pockets. In the pearl-gray light coming through the window, he looked lean and strong and every inch a man.

At the moment, though, the man was vulnerable—a rare occurrence and one she knew she must handle with care.

Approaching slowly, she stopped several feet away to study him. The color had returned to his face, and the lines of strain

had relaxed. Yet he looked terribly unhappy, and as he gazed out at the forest, the low, gravelly words he spoke were edged in bitterness.

“My dad taught me to fish. It’s the only thing we ever really did together.”

She felt his deep sadness, even if she didn’t understand its cause. Cautiously, she moved to stand beside him, and he shifted a little to make room for her in front of the window.

“On weekends, in California,” he continued, “one of the other pilots, Sid Golden, and I used to go up to the mountains and fish. And once in a while, a bunch of us would drive down to the coast, hire a boat, and go deep-sea fishing.” He paused, his lips tightening. “I like to fish. It’s relaxing and easy and . . . Ah, hell.” He uttered a soft, self-deprecating sound. “I don’t know why I expected it’d still be that way. Nothing else is the same as it used to be.”

So many questions ran through her mind as her gaze searched the stoic line of his unshaven jaw, then skimmed quickly over the scars on the right side of his body. She didn’t know where to start, which question to pick. So instead of picking any, she simply laid a hand on his arm and said softly, “Sam, talk to me. Tell me what’s wrong.”

His head turned slightly, but he didn’t meet her gaze, and after a moment, he looked away again.

She let her hand fall from his arm, and she turned her gaze out the window, too, drawing the curtain aside a bit farther with her finger. They stood that way for a long time, side by side, listening to the eerie cry of a loon on a nearby lake and the faint rustling of the wind through tender new leaves.

After several minutes, he straightened slowly, pulling his hands from his pockets to fold his arms across his bare chest. Lifting his head a notch, he squared his shoulders, and she realized with dismay that if he spoke now, it would be the tough guy talking. His pride had taken all the beating it could stand for one morning, and so, to salvage what was left of it, he was putting on his armor. Except the armor had cracks in it, and through them she caught glimpses of the man within.

“Remember Tuesday, when I carried you here, out of the

storm?" he said.

Unlikely she'd ever forget it "Yes."

"Remember when you said it was a miracle I survived the plane crash—and I said that maybe I didn't? You got disgusted, thinking I was being a smart ass."

"I remember."

"I meant it. I died on the operating table after the crash. For twenty minutes, they told me later, I was dead—no heart-beat, no respiration, nothing."

"Dear Lord," she whispered. "Twenty minutes is—" She cut herself off when she saw his jaw tighten and his expression become even more closed.

"Have you ever heard of a near-death experience?" he asked.

She replied slowly. "I'm not sure what you mean. I've read about cases where trauma and surgical teams have resuscitated people whose vital functions have stopped. But I've never heard of it being done twenty minutes—"

"I wasn't resuscitated," he interrupted her. "They did all the stuff doctors do to bring people back, but after five minutes, they gave up. The head doctor had—how do you say it?—'called it.' He'd given the time of death as 2:37 p.m. At 2:52, my heart started beating again."

"But how—"

"I found out it wasn't time for me to die. So I . . . came back—let's say, with some strong encouragement."

For several seconds, she could only stare at him, her lips parted in disbelief. Finally, she swallowed and started to ask, "Encouragement from—"

He stopped her again. "It isn't something I like to talk about, okay? Most of the time, nobody believes me, anyway. I'm not saying you wouldn't, but right now, I'd rather not go into it. The point is, when I died, I didn't just lie there on the operating table. My body was dead, but my mind or . . . soul or whatever you want to call it *went* somewhere."

Kate's look went from skeptical to astounded. "You— You *remember* being dead? I mean, how could you know—"

"Because I was there," Sam cut in, a muscle twitching in

his cheek as an emotion she couldn't begin to name passed swiftly across his features.

A moment later, his head turned, and he looked at her with eyes so startlingly clear she felt as though she were looking through the window to infinity. *He knows*, she thought. *He knows things I can't begin to imagine.*

More gently, he told her, "It isn't a bad place, Katie. I don't want you thinking that. In fact, it's . . . beautiful. I've got some books written by people who've either had experiences like mine or who've studied them. I'll lend them to you if you're interested. And sometime, maybe, I'll tell you about it, but—" He hesitated, then glanced away. "But not now."

But now was when she needed to know. Kate wondered how long she could wait for what she was sure must be the key to understanding him. His effect on her, from the beginning, had been astonishing; it was more powerful than ever now. He had an aura about him that shimmered like heat rising from a fire. On the surface, it appeared as a brazen sexual energy, the potency of which sent tendrils of arousal curling through her. There was more to it than that, though, and she was drawn to know the source of his magnetism. She was drawn to know the man.

"The thing last night was close," Sam went on. "And when it's that close, I need some time afterward to get settled. Remind myself that I'm here, in this world, not . . . over there. Otherwise, I walk around with a replay running in my head of the things that went on when I *was* over there. It makes it hard to go on acting like . . . like a regular person."

Well, that made sense, didn't it? As much as anything else in the past twelve hours.

"Sam, I think I understand," she began. "I won't ask you about . . . dying. But please, tell me—"

With a muttered curse, he turned and took a couple of strides away from the window to stand at the foot of the pushed-together beds. Then, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck, he drew a ragged breath and whirled to face her. "Katie, I know what you want to hear. You want me to give you a reason that guy you took to the hospital is still alive. All I

can tell you is that he was going to die, and I couldn't let it happen. So I put my hands on him and made the bleeding stop. I made his heartbeat get faster and his breathing get deeper. I knew it would work because I've done it—or things like it—a hundred or more times, now. But, honest to God, I don't know *why* it works."

The look he gave her was an odd mixture of defiance that she might dare not to believe him and hope that she would. Kate didn't know what to think.

"Are you trying to tell me—" she began.

Sam waved her off with an arm flung wide. "Something happened to me," he said urgently. "When I was dead, I mean. The experience . . . changed me—except, I didn't find out until months later, after I got out of the hospital."

"How could you not—" She stopped herself this time, realizing she was asking the wrong question. He couldn't give her reasons. Perhaps, though, he'd give her facts.

Choosing her words, she asked, "How did you find out?"

He stared at her for an instant, then turned and paced toward the door. She thought the conversation had ended, but he stopped in the doorway, standing in silence for several moments, his hands gripping the door frame on either side of him. Then, with a heavy sigh, he spoke in a flat, matter-of-fact tone.

"There was an accident. It was a few weeks after I got out of the hospital. Sid and I were helping another friend put a deck on the back of his house." Shrugging slightly, he admitted, "I was mostly watching, since I wasn't walking too well at that point. Anyway, Sid was working with a power saw, and his hand slipped. The blade hit him, and it cut his leg open at the groin. I was standing maybe five feet away, and in the couple of seconds it took me to get my hands on him, the ground was covered with blood. When the medics got there, they shoved me out of the way and started working on him. One of them said something about it being the femoral artery that was cut, and he said it like that meant Sid was already dead. But then the other one realized the bleeding had stopped. Sid had passed out, but he was alive. They took him to the hospital, and . . . well, that was that."

That was *what*?

The starkness of Sam's speech sent chills up Kate's spine. The understatement with which he described what must have been a horrifying event was unbelievable, as was the complete absence of description as to what he'd actually *done* in those moments before the medics arrived. Where was the emotion she'd seen in his expression last night when he'd put his hands on Ray Cooney?

She had her answer when he turned to look at her from across the room; the lines on his desert-bronzed face were deep with strain and exhaustion, and she knew the words he'd left out, the details of the scene, were as vivid in his mind as if it were happening at that very moment. It was costing him a great deal to tell her this story.

"Go on," she said softly. "That was the first time you healed someone?"

"Yeah," Sam replied in the same emotionless tone. Then, with a brooding frown, he added, "But I'd been feeling . . . well, different for a while."

"Different?"

He lifted a shoulder and let it fall. "It started in the hospital, with the TV. I couldn't watch anything where people were killing or beating on each other. And I hated being around other sick people. Then, after I got out of there, I'd be in a place like, say, the grocery store, and I'd see a person with some kind of physical problem—a crippled leg, maybe—and I'd get this urge to make it go away."

Kate gave him a bewildered look.

"To fix it," he explained succinctly. "The thing with Sid triggered it, though. After that, it got so I *had* to try to fix it. Then, one day, I was driving home from visiting Sid, after he got home from the hospital, and I passed an accident. Except, I couldn't pass it." His breath caught for an instant. "It was a kid. He'd been riding a bike, and a car had hit him. He had a cracked skull, and I don't think there were two breaths left in him. But I put my hands on his head, and . . ." He trailed off, then gave her a quick glance. "I understand he's still got some problems with his eyesight, but otherwise, he's okay."

Kate shook her head, trying to translate images from the previous night into the scene Sam described. "Weren't there other people there?" she asked. "Had the ambulance come?"

"Lots of people. No ambulance yet. But there was a cop."

"And how did you get him to let you near the child?"

He hesitated a moment. "I told him I was a doctor. It didn't matter. I would have said whatever I had to say to get my hands on that boy."

"And what did the hospital say? Dear heavens, Sam, how did you get away with such a thing?"

He snorted. "I didn't."

When he didn't immediately explain, she struggled to control the rush of impatience that coursed through her, watching as he pushed off from the door frame to wander restlessly around the small room.

"The next morning, a neurosurgeon named Martin Anderson called and asked if I'd come to the hospital to tell him about my role in saving the kid's life. I went because . . . well . . ."

He came to a halt, staring down at the bloody clothes lying at his feet. Then, bending slowly to pick them up, he kept looking at them as he continued. "I knew what had happened to me when I died was related to what I'd done with the boy and with Sid. I hadn't been able to get anybody to listen when I tried to tell them about the near-death experience. The nurses and doctors at the hospital thought I was hallucinating. I knew I wasn't, but I shut up about it because I didn't want them putting it in my medical records that I was crazy. But when Marty Anderson called, something about him made me think he might listen. I went to talk to him because I had to know what was happening to me."

"I should think so," Kate murmured. Then, seeing his confusion over what to do with the stained garments, she crossed the room and gently took them from him. Turning to walk in the direction of the kitchen, she spoke over her shoulder. "So, what did this Dr. Anderson have to say?"

"He asked questions, mostly," Sam replied, following her slowly. "But when I told him about the crash and the near-

death experience, he went wild.”

“You mean, he didn’t believe you?”

“Oh, he believed me, all right. He gave me a book and sent me home to read it. The next day I was back there, looking for him. The descriptions in the book of what people said it had been like to die sounded just like what had happened to me.” Watching as she ran cold water over his clothes in the kitchen sink, he added, “Truth is, it was damned reassuring to find out I wasn’t the only one. But I still didn’t understand what the near-death experience had to do with this crazy thing with Sid and the boy.”

Swishing the clothes with a squirt of dishwashing detergent, Kate turned off the water. “And Dr. Anderson told you?”

“Hell, no,” Sam grated, wandering around the kitchen. Marty didn’t have answers—only suspicions. He took me to see a couple of his patients in the hospital, and he didn’t have to ask for me to want to help them. Every time I even glanced at a sick person, I . . . well, this thing happens to me where I . . . want to make them well.”

The hint of embarrassment in his tone made her frown in puzzlement, and she watched the interplay of emotions flickering across his features as he picked up a box of cereal off the table, stared at it, then tossed it down again to move on.

“The business with my hands only worked on two out of five of Marty’s patients,” he said. “But that was enough for Marty. The next thing I knew, he was on the phone with some friend of his at a hospital in New England. A couple of days later, I was headed back east to this place where they study people who have what they call paranormal abilities.”

“What sort of place was it?” she asked, unable to keep the note of suspicion out of her tone.

He heard it and cocked one eyebrow in her direction. “A research center,” he replied, and when he named the major university to which the center was connected, her eyes widened. “Yeah, it’s legitimate. No hocus-pocus. It’s run by scientists with M.D.s and Ph.D.s in everything under the sun. For three weeks, I filled out questionnaires and sat through hours of interviews and let them hook me up to machines that mea-



sure brain waves and dreams and electromagnetic fields and God only knows what else. They tested my blood cells and my skin cells and every other cell they could put on a slide or in a test tube. And I've got to say, after putting up with seven months of the same kind of stuff in the hospital, I wasn't the most cooperative subject they ever had."

*And I'll bet that's putting it mildly.* Kate watched with growing concern as Sam made his third trip around the kitchen table, each time pulling out and pushing in the end chair as he passed. "Would you like to go for a walk?" she asked.

He gave her a quick, relieved look. "Hell, yes, let's get out of here." And with that, he headed for the front door.

Biting her tongue against the urge to tell him that he might get cold without a shirt, she followed.

Outside, he started down the cleared track that led to the old lake road. He'd gotten about ten yards when his steps slowed and he glanced over his shoulder, watching as she hurried to catch up. When she reached him, he mumbled an apology, shoving his hands into his pockets as he continued at a slower pace.

They walked for a few minutes in silence, Kate looking at the spring beauty and bloodroot that had bloomed that week, all the while casting sideways glances at Sam, who was staring straight ahead.

Finally, when she thought he seemed a little more relaxed, she asked, "So, what did all that testing tell you?"

He let out a sigh. "Not much. The only thing they had me do that seemed worthwhile was work on patients from the university hospital. They'd tell me what was wrong with them, and I'd try to cure them. It turns out this weird thing I've got is selective. It doesn't work on birth defects or disease, which is why I'd had such bad luck with Marty's patients. Once in a while—about five percent of the time—I can slow down a progressive illness. But so far, at least, I haven't been able to stop or cure one."

Leaning to snatch a small pebble off the ground, he flicked it into the woods. "On the other hand, about ninety-eight percent of the time, I can stop bleeding. And I do almost that well

with problems caused by an injury or an illness—like bad circulation from diabetes or arthritis that develops around an old break. Once I worked on a woman who'd had polio. Afterwards, she could lift her arms above her head, where she couldn't before, and not long after that, her leg muscles developed to where she could walk without braces."

Kate's eyes grew wide. "Sam, that's wonderful!"

He passed off her praise with a shrug. "Yeah, I was pleased."

Pleased? Not elated or wild with excitement? He was just *pleased*? She didn't believe it, not for a minute. He might talk about this amazing power he'd acquired as though it were so mundane as to be boring—"this weird thing I've got," he called it—but she knew he couldn't possibly feel that way about it.

But how did he feel? He certainly seemed less than thrilled, and for the life of her, Kate didn't understand why. She herself had barely begun to accept what he was telling her, and, still, she was in awe. It was astonishing enough to learn that someone she knew had the kind of gift Sam was describing; it was incomprehensible to think he might not want it.

"So, what happened?" she asked. "Did the center just send you home when they'd finished their tests?"

Sam shook his head. "They didn't get to finish. I left. I couldn't take it anymore, being looked at through a microscope. Besides, they were getting all their questions answered, but nobody was answering mine."

"What questions were those?"

"Well, dammit, Katie, what do you *think*?" He erupted suddenly, all pretense of indifference wiped from his features. "I hadn't asked for this thing! I wanted to know when it was going to go away! And all those brilliant doctors and scientists would tell me was that my body's energy field had been altered, apparently as a result of the near-death experience. Well, hell, I already knew that. I even knew why."

Kate's brow creased. "You did?"

"Sure," he declared. "If you think about it, it makes a crazy kind of sense. To come back from being dead, it was like I *made* my body stop bleeding and sort of turned it back on. And

whatever the hell I did over *there* to get back *here* stayed with me. All they did at the center was put a label on it. In their lingo, I'm what's known as a bona fide healer. I finally figured out that meant I'm stuck with this thing." Gruffly, with that odd, half-embarrassed catch in his voice, he conceded, "So, okay. I can handle that. As long as I've got it, maybe I can do some good with it. But does that mean every time I see a sick person, or somebody who's hurt, I'm supposed to try to cure them?"

"Of course not," she replied instantly. "Even if you could heal all different kinds of things, you can't possibly cure all the sick and injured of the world. And nobody could expect you to."

He shot her a cynical look. "Oh, yeah? Tell that to the hundred or so people who knocked on my door between the time I got back to California and the time I left, four weeks later."

She stared at him, stunned. "Good Lord, Sam. Where did they come from?"

"Everywhere." His arm swept the air in front of him. "Just . . . everywhere."

They'd reached a place where the track bent to the left. Straight ahead, a few yards into the woods, lay a casualty of Tuesday's storm—an old red maple, uprooted and stretched across the forest floor, its new leaves withered. When Sam left the track, headed for a look at the damage, Kate followed him, picking her way through the low-lying brush.

He stopped beside the fallen giant to lay a hand on the thick trunk. She came up beside him, tilting her head to look at the cloudy sky through the break in the green canopy the tree's demise had caused. A minute passed in silence before he continued.

"Word got around about me," he said. "Before I knew it, I had parents bringing children with leukemia, blind people who hadn't seen the light of day in forty years, Vietnam vets paralyzed from the waist down . . . you name it, I saw it. Some of them were rich, some not so rich. Most wanted to pay me. They all wanted me to take away their pain and make their

lives bearable. God, Katie, it was”—his control slipped, and he shuddered visibly—“it was awful. Some of them I helped, but a lot of them, I couldn’t help. And they had a hard time understanding that. . . . Hell, so did I.”

He turned his head away as he murmured, “It’s not so easy, watching somebody hurt and not being able to help them.”

“Yes, I know,” Kate said quietly. *Like it’s not so easy watching you hurt, when I don’t know if there’s anything I can say or do that will help even a little.*

As her gaze searched his profile, she had to fight to keep from reaching out to touch him. She wanted to let him know she understood at least some small part of his torment, but something told her that he wouldn’t accept such a gesture. Sam was an incredibly strong-willed man. He’d had the guts and persistence to overcome pain and disability that would have crushed a lesser man’s spirit. Granted, the circumstances he’d described were fantastic beyond her wildest imaginings; but that made it even more ridiculous to think about patting his shoulder and telling him that she sympathized with his predicament.

But what *could* she do for him? Was there anything?

Turning to lean a hip against the broad maple trunk, he crossed his arms over his chest as he spoke. “Still, I helped enough of the people who came to me that more kept coming. And Marty Anderson had me at the hospital two days a week, working on patients. Then he started calling me, sometimes in the middle of the night, for emergencies. I didn’t mind doing it for him—he’d done a lot for me. And I had the time, since I couldn’t . . . Well, I had the time, but. . . .”

He trailed off, shifting his weight uncomfortably as he ran a hand through his hair, rumpling it. “The thing is, this business can be pretty exhausting. It can wipe me out for days afterwards to work on somebody who’s in really bad shape—like that guy last night. And even when they’re not that bad off, I can’t handle more than a couple of people in the same day. I guess that seems crazy, since all it looks like I’m doing is putting my hands on somebody, but—”

“No, it doesn’t seem crazy.” Kate boosted herself up to sit

on the tree trunk. “Energy is measurable. When it’s gone, it’s gone.”

“I’m only a man. I’m not God.”

“Of course not.”

“That was the worst—when people would come not to get me to cure them but to ask for my advice. Like I was some kind of preacher or guru or something.” He uttered a short laugh. “The last straw was the guy from the local TV talk show who started badgering me to be on his show. Hell, if it wasn’t so pathetic, it would almost be funny.”

He was silent for an instant, then bit out a violent curse. “But it *isn’t* funny. There’s nothing funny about *any* of this. It’s terrible to see people suffering and to suffer for them—and never be able to turn it off.” Shaking his head, he finished, “Everybody else who knows calls this thing a gift. But from where I stand, most of the time it looks like a curse.”

“Oh, Sam,” she whispered. “You don’t really mean that, do you?”

He gave her a scowling glance, then looked away. Several seconds went by in silence until, gradually, the set of his jaw relaxed. When he returned his gaze to hers, the scowl was gone.

“No,” he said. “I don’t mean it. I’m not sorry I could help those people. And if I couldn’t do this thing, the doctors who said I’d never walk again would’ve had the last word. I got back on my feet under my own steam—but *just*. I doubt I’d have made it five years before I ended up where they said I’d be—in a wheelchair, living on drugs. I can’t pretend I wasn’t damned glad when I figured out I could cure myself, too. It was harder working on myself—it didn’t happen on the first try, all at once—but bit by bit, everything got to be right again. All I’ve got left to show for the crash are the scars and some missing parts I don’t need.

And a wonderful gift that he looked upon as a curse. The thought ran through Kate’s mind as she asked, “Doesn’t the good you’ve done for others—and for yourself—make the trouble you’ve put up with worth it?”

Sam shook his head. “Katie, since I found out about this

thing, I haven't had time to figure out what is and isn't worth it. The last week in California, I was living with the blinds pulled down, the lights out, and the phone off the hook. I'd lived in that house for ten years, and I had some pretty good friends in Mojave. I was trying to . . . well, to get back to work. But I couldn't stay there. I had to find a place where people would leave me alone. A place I could work things out in my own head."

"So, you came up here to get away from sick people," she noted, "and, instead, you found one bleeding to death."

He snorted. "How about that." Hooking his heel in the bark of the tree trunk, he levered himself up to sit beside her. "Except I wasn't really trying to get away from sick people. I just wanted to go somewhere they wouldn't know it was me helping them. I'm not trying to hold out on anybody, Katie. I just need some peace." Quietly, he added, "And the first place I went looking for it was worse, in some ways, than what I'd left."

"You didn't come straight here from California?"

"No, I went to Detroit to stay with Dad and Susan." He heaved a sigh. "There are a helluva lot of sick people in a big city. More than I could ever cure. Just walking down the street was like running an obstacle course. I'd planned to stay in Detroit, but I wasn't there a week when I started reading the classifieds, looking for a place up here."

He paused, staring sightlessly into the woods, with a look of something that might have been sadness tightening his features. "It wouldn't have worked, anyway, staying with Dad. He was glad to see me healthy. He came to the hospital right after the crash, and I think it about killed him to see me so messed up. But he's . . . narrow in his outlook, I guess you'd say. I couldn't have told him about this healing business. It wouldn't fit into anything he'd be able to accept."

*Or anything you can accept.*

Slowly, the pieces were coming together. In trying to envision Sam and his father having this same talk . . . well, she couldn't imagine it, given what Sam had said about the older man. And Kate thought that might account for at least part of

his discomfort with his awesome gift. The man who'd raised him was steeped in traditional notions about the things that made a man a man, and Carl Reese had passed those notions on to his son. Men didn't cry. Men didn't admit to pain. And a *real* man was never afraid—or, if he was, he didn't show it. What experience, in that motherless household, had Sam had with being nurtured, or with gentleness? Very little, she imagined. Yet the gift he'd been given was inherently a nurturing one.

Sam was struggling to reconcile his healing gift with his macho image of manhood, trying to remain tough despite the torrent of intense emotion that poured from him every time he was compelled to touch and heal another human being. Emotions such as tenderness and compassion—those things she'd seen carved into his face the previous night. Emotions she was certain had always been there, inside him, but that he'd learned to deny. Well, he'd denied them so successfully that he didn't know how to cope with them when they refused to go away. They made him angry, embarrassed; they caused him pain. And he didn't like it. So he was handling the battle inside him—the one between the “real man” and the healer—by trying to relegate the latter to nuisance status. But it wasn't working.

“Anyway,” he went on, “I'm planning to stay here until I've got some control over this thing. Which basically means learning how to make choices about who, when, where, and how often I help people. I know that must sound cold to you, but—”

“It doesn't sound cold at all.”

When his head turned and his startled gaze met hers, Kate added, “I can't begin to imagine how I'd feel in your position, but I know any medical professional—or anybody in the business of helping people—makes choices all the time. If they don't, they get burned out pretty fast. You couldn't have kept going the way things were in California.”

She paused, then added, “You made a choice last night, you know. You waited until I'd done everything I could do. Then you asked me if Ray Cooney was going to die.”

Yes, he'd realized it, but the quick flash of wariness that

touched his features said he wasn't sure of her reaction.

"Actually," she continued, "if I'd had enough Ringer's, you might not have had to do anything."

"But you didn't," he muttered.

"No, and if you hadn't been there, he'd be dead." Holding his gaze, she added softly, "I'm glad you were there, Sam."

He didn't look away. And he didn't shrug off her gratitude.

"So am I," he said. "And I was glad *you* were there. Knowing you were doing all the right medical things helped me not to feel like it was all on me whether he lived or died."

"Is that how it feels?"

"Sometimes." He studied her closely. "It felt that way standing in your living room the other night."

"Last night, you mean, when you decided to go with me."

"No. Tuesday night, when I brought you home after the storm, with your ankle busted."



## Nine

“It was you,” Kate breathed, her mind flooding with the memory of Sam standing at the foot of her bed, removing the ice pack from her ankle to replace it with his hand. The image was blurry—she couldn’t remember much of what either of them had said—yet she remembered his tenderness. She also remembered the incredible lightness, the sense of well-being, that had filled her. Until that moment, though, even after seeing him heal Ray Cooney and listening to his story, she hadn’t made the connection between Sam and her injured ankle’s recovery.

“I was on my way out the door,” he admitted. “But then I thought about all the people who depend on you, and I couldn’t handle wondering what might happen if you couldn’t do your job.”

“You looked so . . . I thought you were mad at me. I see now. But, Sam”—she shook her head a little—“it might only have been a sprain. I’d hate to think you felt you had to—”

“It was broken.”

She stopped short, her lips parted. “You could tell?”

He nodded, his gaze holding hers. “But it wouldn’t have mattered. I’d have done the same thing if it had only been sprained. You do a lot for other people, Katie, and I wanted to do something for you. Mostly, though, I think I did it for me. I didn’t want you laid up with a broken ankle.” His gaze made a slow trip over her features. “I wanted you here, like you are right now, with me.”

When his gaze fastened on hers once more, Kate felt a slow flush of heat coloring her cheeks. She wished she’d been fully awake and aware of what was happening that night, for,

although his hands had touched only her ankle, the look in his gray-crystal eyes said he'd known her, in those few moments, very well indeed. And she felt as if they'd shared something very special and very intimate—more intimate than any other experience she'd ever shared with a man.

Lowering her gaze, she twisted her fingers together in her lap as she tried to imagine saying thank you for something that . . . Well, somehow it didn't seem like the thing to say.

A second later, though, another thought occurred to her, and her gaze flew back to his. "Francis," she whispered. "Sam, did you . . . ?"

He arched an eyebrow. "What do you think?"

"Dear Lord," she breathed, the chill of shock racing over her skin. "And you were able to heal him because his deafness was the result of a virus. If it'd been congenital—"

"It's a sure bet he'd still be deaf." Sam glanced away, grumbling a little as he added, "But I'd have tried anyway. I mean, how could you turn your back on a kid with a smile like that?"

Kate blinked at the tears stinging her eyes.

"I hope you won't think you've got to tell your sister."

She shook her head. "No, of course I won't tell Cressie or Steve. I won't tell *anybody* anything you've told me. I promise I won't. Oh, Sam, I could—"

She hesitated all of two seconds. Then, with the tears brimming in her eyes, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek, saying, "This is for Francis . . . and this is for Cressie and Steve . . . and this is for me."

But when she pulled back from the third kiss, Sam's arm clamped around her waist, his gaze holding hers fast.

"And this is for me," he said. "For listening." Then his head angled and dipped, and his lips caught hers in a kiss that spoke of things far more potent than gratitude.

She trembled as his mouth moved across hers, his lips shaping hers with a firm, persuasive pressure. Her hand resting on his forearm tightened its hold, fingers digging in as her senses filled with the sound of his breathing, the soapy scent of his skin, the warmth of his breath on her cheek. The first easy

touch of his tongue skimming the seam of her lips made the butterflies go wild inside her. But it also sent warning signals shooting through every nerve in her body.

She tried to pull back. "Sam . . ."

"Hush, now." He shifted forward on the fallen tree far enough to plant his feet on the ground. Then, tugging her off her perch, he drew her around in front of him, nestling her thighs between his. Their faces were level, and he reached up to thread his fingers through her hair, gathering a handful of the long waves. "No more talking," he said as he pulled her close, his lips grazing her temple, her cheek, the line of her jaw. "We've both been wanting this. You know that."

Yes, she knew it. But she also knew she'd been afraid of it, and the instant his mouth slid, open and seeking, onto hers, she knew why. In less than a heartbeat she was quivering with excitement, and her safe world, her passionless world, was in danger of being set to flames. Not even if she had pushed him away in that instant would she be able to settle for passionless again. Which was reason enough, since it was too late, anyway, simply to give in.

On a moan of yearning, her hands rode up his arms to cling to his shoulders, her lips parted to match the shape of his, and her body leaned into his with a lush, giving softness that made him suck in a sharp breath, then swear, then fold her into a kiss that quickly taught her she'd never really been kissed before.

Kisses as she'd known them were perfunctory things, a preliminary that led to something else. Sometimes they were pleasant, sometimes merely okay. But they were rarely genuinely exciting. And they were never anything at all like *this*.

His mouth took hers in deep, wet, voluptuous strokes that grew more so with each pounding heartbeat. The low, throaty sounds he made told her that he was as staggered and as aroused by the erotic intensity of the kiss as she was. He left no doubt about his arousal when his arm moved low around her hips and he pulled her tight against the front of his jeans. He was hard, rubbing against her, and so close to the aching place between her thighs he was made to fill. Their clothing kept them from

consummating the act, but his mouth said open up to me, give yourself to me, come with me. And she felt no other joining could have been more intimate than that hot, lusty mating of their lips and teeth and tongues.

Oh, but hadn't she known it would be this way? Yes, just as she'd known she wasn't ready for it. Yet now that she knew what she'd been missing, she didn't want to stop. Not yet.

He clearly wasn't thinking of stopping. With one arm still holding her to him, his other hand began to sweep over her thighs and hips, up over her waist and ribs, then down again. Each pass he made grew more thorough in its exploration, until finally his fingers slipped under the bottom edge of her over-size shirt to splay against her back. She arched into him, her breasts crushing softly against his bare chest. When he slanted his mouth to take even deeper possession of hers, she honestly wondered if she might faint—but she gave him what he wanted because it was what she wanted, too.

His hand roamed over her, fingers trailing down the curve of her spine to dip below the waistband of her jeans. But as his hand rode up again to her shoulders, unhindered, and he finally realized that the only fabric between them was her shirt, he went utterly still. An instant later, with a hoarse "Oh, Katie . . ." he slid his palm around to cover the side of her bare breast.

His action stole her breath away. She knew she should stop him, but her heart raced at the thought of him touching her breast, and she couldn't resist letting him push them a little closer to the limit. He did it in slow degrees, his fingers sinking into the pillowy softness of her, tracing the upper curve, dipping into the warmth and satiny smoothness beneath. Then, shifting his chest away from hers slightly, he took the full weight of her breast into his palm, cradling it, stroking it, groaning at the discovery that the firm mound spilled beyond the boundaries of his large, long-fingered hand.

Lifting his mouth so their lips barely touched, he muttered something that made a rush of liquid heat spill into that empty, aching channel inside her. She knew she had to stop before she couldn't anymore, before he couldn't anymore, before they wound up making love in the middle of the woods with the

earth beneath them. But as she tried to draw a gasping breath to speak, his mouth claimed hers again—at the same instant, his fingers captured the swollen tip of her breast.

Shards of electrifying pleasure raced through her, controlled with exquisite finesse by the tugging, rolling movement of his fingertips. Slicing downward from her taut nipple, the current of pleasure centered in the hot, wet, quivering place between her thighs, setting her hips into unconscious motion against the hard bulge of his erection. When he shifted his denim-clad thigh between hers and pressed upward, she tore her mouth away from his and let out a moan.

Her head fell back, her eyes drifting closed to block out the sky above her. His mouth trailed to the base of her throat, and for a moment she was lost, panting and shaking, in a cloud of sensual pleasure. But when the cloud began to split apart and she felt the first tiny tremors of fulfillment ripple through her, her eyes flew open in shocked awareness.

“Sam . . . stop.” Kate’s fingers fluttered against his jaw, sifted through his hair as she tried to lift his head. But he didn’t seem to have heard her hoarse utterance. His mouth slid downward, and she realized with alarm that his goal was her breast. She hadn’t even been aware that he’d raised her shirt to bare it.

“Oh, no . . . Wait.” Her hands moved frantically to nudge at his shoulders, and this time he got the message.

It was clear he didn’t like it. Pausing, his lips brushing the upper curve of her breast, his breath caught on a ragged note.

“Sam, please . . . don’t,” she breathed, knowing what she was asking of him—what she was asking of herself.

He hesitated an instant longer; then his arms went around her, crushing her to him, flattening her bare breasts to his bare chest, as his mouth came back to hers for a quick, hard kiss. With his lips still on hers, he spoke in a rasping whisper.

“Katie, honey, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she panted. “Nothing’s . . . wrong. It feels wonderful.”

“But . . . ?”

Her breath came out in a quick rush. “But I’m not ready

for this. It's . . . Sam, you're going too fast for me. Please."

A couple of seconds passed without either of them breathing. Then his eyelids lifted halfway, and at a distance of mere inches, he met her hazy brown gaze. When he realized she meant it, he let out a long, resigned sigh, and, catching her lower lip between his for a last sensual tug, he ended the kiss.

Still, when she drew her shirt down to separate their bare skin and started to pull away, he said, "No," and levered himself away from the tree trunk to stand. Keeping his arms around her, one hand rose to hold her head against his chest. "Stay here for a minute," he urged, his voice raw. "Just be still and let me hold you."

She wasn't ready to let go, either. With a small sigh, she rested her head against his scarred chest, listening to the racing of his heart as she tried to will her body to calm down.

Minutes passed. Gradually, his heartbeat slowed. Eventually, her body ceased to tremble. One by one, tiny distractions began to seep into Kate's awareness—the wind stirring the withered leaves of the fallen maple, the lyrical call of a thrush some distance off in the woods.

She squeezed her eyes shut even tighter, wishing the sounds would go away, wishing she could stay where she was forever. But wishing wouldn't make it so. In all likelihood, the amount of time she might have with Sam could be counted in days. She shouldn't let herself feel too good, or too cared for, as she stood wrapped in his embrace. Still, when she opened her eyes to face the real world, it was with a pang of regret that she didn't have the kind of nerve it took to live for the moment, for she was very sure she'd just passed up the best chance she might ever have to experience the pleasures of being a woman.

The words she spoke were a reflection of her ambivalence. "I'm sorry."

There was a split second's hesitation before his gruff reply.

"Sorry? What in God's name do you have to be sorry for?"

"I'm just not, well, used to . . . to . . ." She closed her eyes, unable to tolerate hearing herself stammer.

Sam finished for her, and to his credit, not a trace of amusement was evident in his tone. “You aren’t used to being kissed like that?”

She nodded, her head moving against his chest.

“Katie, are you a virgin?”

Her eyes blinked open. “What?”

“You heard me.”

Yes, she’d heard him, and before she could give him a mature, sane response, her stomach knotted and she went all-over cold at the sudden, painful memories his question evoked.

“Now, don’t go taking that the wrong way,” he said when she stiffened in his arms.

“How should I take it?” she asked on a brittle note.

“Plain and simple. A point of fact.” Locking her to him with one unyielding arm, his other hand lifted her face upward until she was forced to meet his gaze. “I wasn’t insulting the way you kiss. You know damned well what that kiss did to me, and if it makes you feel any better, I haven’t been that close to coming with my clothes on since I was, maybe, fourteen.”

Well, if she hadn’t been pink with embarrassment before, she surely was now. Trying to look away, she murmured, “I’m sorry. I’m not reacting very well.”

“Honey, if you were reacting any better, I’d be the one apologizing and feeling embarrassed as hell.” His hand smoothed down the length of her hair to rest at the small of her back. “Katie, it’s all right. I’d say we’re both pretty strung out. But I would like an answer to my question”—his arm tightened when she started to pull away—“because I think the chances of my kissing you again are about a hundred percent.”

She hesitated.

“And I think the chances are good,” he continued, “that, sooner or later, we’re going to finish what we just started. And I’ve got to tell you, my experience with virgins is pretty limited. Like zero. So I guess you’d better tell me what I’ve got to know, so I don’t get my signals crossed again.”

Her voice was barely audible. “You didn’t get any signals crossed.”

“You said I was going too fast for you.”

"I was going to fast for me, too." And because he'd been honest with *her*, she added, "You weren't the only one who . . . came close."

"I guessed that," he murmured, his lips buried in her hair. "But you acted like it was an awful big surprise. So, are you or aren't you?"

She shook her head, and her eyes closed briefly as she steeled herself to say, "No, Sam, I'm not a virgin. But it's been . . . a long time and . . . and it didn't end very well."

"How long is 'a long time'?"

"Six years."

A moment passed, then he growled, "He must have been a real sonofabitch if you still can't talk about him without shivering."

It wasn't so much that, she thought, as it was that, in six years, she'd *never* talked about Rick Sommers, not to anyone. Not because she wouldn't have liked to but because there was no one to tell who wouldn't have been horrified or deeply disappointed in her. And so, rather than disillusion any of those she loved, she'd allowed the feelings to become frozen inside her, along with the story of how they'd gotten there. For every day she'd had to live with the devastating consequences of her one disastrous attempt to find love and intimacy with a man, a new layer of pain had been added to the wall encasing her heart.

Yet the knowing look in Sam's eyes told her that he'd found the crack in *her* armor.

"I'm sorry he hurt you, Katie."

She lowered her gaze, and this time when she pulled away, he let her go. She didn't go far, though—only a couple of steps.

With her back to him, she managed to say, "He didn't hurt me so much as I let myself be hurt. But for pity's sake, it happened years ago, and if there's one thing I can't stand, it's people who cry over split milk. I think you're right. I'm just a little strung out."

When she turned to look at him, it was immediately obvious that he didn't believe her. She didn't blame him. Still, he let her get away with the act, even if it was woefully frayed around



the edges.

In careful tones, he asked, "So, is this bastard the reason you're nervous about starting something with me?"

*Yes, she thought. Because you know even less about commitment than he did. And because I'm afraid to trust a man who might leave me when I need him most—like you left me last night. Like you'll probably leave me to go back to flying planes like the one that . . . killed you.*

"Maybe," she replied. Then, gathering her wits a little, she added, "But, Sam, it's not just that. I meant it when I said it's happening too fast for me. I can't . . . have an affair with someone I just met a week ago. I know it seems like much longer, and so much has happened, but—"

"But it has only been a week."

"Not even a whole one. And I know you're probably used to things happening fast that way, but I'm not. My friends in college all thought I was just about the most unliberated, prudish female—"

"Prudish!"

"—ever to come down out of the woods, but I can't help it. That's the way I was raised, and we aren't in a city where nobody gives a hoot what you do with your life. I've already had three neighbors ask me who that man was who carried me into my house, then stayed until ten o'clock Tuesday night, and if I—"

"If you sleep with me, everybody's going to know it."

"Yes, and I'd better be darned sure I'm ready to take what the grapevine dishes out. Because after you're gone, *I'll* have to live with it, and—"

"And that's the problem, isn't it?"

His question stopped her.

"You're scared of getting into something with me, then having me take off next week."

"Well, Sam," she began in sensible tones, "I understand that you—"

"I told you, I can't make you any promises, Katie. And by now, you ought to see why."

"I do. I'm not asking you to. It's just that . . ." She trailed

off, half turning away and wrapping an arm around her waist as a stab of anticipated pain shot through her.

"It's just that you need a little more reassurance than I've given you," he finished.

Pressing her lips together, she nodded. "Something like that. I guess."

Sam let out a sigh. "I started to tell you the other day, since the crash, I haven't been involved with anyone. And I didn't come up here looking for a woman. I *ought* to tell you to get the hell out of here, because getting involved with me can't do you a bit of good, but . . . dammit, Katie—"

When he didn't continue, she turned her head to see him struggling for control. Their gazes met, and a moment later, he whispered hoarsely, "I don't want you to go."

The admission cost him as much, or more, she thought, than anything else he'd said that morning.

She searched his features, torn between the need to protect herself and the almost overwhelming desire to give him what he wanted—what he needed—which, she was beginning to believe, was more than he'd ever allowed any woman to give him. His next words only strengthened the belief.

Dropping his gaze from hers, he muttered, "I'm not good at this—talking about relationships. I'm used to things being casual and loose-ended. No pressure, no strings. But that's not going to work for you . . . and, to tell you the truth"—he passed a hand over his face, then back through his hair—"I'm not sure it'll work for me anymore, either."

With a soft, disparaging noise, he admitted, "Dying has a way of making you think about what's important, or if all you've been doing wasting time."

Cautiously, Kate asked, "Is that what you think you were doing before you . . . died? Wasting time?"

He waited a long time before he answered. "In some ways, yes. In others . . ." He trailed off with a one-shouldered shrug.

Then, with a frustrated sound, he began pacing as he said, "I do know one thing, though. Friends are in damned short supply these days. Most of the people I know were totally freaked out that their old buddy Sam, of all unlikely people,

woke up one day and discovered he could cure the sick and dying. Even Sid doesn't know what to say to me anymore. And I'll be damned if I'm going to find a woman who can watch me do what I did last night *without* getting freaked out, then make her run away because she's afraid that all I want is to get laid."

He came to a halt five feet away and met her gaze as he finished, "It's not true, Katie. That's not how I think of you. And it sure as hell isn't all I want from you."

It was as close as he could come to a promise, and it wasn't enough. Yet it was more than she'd expected to get. He was asking for her friendship, and that, she couldn't refuse him.

Holding his gaze, she spoke clearly. "Sam, if I haven't run away from you yet, I don't guess I'm going to."

A moment of silence passed between them, and finally she had to look away. She stared, unseeing, at the forest floor, listening to him walk slowly toward her. He stopped in front of her and slid his hands under the curtain of hair that had fallen to hide her features, bracketing her face to lift it until she looked at him.

"Katie Morgan, you're a pretty amazing woman," he said.

She returned his look steadily. "Funny, I've been thinking you're a pretty amazing man."

A corner of Sam's mouth quirked upward. "So, does that mean you're willing to take a chance on hanging out with me some more, even if it means we end up like we did last night?"

"You're the one taking chances." A tiny smile formed on her lips. "Hanging out with me means you'll be exposed to more sick people than if you stayed put here, in the woods, like you planned to do in the first place."

"Yeah." He grimaced. "It's a real pain in the ass that you're a nurse. But, hell, Katie, we've all got our faults. You keep kissing me like you did a while ago, and I think I can forget about you being a nurse—or just about anything else."

She felt herself blushing, but she enjoyed the sound of his deep, earthy chuckle.

"Besides," he went on, casting his gaze around the dense forest, "I've had about all I can take of these damned trees. It

felt good being alone this week, but enough is enough.”

She grinned. “Getting a little stir-crazy, huh?”

“A little. . . . Well, make that a lot. I’ve never been good at sitting still. And I’ve done enough of it this past year for another two or three lifetimes.”

“There aren’t too many accidents on the streets of Bourner’s Crossing. I don’t think a trip into town now and then would be too risky. And you could always . . .” Kate trailed off, her breath catching at a sudden thought. A second later, her expression brightened. “I’m going to Cressie and Steve’s next Sunday, for dinner. Dad and Kyle and his wife and kids will be there, and Steve’s going to fly Josh up from Kalamazoo for the weekend. I know you’d be welcome to come, and goodness knows, you’d have plenty of people to talk to.”

It had seemed like a good idea, but when she saw a frown appear on Sam’s brow, she started to brush aside the suggestion. “Of course, it’ll probably be chaotic. And I can’t promise they wouldn’t ask you a bunch of questions you might not want to—”

“I’d like to go with you.”

She hesitated. “Are you sure?”

“If you think it’s okay to invite a stranger for a family dinner.”

“You’re not a stranger to me.”

The light in his eyes grew warm. He let his gaze fall to her lips, brushing them with the pad of his thumb as he asked, “What time should I pick you up?”

“About one. Dinner isn’t until four, but I want to get there early to help Cressie get ready.”

“Sounds fine.”

“Sam, I hate to say it, but I really ought to get back to town. I’m on call all weekend, and all I have with me is my pager. I can’t hear the CB in my truck from here.”

He made a vaguely affirmative noise, but instead of letting go of her, his hands tunneled under her hair to hold the back of her neck. His gaze remained fixed on her mouth, and she knew very well what he was thinking about doing. She also knew she couldn’t handle another kiss like the last one—definitely

not.

“Sam, I really have to—”

“Not yet.”

“But—”

“One more, Katie.” His head lowered, his lips parting over hers on a whisper. “Just a kiss. I promise.”

He kept his word and didn’t attempt to push her further—although the actual number of kisses was closer to three or four, not counting the one he gave her through the open window of her pickup once she was safely inside. By the time Kate was on her way to town, her hands were trembling, her knees were rubbery, and certain parts of her were throbbing with pure sexual excitement. She felt as if she were floating along in a sensual fog, and she wanted to relish the feeling.

But she couldn’t. Not when her heart was at such risk. She was very close to being in love with Sam—a realization that came as no great surprise but terrified her all the same. In the first place, it was shocking enough that she even knew somebody with the kind of healing powers he possessed; the idea of being in love with him was . . . well, it was sobering.

Even more sobering—indeed, downright panic-inducing—was the notion that she might be in love with a man who, by his own admission, had never had a relationship with a woman last more than a year. She wondered if he even knew the meaning of the word love, much less what it meant to be *in* love with someone. He wanted her, but he talked about it in terms of going to bed together, not of making love. And if he couldn’t say it, then she couldn’t do it.

With every tender instinct in her, she wanted to give him the warmth, the shelter, the love she suspected he’d never had and that she knew he needed. She knew in her heart, though, that he had the power to hurt her in ways Rick Sommers never had. If Sam wanted her, he’d have to prove he had the emotional honesty—and the staying power—that Rick had lacked.

She was asking a lot of a man whose entire life had been turned so recently upside down.

Then again, maybe she wasn’t. Sam was a strong man, one who possessed a powerful and very special gift. And his

awesome ability to heal other human beings had tapped into a well of emotion inside him, the depths of which left her breathless. The feelings frightened him, embarrassed him. Still, if he could accept that compassion and tenderness were part of his essential humanity, not weaknesses to fight against, she thought he might discover something else that, thus far, life hadn't taught him: that being able to understand and feel for others left a person's heart open to the possibility of love. And when Sam found out just how deeply and fiercely he could love . . .

She wanted to be there.

He hadn't wanted to let her go.

Sam stood watching as Katie's truck disappeared down the track, wishing he could have kept her a little longer. Like maybe all day. Or all week. Or forever.

He felt alive. Good. Happier than he'd been in a long, long time. His body ached in all the right places, and he didn't even mind that it might go on aching. The thick, heavy throbbing in his loins was real, something familiar and normal that he understood. In fact, it was damned reassuring. His only qualm about it was that he was hot for a woman his conscience said he ought to leave alone.

She'd been hurt bad. It had made him ache to see the pain in her eyes—the kind of pain he couldn't touch and make better. She did a good job of hiding it, but under her sweet, cheerful surface, she was about as defenseless as a woman could get. And if he hurt her again, he thought, he'd be no better than the sonofabitch whose face he'd had ideas of rearranging a little while ago.

He *could* hurt her, too. It stunned him to realize how easy it would be. He'd known from the start that Katie was the kind of woman who needed security, the kind who expected marriage. And the idea of spending the next eighty years or so with her struck a faint but strangely resonant note somewhere deep inside him.

The note was drowned out, though, by what he saw as the realities of his life. How the hell could he think about the next eighty years when he couldn't even plan for tomorrow? Katie

needed a man who was ready to settle down and have a home and kids and the whole nine yards, and it was stupid for him even to consider whether or not he might want those same things. It was stupid to be thinking about leading a normal existence, when nothing about him anymore—except the hard bulge in his jeans—reminded him that he was a normal man who had a right to expect a normal life.

Hell, forget the chaos he knew would ensue if anyone found out there was a healer living in Fournier's cabin. He didn't even know how he was going to earn a living. And he wasn't about to tell Katie why he couldn't go back to Chris Rutger—or anybody else—and tell them he wanted to fly their planes.

She'd handled it real well this morning when she'd found him turning green over the fish, hadn't uttered a word to make him feel any worse than he already had. But how would she react if she knew he'd been throw-up-and-pass-out scared last night just looking at that chopper? He didn't want to know. The fish had been humiliating enough.

No, there were too many problems he had to work out for him to go making promises to Katie or any other woman. Which led him to wonder why he was standing there wishing she hadn't gone, when he ought to be packing and leaving himself, before things between them went any further.

But then, the answer was pretty simple: She hadn't treated him like a freak. She'd listened to his story. God knows, she'd seen him at his worst. Then she'd turned around and given him the sweetest, hottest, most honest passion he'd ever had in his life. She'd made him feel starved for something he couldn't even name. And when she was still shaking from it—and from hearing him say he couldn't make her any promises—she'd looked at him with those big, brown, serious eyes and said, if she hadn't run away from him yet, she didn't guess she was going to.

No, he wasn't going anywhere—except to Katie's sister's for dinner next Sunday. After that . . . well, he didn't know. But for the first time ever, he began to see that there might be rewards in sitting still he'd never considered.

Up until a year ago, he'd been hurtling through life at multiples of the speed of sound, his only goal being to punch bigger and better holes in the sky. Yet all he had to show for it was a bank account he rarely touched, the things he could pack into his Jeep, and a bunch of scars. In the long run, the only place it had gotten him was dead.

So this was supposed to be his second chance. He'd gotten the message loud and clear that a big part of it was going to be spent doing things for other people. Last night, he'd also gotten the message that he wasn't going to be punching any more holes in the sky. He didn't know how he was going to face that; the thought of not being able to fly was . . . God, he couldn't think about it without wanting to howl.

But if he *had* to sit still, maybe he could have something else that would help fill the empty place inside him that flying had always taken care of. Because sitting still, taking things slow and easy, might get him Katie. And it occurred to him that having her—even if it was just for a little while—might be worth as much . . . and maybe more . . . than anything he'd ever had before.



## Ten

Kate began the week thinking she'd see Sam again before Sunday, but as the days passed, hope dwindled. A broken arm, a sawmill accident, the arrival of the overdue medical supplies, a day spent in Matchwood talking to Alison Lenox's science classes about prenatal development, and two ten-hour days of office appointments prevented her from sneaking in even a short visit to the cabin. Everywhere she went, though, gossip about Sam's trips into town aroused her curiosity and made it harder to wait to see him.

Bert Andrews at the post office said Sam had come in on Monday to mail a letter to Detroit. Floyd Gibson, Scott's father, reported that Sam had brought his Jeep into the shop for work, and Ed Davenport said he'd been to the store on Tuesday for groceries and again on Wednesday for bait.

Bait? As in *fish*? Was Ed sure of that? Absolutely.

On her way to baby-sit for Cressie and Steve on Thursday evening, Kate tried not to worry about Sam forcing himself to catch fish that made him sick, only to prove he still could. Yet it seemed he'd not only caught fish but had taken them to Cressie's the previous evening.

Kate wondered if there was a problem at the cabin that had brought him out. No, Cressie said, it had been a social call. The instant Sam walked in the door, Francis had corralled him into building block towers and playing airplanes. That Sam seemed happy to oblige a two-year old had impressed Cressie no end.

Sam had impressed the daylights out of Steve, too. The man knew his planes, Steve said. They'd talked aviation history from World War One to the present, until Cressie had

begged them to stop. Had they flown Steve's plane together? Kate asked. No, it had been too dark. Come to think of it, Steve said, he hadn't heard Sam say whether he actually had a pilot's license. Kate bit her tongue, wondering how much Sam wanted people to know.

In any event, Steve planned to see to it that Sam got up with him in the Mentor on Sunday. He and Cressie both were glad Kate had invited Sam to join their family gathering—a “meet the new baby” party that had expanded to include a surprise celebration of Francis's recovery. Kate was glad, too, that she'd invited Sam, since he was responsible for half of her family's good fortune.

By Friday afternoon she was sure she wouldn't make it until Sunday without seeing him. Then her last office visit of the day—an hour spent with Lynn Nielsen—ruined her half-formed plans to take dinner out to the cabin that evening.

“Lynn, why didn't you call me yesterday, or have Erik come get me?” Kate handed Lynn a Kleenex and waited for her to blow her nose.

The pregnant young woman had come in without an appointment and had been a bundle of anxiety as she told Kate she'd wakened the previous morning bleeding. Terrified that something was wrong with her baby, Lynn started crying the instant Kate had located the baby's healthy heartbeat with her electronic fetoscope that put intrauterine sounds on speaker. With the exam over and her tears winding down, Lynn was feeling reassured.

Kate, however, was not.

“I know I should have come in or called.” Lynn wiped her nose and wadded the tissue in her fist. “But the radio's broken, and Erik didn't finish installing the stove in the lodge kitchen until ten last night. Then he fell asleep on the couch. Besides, it wasn't much bleeding, and it stopped after a couple of hours. And I figured if”—the tears welled up again in her blue eyes—“if something was wrong with the baby, it was . . . too late. So, I . . .”

“So you worried all night and waited until Erik got home with the truck this afternoon to bring yourself in.”

Lynn nodded. "Nothing *is* wrong with the baby, is it?"

"Not that I can tell," Kate replied, opening the Rolodex on a corner of the desk. "But you're going to need a sonogram. And if I can get Dr. Logan at the hospital, I'd like to send you down there now."

"Tonight?"

"Hm-mm." Kate picked up the phone and punched in the number. "You go home and get Erik to drive you, though. And it might be a good idea to take an overnight bag, in case Dr. Logan wants to keep you."

Lynn's mouth dropped open. "Keep me? You mean, at the *hospital*?"

Tucking the phone under her chin, listening as it rang in Adrian Logan's office, Kate looked at the distraught young woman sitting in the chair alongside her desk. If Lynn went into labor at thirty-three weeks, her baby might survive—if the infant received immediate neonatal care. And *if* the conditions that might have caused the bleeding didn't become acute when Lynn was an hour away from the hospital.

When Adrian Logan's answering service picked up, Kate left a message. Then, turning to Lynn and seeing her young patient's anxious look, she reached across the desk and took her hand.

"Lynn, bleeding this late in a pregnancy isn't good. Maybe it'll turn out to be something minor. Maybe you can stay with your parents in Ironwood." She raised an eyebrow in warning. "But if Adrian Logan thinks you should be in the hospital, you're going to have to listen to him."

Lynn frowned. "So you really think this could be serious?"

"Yes, it really could be." Kate explained the basics of several conditions that might have caused the bleeding.

Lynn thought a moment. Then her lips thinned in a determined look. "All right. I appreciate your calling Dr. Logan for me, but I can't go down there until Tuesday."

Kate shook her head. "You shouldn't wait that long."

Hesitating, Lynn chewed on her bottom lip, but an instant later, she insisted, "I can't do it sooner. I have to talk to Erik. If I'm going to have to be in the hospital, it'll mean . . . well,

there are things we'll have to work out."

Kate spent the next fifteen minutes trying to change the young woman's mind, but she finally had to give up. She was arguing with a brick wall. "At least promise me that you'll go home and go straight to bed," she said. "And *stay* there. I don't want you to get up except to use the bathroom."

"I promise," said Lynn promptly. "And if the bleeding starts again, I'll . . . I'll send Erik in if the radio's still not working or . . . well, I'll do *something*."

Kate wasn't satisfied with the arrangement, but later, when she talked to Doc about her day's appointments, he assured her that he'd check on Lynn over the weekend. That helped a little.

It was nine o'clock when Kate got home, and she was too exhausted to do more than eat a bowl of cottage cheese and go to bed. When the phone rang at 3:00 a.m., she groaned but woke up quickly as a frantic David Graff told her that Laura was in labor and didn't think she'd make it to the hospital. Laura was right. Kate got to the Graff's twenty minutes before Isaac was born. His father was proud. Laura was elated, if a little staggered at how quickly the whole thing had happened.

Kate left their house smiling, at 6:00 a.m.—and went home to cry herself to sleep.

Would it ever end? Would she ever have any peace from the conflicting emotions that plagued her every time she delivered another woman's baby? She was thrilled for Laura and David; it always made her a little euphoric to participate in what she thought of as the core experience of life. But it also hurt. She'd thought it would get better, that being a midwife would help to satisfy her unfulfilled needs, but with every baby she delivered, it was only getting worse.

Kate spent all day Saturday cooking for Sunday dinner. It solved the problem of what Sam would do when faced with Cressie's baked ham. It was also good therapy. Seeing Sam might have been better therapy, but she was in rotten shape, and she didn't want their next meeting to occur when either one of them was an emotional wreck. She wanted them both

to be at their best—and for the day to be normal.

Actually, she wanted everything to be perfect, and when Sunday finally came, it gave every sign of living up to her wishes.

Standing at her front door on Sunday afternoon, Sam looked lean and tall and sinfully sexy, dressed in khaki slacks and a dark brown shirt, with his sun-streaked hair swept back in careless disarray. Kate was certain her expression conveyed her thoughts when his mouth sloped into that assured, wicked grin. His eyes traveled downward, taking in the mass of waves falling around her shoulders, the skin exposed by the deep lace collar of her white blouse, and the curve of her hips beneath the soft, clinging folds of her flowered skirt. When his gaze rose to caress her features, his grin had softened to a warm smile. His eyes spoke of shared intimacies.

“I missed seeing you this week,” he said.

“I missed seeing you, too,” she returned.

“You look pretty. All soft and sexy.”

She blushed, as she was sure he wanted her to, and murmured a nervous thank you.

His smile took on a hint of teasing. “I hear you’ve been busy.”

“I hear the same about you.”

“So, let’s swap local gossip while we ride. Otherwise, I’m going to kiss you. Then it’ll be a while before we leave, and I want to get you out of here before the phone rings or that radio crackles and we end up losing the day.”

Kate’s dimples appeared as her lips curved upward. “That won’t happen. Doc’s on call until tomorrow.”

“Don’t give me that stuff,” Sam replied. “After what I’ve heard this week, I think you’ve got a bigger problem than I do with knowing your own limits.”

She didn’t like to admit it, but given her emotional state the day before, she was afraid he might be right.

It was a gorgeous day, full of warm sunshine and yellow daffodils and the clean smell of spring. With the Jeep’s top off, Kate relished the breeze whipping against her skin as they rode. And when they passed the old McCarron place—an aban-

doned farmhouse she had always loved—she got a rush of spring fever seeing the pink dogwoods blooming among the weeds on the front lawn.

“So how did you make out with Aaron Spencer and his broken arm?” Sam asked. “I hear he fell out of a barn loft.”

“He’s lucky he didn’t break his neck,” she muttered. “I think his mother is hoping the cast will slow him down, but I doubt it. He was quite a handful at the hospital.”

“You went with him?”

“Yes. And don’t look at me like that. Doc already yelled at me for it, but Nancy’s two months pregnant and throwing up all the time, so I drove them down. But how did you hear about Aaron?”

“From Mark White, who heard it from Aaron’s dad. I guess you know they work together at the sawmill. I was in Davenport’s when Mark came in with his hand all bandaged up. He said he lost a little skin off his middle finger on a saw blade.”

“‘A little skin,’ huh?” Kate gave a short laugh. “He lost the end of his finger, down to the first knuckle.” When Sam shot her a startled look, she added, “It could have been a lot worse. It’s always amazed me that we have as few serious accidents as we do at the mill.”

The lines on Sam’s forehead came together in a familiar scowl. “Like the one at Sadler’s logging camp last fall?”

“My, my, you did get an earful at Davenport’s, didn’t you?”

“Mr. D. said a tree fell on some guy, but that he died because the medevac chopper was delayed.”

“That’s not really true. The helicopter made record time—forty minutes—but it wasn’t fast enough.”

Sam was silent for a moment, then growled, “This town ought to have its own chopper.”

Kate laughed at the impossible notion. “Wouldn’t that be nice? But the whole county put together couldn’t afford it.” She understood now why he was so concerned with the health of the people around him, but she knew from personal experience that obsessing over all the things that might go wrong did no good.

When his scowl deepened, she said, "I hear you were at Cressie and Steve's on Wednesday."

"What? Oh . . . yeah." His reply was reluctant, but he let her divert him; and, gradually, his expression cleared. "I met Steve at Gibson's Garage, and he invited me out."

"He said the two of you talked planes."

Sam lifted one shoulder in a negligent shrug.

"I think he really enjoyed talking to somebody who appreciates flying," she added. "All he gets from Cressie about it is fretting."

"Yeah," Sam chuckled, "I noticed. But after this week she'll have to find something else to fret about. Some guy in Pittsburgh is buying the Mentor, and Steve's flying it down to him on Tuesday."

"That's a shame. He's worked so hard on it." Kate sighed, then asked, "Why didn't you tell him that you're a pilot?"

Sam's gaze flashed to hers. "Did you?"

"No. I figured if you'd wanted him to know, you'd have told him." When he looked away, she continued, "Do you *not* want people to know?"

"It doesn't matter."

His reply was almost curt, and it was clear that it did matter. She gave him a puzzled look. His gaze was focused on the road ahead, his features set in a stony expression she recognized all too well.

"Listen"—he slowed to make the turn into Steve and Cressie's driveway—"Cressie said they were taking Francis to see the audiologist on Thursday. Do you know how they made out?"

Kate knew he was deliberately changing the subject, but this was not the time to press him.

"I hear it was, shall we say, an *interesting* visit," she replied, smiling. "The doctor spent three hours trying to prove that Francis' nerve damage hasn't completely repaired itself, but he finally had to admit that it has."

One corner of Sam's mouth quirked upward. "Must have been frustrating as hell. Did he give them an excuse?"

"No. He said he's never seen anything like it and has no

idea why it happened. And they don't care." She tilted her head, studying him as they pulled to a halt in the side yard. "That pleases you, doesn't it, them not knowing?"

"It pleases me that they don't care. They're not looking for explanations. They're willing just to accept . . ."

"The gift?" she finished for him.

Sam frowned, one hand resting on the steering wheel, the other on the stick shift. "I wish I thought it could always be that easy."

Then, giving his head a quick shake, he said, "But I don't want to talk about anything weird today. I just want to enjoy the sunshine"—his gaze skimmed over her—"and looking at you."

Without giving her time to respond, he hopped out and started around the front of the Jeep, headed for her side. She watched him, thinking she was going to enjoy looking at him, too. But she also thought about what he'd said—that he wished it could always be that easy.

Was it unreasonable for him to want to remain anonymous to those he healed? Given what his life had been like recently, it seemed not only reasonable but essential. Sam was right in thinking he needed time to get used to being a bona fide healer, time away from the demands people were bound to make of him, however understandable those demands might be.

How long, though, would he be able to keep his awesome gift a secret? Not forever, that was certain. Yet, while he was learning his limits and growing accustomed to his new powers, what would the burden of keeping the secret be like for those he'd entrusted with it? Those, for instance, like her. She'd be more than willing to protect him from discovery in whatever way she could. But would he let her? Or would he look at any protection she might offer him as a slur against his manhood?

She had a suspicion she knew the answer.

Protective thoughts were running through Sam's mind several hours later as he sat next to Katie at the dinner table in Steve and Cressie's big farmhouse dining room.

The Morgans were good people. They laughed a lot and



teased each other with affection, and they'd made him feel welcome without a lot of fuss. He'd gotten considerable pleasure out of seeing their happiness over Francis and was glad Steve and Cressie had saved the announcement for today, so he could share the excitement. Yes, generally speaking, he liked the Morgans just fine.

Except for one thing: He was having a hard time keeping his mouth shut about the way they treated Katie.

Oh, they cared about her. In fact, they practically worshipped her. And that was the problem. It was a toss up, who competed hardest for her attention—Cressie, Kyle, Josh, Kyle's two kids, or Francis. Sam had a feeling that if Katie's other siblings and their children had been there, they'd all have wanted their nickel's worth, too. On subjects ranging from the advantages of buying a bigger house to the best way to can tomatoes, Katie was the last word.

Watching her, he had to give her credit for the way she handled them. She never criticized, she praised every success to the hilt, and she never outright told them what she thought they should do. Mostly, she just listened, which made them feel important. And that was fine, except that while they were feeling satisfied with themselves, none of them stopped to think about what Katie was getting out of the deal—which didn't look like a hell of a lot, since nobody thought to ask her how *she* was or what *she'd* been up to lately.

Katie's dad wasn't any help, either. John Morgan was an amiable sort of guy, in his late fifties, Sam guessed, robust and healthy-looking despite the sliver hair and the weathered lines in his face. He didn't say much, but he showed Katie a certain deference, a quiet, adult respect that didn't extend to his other children. She was his daughter, yet he treated her like a peer. Which only made matters worse.

The in-laws were better. Steve and Kyle's wife, Judy, acted like they were used to the routine and had learned to tolerate it. They didn't solve the problem, but at least they didn't contribute to it.

In all fairness, Sam realized nobody was being deliberately inconsiderate. They just didn't think. Katie was the predict-

able influence in their lives, the one who came through for them every time, the one they turned to for approval and all that good stuff. And she was incapable of refusing them.

Well, hell, he knew what that was like, didn't he? Yes, and he wanted to say, "All right, gang, that's enough. You've had your piece of her. Now, I'm going to take her home and . . ." And what?

Keep her safe. Somehow protect her from her own inability to say no, and from poor, needy bastards who couldn't solve their own problems and wanted her to hold their hands.

He had never in his life asked anybody to solve his problems for him. His father had expected him to handle things on his own, and there hadn't been anybody else to ask. Maybe, a long time ago, when he was very young, he'd wished he had somebody to give him what Katie had given her siblings. He hadn't had a mother when he needed her, and that was too bad. But it was too late; he didn't need one anymore. And he didn't know what to make of a tableful of adults acting like they wouldn't know what to do if Katie wasn't there to tell them. Especially since it wasn't true—they were all doing fine, as far as he could see.

It made him want to laugh when he looked across the table at Kyle, Katie's oldest brother, and caught the territorial challenge in the younger man's eyes—a look that had appeared when she introduced them. Sam understood what was going on. Kyle's suspicious gaze flickered to Katie, then back to him, and the message in Kyle's eyes couldn't have been plainer: *"You better watch yourself, dude, if you're thinking about messing with my sister."*

Sam kept his expression impassive. Okay, so maybe he did want to mess with Kyle Morgan's sister. In the past few hours, though, his guilt that he wasn't doing Katie any good and should stay away from her had undergone a surprising transformation. At least, he thought, he wasn't asking her to solve his problem. And he sure as hell expected to give her back something for what he was asking her to give him. In fact, her pleasure was getting to be more important to him than his own.

Holding Kyle's dark gaze, his face giving away nothing,

Sam blinked lazily. At the same time, under the table, he reached to find Katie's hand, lying in her lap. She was talking to Judy, sitting to her left, and he heard her breath catch when he touched her. She didn't pull away, though. And, without missing a beat of her conversation, she gave him a quick smile and turned her hand over so he could entwine his fingers with hers.

A corner of his mouth twitched as he let his gaze slide away from Kyle's. *Watch it yourself, buddy*, he thought. *You might think the lady belongs exclusively to all of you, but I think she's got other ideas.*

When it came time to do the dishes, Sam wasn't surprised that Katie got up and quietly began clearing the table—and that no one followed suit. He looked across her empty chair and saw Judy biting her lower lip, her eyes darting over the long table, laden with twelve people's dirty dishes. Cressie was telling her something about a bell choir concert in Wakefield, but she interrupted Cressie to speak.

"Kate, I'll be there in a minute to help."

"Oh, I'm just going to pick up a little," Katie replied as she started toward the kitchen with a stack of plates. "Sit still."

"Don't bother with the dishes," Cressie called after her. "I'll do them tonight after everybody's gone."

Right, Sam thought. He could just picture Katie leaving her sister with this mess. But if they all sat here long enough, she'd have the dishes done and put away.

Enough was enough. He had never offered to wash dishes in front of other men in his life, and he didn't offer then. He simply got up, picked up his plate and one of the serving dishes, and followed Katie to the kitchen.

He found her clipping her hair out of the way; she already had a ruffled apron tied around her waist. When she saw him enter the big kitchen, her expression was startled.

"Oh, Sam, you don't have to help!"

"Yes, I do," he said, setting the dishes on the counter. "Because I couldn't wait anymore to do . . . this." He bent to cover her parted lips with his, kissing her just long enough to let her know she was being kissed—but not so long that he'd have to wait for the effects to wear off before he could walk back into

the dining room. When he straightened to look down at her, her brown eyes were soft with surprise and arousal.

"You wash. I'll clear," he said. Then, before he gave in to the urge to kiss her again, he headed to the dining room.

As he gathered up serving dishes sitting on one corner of the table, Steve asked him if he wanted to watch the Tigers' game. No, he replied, he didn't think so. It gratified him to see Judy get up and make motions toward helping. An instant later, Cressie followed Judy's lead. By the time he'd made two more passes back and forth to the kitchen, the only ones not helping were Mr. Morgan, who'd been sent to the living room to sit with the sleeping baby and keep tabs on the ballgame, and Kyle, who'd gone outside with the other children to keep them entertained.

Judy and Cressie scraped plates and put away leftovers. Josh, at eighteen the adolescent of the crew, perched on the counter with a dish towel to dry glasses and stick them in the cupboard behind him. Before someone could usurp him, Sam parked himself next to Katie to dry the plates she put in the drainer, stacking them on the table behind him for Steve to put away. It got to be as noisy a scene as the dinner table had been, and Sam was feeling relaxed and pleased with himself for having engineered it. Until Steve ruined it.

"What do you say, Sam? How about taking the Mentor up with me for a little exercise?"

Sam's fingers, gripping a flowered dinner plate, tightened. In two seconds flat, his heart was pounding, and he felt the cold dampness of fear chilling his skin.

"You can help me run through the checklists," Steve continued. "By the time this KP duty is finished, we'll be ready to take off."

"Do you know about planes, too, Sam?"

Sam shot a quick glance at Josh, then, with a lift of one shoulder, muttered an affirmative response.

"Hey, come on." Steve gave him a companionable slap on the back. "In case you haven't noticed, this family doesn't stand on modesty. Except Kate. We have to twist her arm to get her to take credit for anything." Then, speaking to Josh,

who was suddenly all ears, he said, “You’re always asking me about planes. Well, this man can tell you about every aircraft the Air Force and Navy have used since the beginning of World War One. And you should hear him talk about jets.”

“Supersonics?” Josh wanted to know.

“Yeah, *and* drawing-board ideas for planes most of us don’t think could even exist.”

“Awesome.”

Sam went on doggedly wiping the same plate he’d been drying for the past two minutes, thinking he should have kept his mouth shut on Wednesday. But it had been too long since he’d talked shop with another flying addict, and he hadn’t been able to resist talking to Steve. He knew Katie was casting him sideways looks; he could feel her concern, the same way he felt everyone else’s eyes on him. Panic was a tight knot in his gut, but he reminded himself that, as long as he was standing there, drying dishes, he was safe. Nobody was going to drag him into the yard and throw him into the damned plane.

“You know, Sam”—Judy nudged him aside and reached around Katie for a garbage bag from under the sink—“I don’t think I remember hearing you say what you do for a living.”

For a moment, during which his eyes bored holes in the plate he was drying, he considered lying. Finally, though, he admitted, “I work for a company called Rutger.”

“Rutger . . . Hey!” Josh waved a hand holding a glass in an excited gesture. “Aren’t they the ones making that wild-looking flying wing I saw a picture of in the paper two weeks ago? There was a big article.”

“The Pegasus,” Steve supplied. “Howard Industries gave Chris Rutger a contract to build it years ago, and the aviation mags have been speculating about it ever since.”

“It looks like a monster sea gull,” Josh continued. “The article said it’s supposed to be *real* fast, too. Sam, have you seen it? In person, I mean.”

Sam twisted to set the over-dry plate on the stack behind him, then picked up another. “Yeah, I’ve seen it.”

“Jeez, you haven’t *flown* it, have you?”

“Joshua,” Katie broke in, “I think you should—”

“It’s all right.” Sam met her worried brown gaze. No matter what, he wasn’t going to let her cover for him. That would put him in the same league with her brothers and sisters—the last place he wanted to be.

Letting his gaze slide from hers, he told Josh, “Yeah, I’ve flown it.”

“Really?” The kid’s voice was full of enthusiasm. “You’re a pilot? A *test* pilot?”

Sam gave him a single nod.

Behind him, Steve uttered a short laugh. “No wonder I got the feeling you could take the Mentor apart and put it back together in your sleep.”

“What’s the Pegasus like?” Josh asked.

Sam added another dry plate to the stack as he replied. “Like every other plane Chris Rutger has built—like no other aircraft ever made.”

“The article said it’s an executive jet, but it sure doesn’t look like anything that . . . well, boring.” Josh’s face scrunched in a disgusted grimace.

Sam’s mouth twitched at the corners. “That’s what Howard Industries asked for—a big, fast executive jet—and that’s what they’re getting. But they’re also getting a radically different kind of aircraft. The Pegasus is lightweight and highly maneuverable, and it’ll give you more speed than you’ll ever need if you don’t care about the fuel costs. If you do, then what you’ve got is a plane that’ll go halfway around the world without refueling.”

“You make it sound like a dream.” Steve came to lean against the counter next to Josh, his kitchen duties forgotten. “But I hear they’ve had a lot of problems with it. In fact”—he frowned thoughtfully—“I remember reading an article about a crash. It happened around the same time I bought the Mentor—about a year ago—because I remember wondering what the devil kind of nerve it must take to fly a plane that everybody else in the industry says will never fly.”

Sam’s lips tightened into a bloodless line. “Oh, it flies.”

“When was the last time you flew it?”

“About a year ago.”

An instant of confused silence passed. Then Steve burst out, "Sam, you aren't the pilot who—" He broke off, his expression changing rapidly from disbelief to shock. "My God, you are, aren't you?"

Behind him, Sam heard Cressie's horrified "Ohmigod" and a chair scraping the floor as she plunked down with a whimper.

Tonelessly, he explained, "The nosewheel didn't lock on landing, but the computer didn't indicate there was a problem. So when I hit the runway, it collapsed. One wing tip caught the ground, and the plane cartwheeled. That was the original test plane. The front end's been modified since then."

"Holy hell," Steve whispered.

"But how come—" Judy began, then hesitated, her gaze flickering over him as she stood at the counter on Katie's far side. "You *must* have been hurt."

Sam shrugged. "It kept me down for a while." Then, because he couldn't tolerate doing nothing while they all stared at him, he reached for another plate. But there weren't any more. Katie had stopped washing and was gripping the edge of the counter as she stared out the window over the sink.

Josh wanted to know, "So, are you still with Rutgers?"

Sam uttered a harsh laugh. "Chris doesn't believe in taking anybody off the payroll unless they're dead and buried." *And I get a letter from him every other week asking me when I plan to get the hell back to work.* "Officially, I'm on disability leave."

"Jeez, but . . . you're okay, aren't you?"

The boy seemed younger at eighteen than Sam remembered ever being, and his stoic expression softened a little as he said, "Yeah, I'm okay."

They were all silent for a minute.

Finally, Steve shook his head. "Well, that's one hellova story, Sam. Flying a Pegasus . . . Lord! I'd give my eyeteeth—" He cut himself off, then murmured, "I guess I see why you don't want to bother with my T-34."

Steve was offering him an excuse. All he had to do was shrug and say something like, "*Yeah, well, you know how it*

is. . . .” But he couldn’t do it. He might be a coward, but, dammit, he hadn’t lost his integrity.

Glancing briefly at Josh, he asked, “Has Steve ever told you about his plane?”

“Well, not a lot,” the kid admitted, and Sam saw his gaze slide to where he knew Cressie was sitting, behind him. “We, uh, don’t talk about it much.”

“Then you’re missing a piece of history.” Flattening his hands on the counter to control their trembling, Sam spoke roughly. “The Beech Craft T-34 Mentor isn’t famous, and it isn’t rare. But it was put into service in the Air Force and Navy in the early fifties, and along with its successors—the T-34B and C—it’s been turning kids into pilots every since—including me. In fact, it’s got one of the longest service records of any plane in military aviation history, and I don’t know a pilot who won’t say the original model’s one of the best-handling aircraft he’s ever flown. Besides that, it’s fully acrobatic, which makes it just plain fun to fly.”

Josh was obviously impressed, yet his look was dubious. “But it isn’t like what *you’re* used to.”

“No, it sure isn’t,” Sam agreed. “Since I left the Navy, the planes I’ve flown don’t have any history, and they haven’t proven much of anything to anybody yet. They’re just expensive pieces of hardware with possibilities and good intentions.”

“All right, all right,” Steve said, chuckling. “You’ve made your point. So how about we take the old war bird up for a spin? I’d like to see you wring ’er out—see if all that ‘expensive hardware’ I’ve installed was worth it.”

This was it. With his vision blurring and his insides shaking, Sam didn’t know what to do. It seemed his only choice was to tell the truth. Which meant looking like a fool in front of Katie . . .

“Steve, please, do you have to do it *now*?”

Staring at the empty dish drainer, Sam was so caught up in his inner turmoil, he almost missed Cressie’s anxious question.

Steve’s tone was exasperated. “Cressie, I told you I had to—”

“But the kids will want you to put on a show for them.”



“Well, what’s wrong with that? The plane will be gone by Tuesday. This’ll be the last chance they get to see it.”

“But it makes me so nervous!”

Josh groaned. “Cressie, *everything* makes you nervous.”

“Oh, go stick your head in a bucket,” she retorted. “I know you all think I’m just a nagging fishwife, but I don’t care. Flying *scares* me, and that’s the way it is.”

“Aw, Cressie, for crying out loud—”

“It scares me, too.”

Katie’s quiet announcement brought the argument to a dead halt. Sam’s gaze flashed to her, but she was looking at the others. With her hands twisting together at her waist, she seemed as anxious as Cressie.

“Kate, you’ve never been afraid of flying,” Steve noted, clearly confused.

“I know,” she said. “But all this talk about crashing is enough to make anybody nervous. I’m not doubting your judgment, Steve, but if something went wrong and Dad and the kids were watching . . . well, I don’t think any of us want to stand there and see it happen. Besides, it’s getting late. So let’s stop this business and talk about something else. Can we?”

You bet they could. For Katie, they’d jump through any hoop. They might have ignored Cressie’s objections, but all Katie had to do was let them know, in the gentlest possible way, that she didn’t exactly approve, and that was the end of it. No one breathed a word about planes for the remainder of the day.

Yet Sam had to wonder. Did she know? He didn’t see how she could—unless she’d heard his heart pounding. But the possibility that she might have figured it out bothered him almost as much as the idea of flying itself. It would be like having her find out he was impotent or something. Flying hadn’t been only a way of making a living. It had been his life, his identity. Take it away, and . . . well, he didn’t know what was left, but he knew it wouldn’t be enough. Not enough for Katie.

She needed somebody she could rely on, somebody who’d take care of her. She needed a man. And he didn’t want her knowing he wasn’t exactly up to standards anymore.

## Eleven

“Sam, are you going back to Rutger when you leave here?”

Riding home in semidarkness, Kate glanced at the man beside her. He’d put the Jeep’s top on in deference to the chilly evening, and in the dim interior of their close quarters, she saw his mouth twist in a dry smile.

“Are you worrying again about me leaving next week?”

“That isn’t why I asked. I wondered if the idea of going back to California might make you look someplace else.”

He was silent a moment, then admitted, “It might. There are other companies that build planes. And there are foreign countries, too, looking for test pilots.”

She looked at him sharply, but the only hint she got of his mood was the grim defiance of his tone. “You’d consider that?”

“Why not?” he replied.

Why not, indeed.

Her fingers toyed with the scalloped edge of the crocheted shawl draped over her shoulders. “You know, with all the talk today about planes and your crashing that Pegasus thing . . . I was thinking that, with the time you spent in the hospital and the uproar since you found out about your . . . your special talents, I guess you haven’t had much chance to fly. Have you?”

“Katie, I’d just as soon not talk about it if it’s all the same to you.”

His quiet warning had an edge to it, and she figured the smart thing would be to back off.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I was just thinking how hard it would be if I had to stop work for a whole year. Lord, I think, by then, I’d be pretty desperate to get back to it.” She waited for him to

answer, and when he didn't, she sighed. "Then again, I guess a lot of people would love to be able to take a long vacation from their jobs. I suppose if you don't *have* to work, you might as well relax and enjoy the time off."

The barest trace of humor colored his tone as he asked, "Are you afraid I'm going to starve to death?"

That hadn't been her main concern, but . . .

"Sooner or later, I imagine, that would get to be a problem . . . wouldn't it?"

"Honey, I don't want to shock you, but they pay test pilots a pretty outrageous amount of money to take the risks they take, and I haven't spent much of it. It'll be a good while before I have to worry about starving."

There wasn't enough money in the world to make her think it was worth the sort of risks his job required, but she was glad to hear he didn't have financial problems to add to his troubles. Especially if her suspicion turned out to be true.

When they arrived at her house, Sam got out of the Jeep, opened her door, and walked with her up the front steps without another word being spoken between them. When they reached the door, though, Kate paused, staring at her hand wrapped around the metal handle of the screen door.

"Sam, last Friday night . . . why didn't you go with me to Marquette?"

She looked up at him and caught a brief glimpse of his shock at her question. He recovered quickly, but his tone was clearly defensive as he replied.

"What for? The guy was okay."

"True, but"—she hesitated, her gaze falling—"I didn't know that."

"I told you he would be."

"Yes, you did, but—"

"Katie, are we going inside—or do I have to kiss you out here, with Sarah Winfield sitting at her window, taking notes?"

Her gaze flew back to his, and when a corner of his mouth curved in that familiar, half-teasing, half-seductive smile, she grimaced. "You heard about Sarah?"

Sam nodded slowly. "I carried a box of groceries over

there for Mr. D. on Tuesday, and that nice old lady spent a good half hour filling me in on the men you've dated in the past three years. All one of them. So unless you're out to liven up her evening . . ." His gaze fell to her lips.

Kate groaned, pulling the screen door wide. "You'll give Sarah vertigo."

"What?"

"Never mind. Just come inside. Anyway, I baked a cherry pie for you to take home, and I want to give it to you."

The living room was bathed in a soft amber glow from the Victorian lamp on the table beside the front window, and Kate didn't bother to turn on any others. As she tossed her shawl and purse over the back of an armchair, she was aware that she and Sam had different ideas about what would happen next. If he couldn't be honest with her, though . . . well, then, neither of them was going to be satisfied with the outcome of the evening.

"Can I fix you a cup of coffee?" she asked.

He ambled into the small living room, stopping in front of the mantel to examine a photograph. "No thanks."

"A piece of pie?"

"I'm still full from dinner. Who're these people? Your grandparents?"

"Yes. My mom's mother and father. Would you like to sit?"

He gave her a glance over his shoulder, let his gaze drop to the sofa facing the fireplace, then turned back to his examination of her picture gallery. "In a minute, maybe."

He moved on to look at a picture of her parents while she stood gripping the back of the sofa. She felt as if she had a stick of dynamite in one hand and a lit match in the other. Only a fool would light the fuse. Or a woman set on loving a man who wasn't sure that he wanted—or knew how—to let her.

"Sam, were you afraid?"

His back stiffened, and he went very still for a moment. Then he moved to look at the anniversary clock in the center of the mantel. "Afraid of what?"

She took a shallow breath. "Last Friday. Were you afraid

to ride in the police helicopter?”

He laughed, a short, rasping sound. “What kind of crazy question is that?”

“It doesn’t seem crazy to me.”

The seconds ticked by, and when he didn’t say a word, didn’t look at her, simply stood there, unmoving, she asked again. “*Were* you afraid? I’d really like to know.”

“Dammit, Katie, what is this?” The words burst out of him as he whirled from the mantel. “Haven’t you had enough of playing mother hen for one day? You think you’ve got to turn me into another one of your permanent infants?”

The shot struck home, and her jaw clenched. Sam stopped in front of the window and pivoted to face her, and she prepared herself for an attack. But when their gazes met across the room, she heard his breath catch, hold for an instant or two, then rush out in a groan.

“Katie, I’m sorry.” His gaze slid away from hers. “That was stupid talk. I say things I don’t mean sometimes, because—” He shook his head, turning to face the curtained window. “Hell, I don’t know why I say them. You shouldn’t put up with it.”

Her answer was quiet and clear. “Why don’t you let me decide what I want to put up with?”

“You put up with too much,” he murmured, his voice soft and low, like the muted light from the lamp in front of him. Staring at the lamp, he added, “You’re probably the most generous, unselfish person I’ve ever met, and I wouldn’t want you to be any different. But I’m not used to having somebody worry about me, and it. . . . Well, I’m not comfortable with it.”

She smiled. “I know.” *But I’m going to do it anyway.*

Pausing, her gaze fastened on his angular profile, she asked the question one more time. “Sam, did the crash make you afraid of flying?”

His jaw tightened, and he spoke through clenched teeth. “You don’t give up, do you? I told you I don’t want to talk about it.” Then, without a glance in her direction, he headed for the door, muttering, “And maybe I’d better get out of here before I say something else I’ll regret.”

He stopped with the door half open, one hand on the knob,

the other braced on the frame. For what seemed an eternity, he simply stood there facing the shadowed darkness beyond the screen door, his shoulders rising and falling with his rapid breathing. She closed her eyes, clamping her mouth shut against the urge to beg him not to go, to give himself—and her—a chance. Just one chance, that's all she wanted, to show him that he didn't have to handle everything alone.

When the door clicked shut, her eyes flew open, and she nearly cried aloud to see that he hadn't left.

"Ah, shit," he muttered. "Who the hell am I kidding?" Then, with his hands still on the door, he drew a shuddering breath and spoke over his shoulder. "Katie, you don't want to hear this."

She spoke very softly. "Sam, I care about you. I do want to hear it."

Still he hesitated. "I don't want you looking at me like you do your brothers and sisters."

"Believe me, I do not feel even vaguely the same about you as I do about them."

That made him turn around. She was not surprised to see him struggling to put his armor in place—squaring his shoulders, lifting his chin, planting his feet wide, all the signals she'd come to recognize. He wasn't going to be able to do it this time, though, and she didn't know if the tears that kept lodging in her throat were ones of heartbreak for him or of tentative hope that, after all, she might be more important to him than his pride.

The first words he spoke threw her.

"I got grounded."

Kate frowned. "You mean, you lost your pilot's license?"

Sam shook his head. "The final medical report I got from the hospital said the nerve damage in my spine would screw up my reflexes, and that my body couldn't take the stress of high speeds or altitudes. The FAA medical examiner wouldn't give me a medical certificate, and without one, you don't fly."

Her frown went from puzzled to worried. "But you told me you're all right now."

"I am."

“So—”

“I fought for three months to get the certificate back, but I wasn’t about to tell them why the hospital report was worthless—too many people already knew about the healing thing. Then I told Marty Anderson about the trouble I was having. I didn’t know he was doing it, but he started talking to the FAA, and somehow, about a week before I left Mojave, he got them to issue me a clean certificate.”

“Then you could—” She broke off, biting her lower lip. He could—but then, he couldn’t.

“Yeah, how about that?” he muttered, moving away from the door. He only went a couple of steps, though, back to the lamp table, as if to say he still might decide to leave. With his gaze directed once more at the lamp, he asked, “How did you figure it out?”

Her voice quavered a little as she replied. “Your face. After dinner, when Steve asked you to go up with him, you were . . . well, you looked like you did last week, over the fish.”

“You mean I was green.” Having been backed into the corner, he wasn’t about to show himself any mercy. “So your whole family knows.”

“I doubt it. You’re not an easy man to read.”

“You seem to be doing a damned good job of it.”

“I’ve had a chance to practice.” *But I’d rather you told me what you’re feeling.*

He was silent for a minute, his finger batting absently at the fringe that hung from the lampshade. Then, he said, “Up until now, I’ve had excuses I could give myself. I didn’t have a medical certificate. I don’t like flying commercial. I wanted to have my Jeep with me when I got wherever I was going.”

He hesitated, stuffing both hands into his pockets. “Last Friday night . . . that was the first time since the crash I really had to face it—where I’ve been in a situation I couldn’t rationalize my way out of. Katie, I knew you were scared. I wanted to go with you, but—”

“It’s all right,” she said quietly. “It’s enough to know you wanted to.”

His reply was hard and grim. "It's not enough for me."

"But, Sam . . ." She started toward him, got as far as the end of the sofa, then hesitated; she didn't want him to feel any more crowded than he already did. "A lot of people are afraid of flying," she said, "people who've never been near a plane and don't have a single real reason to be scared of one. And you have the best reason in the world."

"Come on," he grated. "'A lot of people' aren't jet pilots with thousands of hours of logged flight time. Being scared of what you don't know anything about isn't the same as wanting to throw up just at the *idea* of doing what you've been doing for over seventeen years."

No, it wasn't, she had to admit. Still . . .

"You may be a pilot, but you're also human," she reasoned. "For heaven's sake, you *died* in that crash. Any man has a right to be scared of something that *killed* him."

For a fraction of a second, she thought she saw his harsh mask waver, his face lose a trace of color, his jaw slacken.

She spoke in gentle tones. "Please, don't be so hard on yourself. It's a normal reaction. You must know you'll get over it."

His countenance hardened again instantly. "I'm not being too hard on myself . . . and I'm not going to get over it."

"How can you say that? Sam, it's only been a year since you crashed that plane, and you spent most of it in the hospital. At least give it some time before you decide it's hopeless."

"Time isn't going to make a difference. And it's not a matter of deciding." His voice dropped to a low rumble. "It's just part of the price."

Kate's eyes widened. "The price for what? Your life? That's . . . Sam, that's ridiculous."

He shook his head slowly. "No, it's fair. I got a second chance. But it's not free. There are things—lots of them—I've had to give up."

She stared at him for a moment. Then, suddenly, as the strange logic of his reasoning began to make sense, she whispered, "Meat."

"And coffee and any kind of alcohol and cigarettes," Sam



added. "I can't put anything in me that slows me down or speeds me up or feels . . . dead."

"And the fish," she concluded.

He shrugged. "Catching them was fine. It was trying to clean them that did it. I couldn't cut up living flesh and watch it bleed."

Her gaze remained fixed on him as she moved around the sofa and sank onto a corner of it. It was finally hitting her that the man she was falling in love with was truly, fundamentally different than he had been prior to a year ago.

She couldn't quite see why Sam would miss the things he'd given up, or why he would resent the heightened awareness—the enlightened conscience—he'd acquired. But then, the changes in his life weren't the result of some spiritual discipline or radical social beliefs. They'd come as a total shock, the result of one profound, devastating experience. And unlike someone who might decide one day to "try out" a new lifestyle and the next day give it up, Sam couldn't simply set aside the changes in him—and in his life—not even for a little while. They were irrevocable. He had to learn to live with them. All of them . . .

"And you think flying's been added to the list," she concluded. "Like a . . . a sacrifice."

"That's not what I'd call it," he murmured. "It's just a payment, plain and simple."

A payment. And he thought it was a fair payment, at that.

Kate couldn't accept it. Something was very wrong here. The other things he'd given up made a kind of sense. It seemed right that a person who had the power to heal would find it hard, even impossible, to take a life, any life, or to do harmful things to his own body. But to be *afraid* of something—to be afraid of *flying*. No, it wasn't the same thing at all. She didn't believe he had to pay for the second chance he'd been given. Nor did she think there was anything fair about a man forfeiting the thing he loved most in the world. No, this was no payment. In fact, it seemed more like punishment. But for what? And who was doing the punishing?

Calculating her words, she settled back on the couch, pull-

ing a throw pillow onto her lap and placing her hands flat upon it. "Well," she sighed, "I've seen a lot of men lose their jobs—farms go under, mines close. They've found other things to do. You can too, I guess. I mean"—she lifted one shoulder—"there are other things in life besides flying."

When Sam didn't respond, she turned her head to see him staring at her, and the expression on his face said she might have suggested there were other things besides breathing.

"Would you quit nursing?" he asked.

Her gaze dropped to watch her fingers toy with the tatted lace edge of the pillow. "Well, no, but—"

"No buts," he retorted. "You wouldn't. Period. Not as long as you had your hands and all your faculties. Well, I've got the same kind of one-track mind. Flying's the only thing I ever wanted to do, and I'm damned good at it. And you said yourself that a person ought to do what he likes and does best. Remember?"

Yes, she remembered, and she didn't mind his using her words as an argument. Still, she couldn't help saying, "You know, there's at least one other thing you do very well."

He understood immediately what she meant, and he reacted exactly as she'd expected he would.

"Forget it." Taking a few long strides to stand at the mantel in front of her, he gave her a warning scowl. "Don't you start getting ideas, because I'm not about to make a career out of curing people. In the first place, I'd never take money for it. And in the second place, I don't *like* being a"—his mouth twisted in disgust—"a bona fide healer. Most of the time, I downright hate it."

"But you did tell me you were glad you could help those people."

"I didn't say I liked *doing* it."

"You don't?"

"Hell, no, I don't! You saw me with that man, Cooney. Did it look like I was having fun?"

Turning sharply, he set to pacing in front of the hearth. "Katie, you help people all the time. And it's obvious you get a lot of pleasure out of it. But you've been doing it all your life—

you're used to it. And I'm not. It's like"—his hand searched the air—"like waking up one day and finding out you've turned into a sponge. It seems like my only purpose in life anymore is to absorb pain." He shot her an incredulous look. "And you think I ought to make a *career* of it? Lady, you're out of your mind. I'm looking for ways to make this thing livable—not to make it worse."

Kate's gaze followed him as he continued to pace. She was about to tell him that she hadn't really been suggesting he make a career of healing when he came to a halt, leaning an arm on the mantel and letting out a frustrated sound.

"Ah, hell," he muttered. "I don't know why I should expect you to understand this when I don't understand it myself."

"But I think you do," she said.

He was rubbing the bridge of his nose, but as she spoke, he stopped, clearly listening.

"It must be horribly disorienting to have your whole life turned inside out, and if it were me, I'd resent it like mad—for a while, at least. But underneath all the confusion—the day-to-day things that keep cropping up to upset you—I think you do know what's going on. I think you understand it very well."

He turned his head to give her a scowl. After a few seconds, though, the lines of his face and the set of his shoulders slowly relaxed, the defensiveness and the frustration appearing to fade.

"Maybe I do understand it," he said quietly. "Maybe I understand why having this . . . this gift changes everything. And maybe I even see that what I do with it is more important than whether I ever fly another plane. But so far, understanding hasn't made *living* any easier. Sometimes, it just makes it harder."

Their gazes held across the short distance that separated them, and for a moment, he studied her, a thoughtful frown flickering across his brow. Then, with a purposeful look, he came toward her.

Kate drew back, a little frightened by the tension radiating from him. He sat on the edge of the sofa, turning sideways to

face her, and when he reached for her hands, she was filled with a strange reluctance. Yet she let him draw her hands into his, feeling both the strength and the gentleness of his grasp. She started to speak, seeking to relieve her uneasiness, but an instant later, she forgot what she was going to say.

It was happening. Her gaze fell to his hands, wrapped around hers, and she realized they were growing warm. Not hot, like they'd been the night he'd healed Ray Cooney, but warm—a shimmering, electric warmth. As it seeped slowly into her own skin, the reluctance she'd been feeling drained out of her. There was nothing to be afraid of, nothing in this that would ever hurt her.

“Do you see what I’m saying, Katie?” he asked. “Do you feel it? Feel it here—” He squeezed her hands a little. “Feel what I’m trying to tell you.”

Oh, yes, she felt it. And she realized that until that moment, she hadn’t begun to understand it. How had she thought it happened? She’d seen him lay these hands upon a dying man, and it had seemed like magic that the man lived. Yet the hands that held hers were flesh and blood, strong and big and tanned, the backs dusted lightly with fine hair, the fingers long and tapered. They were wonderful hands—but only a man’s hands, nothing more, and it was impossible to grasp that they had become the vehicle for such a powerful force, the essence of life itself. The force wasn’t the man, yet, somehow, he could contain it in his body; more than that, he could direct it into other people’s bodies.

But *how* could he? And how could he go on, walking, eating, sleeping—*living*—knowing what he could do?

But then, that was the problem, wasn’t it?

In a voice filled with wonder, she breathed, “The other night, it . . . your hands were so hot, and yet . . . yet it doesn’t hurt.”

“No, it doesn’t hurt. It heals,” he said. “It only gets hot when I’m using it for real, but it’s always there, like this, under the surface . . . just waiting.”

He released her then, and she stared at her hands, feeling the warmth he’d imprinted upon her skin fade until, at last, it

was gone. Then slowly, she brought her gaze up to his.

His clear gray eyes were less guarded than she'd ever seen them, and they revealed that incredible strength of spirit she'd always sensed was there but had never seen in such full measure. Yet his eyes also spoke of things not so wonderful, things Kate could better understand, and the sum of it was a wrenching ambivalence.

Sam searched her features for a moment, then turned away as he spoke. "Katie, I'm not trying to scare you or prove something to you. I'm trying to tell you that I don't recognize myself anymore. Since the day I put my hands on Sid and stopped that artery from pumping blood, I wake up every morning wondering what I'll find *that* day that's different about me. And often enough, some new thing catches me off guard—like the fish last week."

Her gaze followed as he rose to move restlessly around the confined space between the sofa and the hearth.

"But it's more than a matter of changing habits or the way I live," he said. "I spend all kinds of time now just thinking. Thinking and asking myself questions that never would have occurred to me before. And it's all tied up with knowing . . . knowing what comes after this . . . understanding that being dead isn't an end to life but a continuation of it. Except it's . . . it's . . ." He stopped by the fireplace and closed his eyes on a long, ragged sigh. "Katie, there aren't any words to talk about that place. I could call it heaven, but that wouldn't tell you anything. There isn't any way . . . any *language* to describe it. But in my mind it's got color and shape and size. I remember what it looked like, how it felt. How peaceful it was."

His eyes opened slowly, and in a voice that held all the bitterness of a lonely lifetime, he said, "But I had to come back here. And now I'm supposed to go on living in a body that looks and feels like mine—mostly—and that has all my memories. But it's a body that feels things mine never felt. And it can do things I never knew how to do. And I ask myself—Are you really who you think you are? Do you even *know* who—or what—you are? And honest to God, some days . . ." He shook his head. "Some days I'm really not sure."

He gave her a brief look, his mouth twisting in self-mockery. "Katie, I didn't leave California to get away from sick people. I left to get away from the stares. I couldn't take being treated like a freak in a sideshow. I couldn't stand listening to people talk about me like I was a laboratory rat or some religious nut's latest idea of the Messiah." With an angry gesture, he insisted, "I'm just a man, dammit!" But in the flash of silence that followed, he turned away, muttering, "Not that I know what the hell that means anymore, either."

And that, Kate thought, said it all.

She could no more have kept from going to him then than she could have stopped spring from coming. So many times she'd wanted to touch him, to reach for him, but hadn't for fear of . . . of what? Of making him angry? Of being rejected? Of falling in love with him if she got too close? Well, it was too late for that. Still, as she rose from the sofa and walked slowly toward him, her heart was racing, and she was frighteningly aware that she was taking the biggest risk she'd ever taken in her life.

## Twelve

Sam watched Katie approach, his body tensing. He didn't want her near him. He didn't want anyone near him. He wasn't even sure why he hadn't left in the first place, when he'd realized what was coming, except that it would have been like lying. To have walked out, when it was so obvious she knew the truth, would have looked worse than just admitting it.

Well, so he had. He'd told her more about himself than he'd ever told another human being. And, honest to God, he didn't know where people ever got the idea that talking about their problems made them feel better. As far as he was concerned, they could have it. He felt awful. Raw, like in the hospital, when the doctor had scraped the burned skin off his face every day so he wouldn't scar, and he'd had to lie there and not scream and act like he wasn't just horrified at the whole idea. They'd wanted to scrape the rest of him, too, and he'd told them to forget it. He'd take the scars.

So, when Katie stopped in front of him and raised her brown gaze to his, he felt like she must be seeing him without any skin. And he felt like screaming then, too. He almost did, when she lifted her hand and placed it on the spot just below his heart, where, under his shirt, the long surgical scar began its arc around the right side of his body. But then she did something that knocked the wind out of him and made the muscles in his belly tighten, so he couldn't scream; instead, all he could do was stand there, watching, as she let her gaze drop from his and began tracing the scar beneath the cloth with her fingertips.

It was as if she'd memorized it, for she followed the line unerringly. When she reached the halfway point of the scar,

she retraced the path to where she'd started, finally letting her hand rest lightly on his shirtfront as she raised her gaze to his once more. This was no sympathetic pat on the hand but a deliberate attempt to shred the last of his control, and he knew the look he returned was suspicious and about as receptive as a brick wall.

"Sam," she said, in a voice that was low and kind of shaky. "I don't know what sort of man you were before, and it doesn't matter to me, because I know what kind of man you are now. I can tell you, you're more of a man than most men ever get to be. And it doesn't have a single thing to do with whether you can clean a fish or fly an airplane. In fact, you're . . ."

She trailed off, her thick, dark lashes lowering in a way that made it sink into his confused and wary mind that this wasn't at all what he'd expected—and that she was really nervous. But about what? Why should *she* be nervous?

When her hand moved, her fingers trembling as they slid up his chest, and a hint of pink crept into her cheeks, it hit him: This wasn't sympathy. It was seduction. And, damn . . . it was working.

Her eyes were warm and heavy-lidded as she raised her gaze once more to his, and she continued on that same trembling note to tell him, "You're more of a man than any man I've ever known. You're enough of a man that all I have to do is look at you, and . . . Oh, Sam"—her eyelids drifted closed—"when you look at me or touch me . . . when you kiss me . . . you make me feel things no man has ever made me feel. You make me feel exactly the way a woman's supposed to feel. And it feels wonderful."

"Ah, Katie . . ." His fingertips brushed her flushed cheek as he tilted her face up to his. How she'd done it, he didn't know, but in less than a minute flat she'd given him back the pride he'd spent the past hour wasting. He ran his thumb over her full lower lip. "Honey, when you look at me like you are right now, you make me feel exactly like a man is supposed to feel. And it feels good . . . so damned good."

"Does it?"

"You know it does."



“Kiss me, Sam. Please.”

Her body was straining upward, toward him, and he felt himself bending, toward her. Their lips were only inches apart, and he could feel the current of anticipation running between them. But before he kissed her, he had to tell her. . . .

“Katie, we’re not going to stop this time. I want to . . .”

He trailed off, his gaze searching her pretty face, skimming over her shiny hair, finally locking on her deep brown eyes, sinking into them. “I’m going to make love to you,” he said.

Her breath rushed out on a little sob, and her eyes closed briefly. When she opened them, they were hazy with desire. “That is what people do, isn’t it,” she whispered, “when they make each other feel this way?”

“Is it? I don’t know.” His lips touched hers once. “I’ve never felt this way before.”

Nor had he ever pulled a woman into his arms, settled his mouth over hers, and kissed her as if doing it meant more to him than anything else in the world. But it did. Somehow, at that moment, it meant everything. And he tried to tell her that. He tried to tell her that she was special, different from any other, and that he was different, too. And, for once, he was glad of that, because making love with her was going to be different from anything he’d ever known.

*Slow, he said to her silently. Ah, Katie, we’re going to take this so slow. Slow, like our mouths blending this way, so we feel everything, taste everything, so I know your mouth the way I know my own, and you know mine. Slow, so when we get where we’re going, we’ll know exactly where we’ve been. Because getting there . . . ah, Katie, getting there is going to be such a pleasure. . . .*

He tried to tell her everything in that kiss—everything about needs and wants he hadn’t known he had, and about wanting to give her things he’d never thought of giving anyone. He told her until she was liquid in his arms, until she was breathless and trembling, her face flushed and her lips wet and swollen. When he raised his head far enough to look down at her, her lashes fluttered, and she whispered his name. He kissed her again, briefly, then lifted her in his arms. He wouldn’t have let

her go for anything.

The bedroom was bathed in moonlight filtering through lacy curtains, and the moon provided all the light he needed to find the bed—and to see the look on her face when he stood her beside it. The slight lowering of her lashes, the hint of uncertainty, reminded him of how long it had been for her and that she was probably feeling shy and maybe a little scared. And so, when he pulled her into his arms, he tried to tell her it was all right.

Some of it, he told her in words.

“Katie, honey, it’s going to be good between us.”

“It already is. . . . Oh, Sam, when you touch me like that . . .”

“You’re so soft. All-over soft, like I’ve never felt soft before. And your hair—”

“If it gets in the way, I can—”

“It’s not in the way. I want to wrap us up in it and. . . . Katie, don’t ever call your hair, or anything else about you, plain and ordinary again.”

“I’ve always thought I was.”

“Well, honey, you’re about to find out you’re not.”

He undressed her in a way meant to arouse, not to startle, and in a way meant to stretch it out and make it last a long, long time. His hands learned her through the fabric of her clothing, using the filmy lace of her blouse to shape the lush fullness of her breasts, and the soft folds of her skirt to mold the curve of her hips, to test the rounded swell of her bottom, and to caress for the first time the hot mound between her thighs. An accidental brush, a deliberate stroke. A fingertip here, the palm of his hand there. Long before her blouse or skirt were even unbuttoned, the clothing under them was gone or undone, and he’d touched almost every inch of silky skin beneath them.

His own clothing came off in a slightly different way.

“Katie, if you’re thinking about undoing the rest of the buttons on this shirt, or maybe taking something else off—”

“I’ve got plans along those lines.”

“I was hoping you might, but I’ve got to tell you, I’m kinda nervous about it.”

“Nervous? Sam, I don’t believe you.”

“You haven’t seen all the scars yet.”

“You don’t really think these scars matter to me, do you?”

“Well, besides a mess of burns . . . Oh, yeah, do that . . . just like that, with your mouth . . . Ah, Katie, you’ve got the sweetest, hottest mouth.”

“Help me with the buckle, Sam. I want to see you.”

“There’s burns, like the ones you’ve already seen. And they did . . . Here—let me get my shoes . . . They did some pretty serious cutting on my leg.”

“I promise, I won’t stare like I did the first time.”

“Honey, you can stare all you want.”

“Not at the scars, though. Oh, Sam, you’re . . . Oh, my . . .”

With soft, brief kisses, with the unmistakable trembling of his hands, with approving murmurs and deep, shuddering sighs, he let her know what she did to him every time she touched him. And he made it seem as if their touching each other was the most natural thing in the world. When the last of their clothing eventually fell to the floor, there wasn’t a hint of nervousness or uncertainty in the way she pulled back the covers, sat on the bed, and opened her arms to him.

Placing a knee on the mattress beside her, he curled a hand around the back of her neck and leaned down to kiss her, feeling as he did so that this was the beginning. The *real* beginning of the life he’d been given a year ago. So far, he’d only been surviving, watching the empty space inside him grow larger, until that’s all there was. But in making love with Katie, it seemed as if he was taking the initial step toward filling that empty space, and he was choosing something—*someone*—to put into it who meant more to him than anyone ever had before.

He came down to her knowing that this was the most completely right thing he’d ever done in his life. And as he wrapped her body against his in that first breathless, flesh-to-flesh embrace, he thought about how it would be to go on filling up the days and nights with the same rightness he felt at that moment, kissing, touching, coming to know the woman in his arms.

He hadn’t a doubt in his mind that she would last a man a

lifetime. Warm and tender and full of an honest, almost innocent passion, she was everything he'd known she'd be. But he hadn't really known, because there'd been no woman like this for him. There hadn't been a woman whose lips melded so softly with his or whose mouth tasted this good. None whose passionate responses matched his so exactly and with such ease. No woman who felt so perfectly shaped for him, or whose body, entwined with his, gave him such pleasure.

And, oh, it was a pleasure to touch her. To touch her face and her soft, soft skin. To get lost in those long, silky ropes of hair. To hold her beautiful breasts, to shape them and suck on them and bury his face between them, and to hear her moan and feel her hips move against him, and to know the pleasure was not his alone. To feel the giving crush of her belly against the throbbing demand of his erection . . . to sink his fingers into her hot, creamy folds and watch her body arch as she gasped his name. Then, to have her reach for him, to feel her mouth and hands all over him; to hear her sighs and murmurs and sultry sounds of arousal as she learned his body . . . to lie trembling under the erotic perfection of her selfless loving and watch the last remnants of the jaded life he'd led slip away.

If he lived another hundred lifetimes, he would never forget the moment he slid inside her. The catch in her voice as she whispered his name. The clutch of her fingers on his back. The satin of her thighs embracing his hips. The tightness and slick heat of her stretching to take him. He'd never forget the way her gaze held his and the world seemed to fade away, everything important coming together in the wordless look that passed between them.

The look held them as surely as any lock as their bodies fell effortlessly into an easy, timeless rhythm. A rhythm that built the pleasure slowly. Slow enough to savor each long, gliding thrust. Slow enough to notice every subtle shift in pressure, and to appreciate every change in each other's expression. Slow enough to forget how long they'd been joined this way and nearly enough to forget where they were going, because the getting there was such an everlasting pleasure.

They came together as naturally as the sun rising in the

sky—the pearly blush appearing on the horizon, the first glimmering ray darting over the edge. Then the burst, the radiant beams, shimmering through the heavens. The steady, pulsing heat of it. The fiery brilliance as it rose higher and higher. And the light. The bright, unearthly light that poured into the mind and filled the senses with the wonder and beauty and power of it.

It wasn't heaven. But it was a piece of it. And all he'd had to do to have it was let himself die in Katie's arms.

Spent and shaking, his sweat-slicked body still atop hers, he dragged his head around on the pillow to brush her cheek with his lips. When he tasted the salty wetness of tears, he spoke in a rasping whisper.

"Katie. . . ?"

"Oh, Sam . . ." Her head turned toward him, her lips seeking his, kissing him over and over, soft, trembling kisses that told him her tears weren't anything he needed to worry about. They were only her way of saying what he couldn't have put into words, either. God, he almost could have cried himself.

But even if he could have let himself cry, he didn't have the energy left for it. He was too tired, and too bone-deep satisfied, to do anything but roll to his back, taking Katie with him to hold her close. Only a small, unwelcome voice in a corner of his mind kept him from drifting off.

*So, what are you going to do now? the voice nagged. What about the big plan? Remember that? The plan where you hid out for a while, got yourself together, then left to go back to work?*

Yeah, he remembered, but it didn't look like he would be going back to work. Hell, he didn't want to go anywhere any time soon.

*Fine, the voice returned. And it's real smart, isn't it, getting stuck on this woman, when all it's going to take is one person with a big mouth witnessing one of your handy little tricks, and it's California all over again? Face it. This is nice, and maybe it's the best thing you've ever had, but it won't last. It never does. And the more stuck on her*

*you get, the worse it's going to feel when you've got to leave. You're going to lose it. You're going to lose her. So don't go getting any ideas.*

But he couldn't help getting ideas. And he couldn't imagine walking away from Katie. Not yet. Not after they'd just . . .

Sam's eyes flew open at a sudden, unbidden thought. "Damn," he muttered, his breath hissing out slowly.

Katie was lying with her head on his shoulder, and he felt her stiffen slightly. He hadn't realized she was still awake.

"What's wrong?" she whispered.

He hesitated, reluctant to bring it up when it was too late anyway. But there'd be the same question in the morning, so. . . .

Sliding his hand up her arm to her shoulder, he said, "Honey, I know it's a little late to be asking, but you're not using any birth control, are you?"

The silence that followed his question worried him. Maybe she hadn't thought of it either and was as rattled as he was, being reminded—or maybe she *had* thought of it, after their close call last week, but was shy about telling him that she'd taken some kind of precautions. Strangely enough, Sam didn't know which possibility worried him more. The idea of making Katie pregnant gave him an odd kind of satisfaction that he'd never felt, but the idea of having to leave her that way panicked him.

"Katie?"

He shifted a little, trying to get a look at her face, but she kept it turned against his chest and her arm snugged tight around his waist as she spoke.

"It's all right. I won't get pregnant."

"Are you sure? Because—"

"It's all right. I promise."

He relaxed, figuring either she had, in fact, taken care of things after last week, or that she meant it was a safe time in her cycle. He'd never been keen on taking chances like that, but, hell, in her line of business, she ought to know what she was doing. Either way, it wasn't a problem—for now, at least.

Later, they could talk about it. Later, they could talk about a lot of things. Talking things out with Katie was . . . well, somehow, it didn't seem so bad anymore.

Kate lay still and silent in Sam's arms, listening to the steady beat of his heart and the slow, even sounds of his breathing as he fell asleep. She'd been nearly asleep herself when he'd spoken. Now, though, her thoughts were in turmoil, and sleep was a long way off.

How could she sleep? She was lying in the arms of a man who, it was almost a hundred percent certain, could make her whole again. In all her life she'd never know why it hadn't occurred to her before; probably it had something to do with six years of being convinced it was hopeless. But of all the horrible moments she could have realized it might *not* be so hopeless, this was the worst. Because nothing on earth was worth the risk of losing him—and she was terribly afraid that asking him to help her would accomplish exactly that.

Lying in the semidarkness of her room, Kate looked down at the hand Sam had curled over her arm. His grasp was relaxed in sleep, his fingers twitching every so often. How would she say it to him?

*Heal me, Sam. Put your hands on me and make it so I can have babies. Erase the mistake I made six years ago, because, after all, haven't I suffered for it long enough? And, by the way, I love you. And if you fix this problem for me, I'll give you some babies, and we'll have a good life together. Why, I bet, after a while, you won't even miss flying anymore.*

*Sure, he'd say. We'll have a great life. When we run through the money I made doing what I like and do best, I'll get some job that pays the bills. And maybe, on the side, I could cure people for you, too. You know, like I cured your nephew and that man you couldn't keep from dying. And like I cured you so you could have the babies you've always wanted more than anything else in the world.*

But she wouldn't have what she wanted. She wouldn't have him.

Kate had no doubt that if she asked Sam to heal her, he would try. But would he still feel safe and trusting enough to bare his soul to her as he had a while ago, or to make love with her as he had, or to lie here with her like this? Or would he feel used? And would she become to him just like all the others? The ones in California who'd wanted him for what he could give them. The ones who'd made him feel like a freak. The ones who'd nearly broken him before he'd finally had to leave.

She didn't want him to leave. She wanted him to give her his heart. She wanted him to let her love him for the rest of their lives. She wanted them both to have what they needed and wanted most in the world. But neither of them would have anything if she did or said something that made him think she'd become part of his biggest problem.



## Thirteen

Getting to work the next day took Kate a little longer than usual. She discovered Sam was hungry in the mornings. Ravenous, actually. And brazen about it, too.

"Katie, you have the most incredible breasts."

"And you have the most . . . incredible mouth."

"You like my mouth on you?"

"Oh, yes, it's—"

"Lift up a little . . . that's it . . . so I can . . ."

"Mmm. Oh, Sam, that's good. It's . . . What are you doing?"

"Giving you more of what you like."

"But you— Oh . . . oh, my . . ."

"Open up these pretty thighs for me, Katie."

"Sam, I . . . Oh, Lord, that's . . . But, Sam, you *can't*—"

"I sure as hell can. Honey, you're so soft. Soft and . . . hot."

"But it's not . . . I'm not . . ."

"And you taste . . . mmm, like us."

She groaned as her will to argue and her inhibitions about such intimacy were deftly shattered; her fingers clutched at his hair, holding him to her, and in what she thought must be a disgracefully short time, he showed her how silly her objections were. It was more than sensual pleasure, though, that he gave her. It was her womanhood—or rather, the right to enjoy the full measure of it, a right she'd never truly understood and that no other man had been man enough to allow her to claim.

She hadn't stopped shaking from that first shattering climax when he plunged into her with a breathtaking volley of hard, deep thrusts that quickly sent her soaring again. But when she opened her eyes from that second time to see him gazing

down at her, she knew by the look in his glittering crystal eyes—and by the undiminished vigor of his erection still filling her—that they weren't finished yet.

With a moan of surrender, she begged, "Oh, Sam, I can't—" "I think you will."

"But I should get . . . up and—"

"Honey, you come so easy."

And he was having a wonderful time proving it.

"Sam, you're— How can you . . . Oh, Lord . . ."

"Watching you is amazing, you know that? You just don't hold back anything. Do it one more time for me, Katie. Just once more. Then we'll take a shower. I promise."

It wasn't until they were in the shower, though, after he'd made a torrid production out of washing her hair, that he found his own release. With her back against the tiled wall, her legs wrapped around his waist, and his pulsing sex buried deep inside her, Kate felt the shudders ripple through him as he growled against her throat. His low, rumbling sound of profound satisfaction made her own body as fluid as the water sluicing over them, and she instantly spiraled off with him a final time.

Yet again, the physical pleasure was only part of it. *This* was the man she'd wanted so badly to know—the one who wanted to fulfill her until her bones turned to water and she could do little more than moan. The one who, last night had wanted to "make love"—and whose lovemaking had moved her to tears. And Kate knew that nothing, nothing on the face of the earth, could have given her more pleasure than seeing him this way. The way he'd been this morning: confident, bold. A little arrogant. Relaxed. And so obviously happy.

She intended to do everything in her power to keep him that way. And, after all, making him happy was making her happier than she'd ever been in her life.

At ten, Kate sent Sam home with a promise to stop at the cabin after she saw Lynn Nielsen that afternoon. Then she went to the office, where she met Doc for their regular post-weekend conference.

"So, except for a trip out to see the Nielsen girl, I spent the

weekend putting in spinach and broccoli and watching the ballgame.” Doc sat back in the squeaky leather desk chair to lace his fingers together over his belly. “I did get some phone calls, though, that I want to talk to you about.”

Sitting in the chair next to his cluttered desk, Kate was looking over his notes on Lynn. “Who were they from?” she asked.

“Well, there was one Saturday morning from Evan Resnick, the audiologist who saw that nephew of yours last week.”

“Oh?”

“Said he’d never seen anything like it. Not so much as a decibel of hearing loss evident, and no trace of nerve damage.”

“It certainly is amazing, isn’t it?” With her attention still directed on the medical chart, Kate smiled to herself.

“Resnick thought it was more than that. He called it a miracle.” Pausing, Doc added, “Which is the same word the vascular surgeon at Marquette used to explain why that man Cooney is still alive.”

Her gaze flashed to his briefly, held for a second, then dropped once more to the chart. “Straun called?”

“About an hour after I’d hung up with Resnick,” Doc confirmed, his tone far too intent for her comfort. “Said he was sorry it’d taken him so long to get to me—he was off on vacation last week. But he had to call, he said, to tell me what a fine associate I have. He can’t figure out how you kept that man alive on a piddling 250 cc of Ringer’s. Given the amount of time before you got to him, and the number of arteries and veins that had chunks out of them, and the fact that he was in severe shock”—Doc shook his head—“it does seem miraculous.”

Kate closed Lynn’s chart and laid it on the desk. She wasn’t a good liar, and she loathed the idea of lying to Doc, or even of keeping something from him that was clearly his concern. Yet as she rose and walked over to open her knapsack, lying on the table beside the supply cabinet, she knew that was what she had to do.

“I think ‘miraculous’ is putting it too strongly,” she said.

"I don't know. There seems to be a lot of it going around."

"A lot of what?"

"Miracles. Ray Cooney, Francis . . ." Doc's chair creaked, and she knew he'd swiveled around to watch her. "And you."

She stopped with the supply cabinet door half open. "Me?"

"Your ankle. I admit, I didn't think much about it. It looked normal to me. I just figured you'd made a mistake. But that was foolishness on my part because you don't make mistakes very often. And I've never once heard you exaggerate about anything, least of all your own problems. So if your ankle was as bad as you said it was, well, then, doesn't it seem like a miracle that it got better overnight?"

Tossing a laugh over her shoulder, Kate pulled the cabinet door open and reached for a pack of surgical gloves. "Of course, I was wrong about my ankle. Heavens, everything that day seemed ten times worse than it probably was. I mean, I was scared to death, sitting there in that storm, and I was soaking wet by the time Sam found me, and"—she shook her head, sticking the gloves into her knapsack—"well, it was just an awful day."

Several long moments passed in silence as she continued to stock her traveling medical kit. Through the open window of the office came the sound of Laura Graff calling her three-year-old to come put her shoes on. A truck, loaded with lumber from the mill, drove by on its way out of town. Finally, Doc broke the silence.

"Kate, is there something you ought to be telling me?"

His simple question made her hands tremble as she buckled the knapsack closed. "About what?" she asked. When he didn't answer, she glanced to see him studying her.

"Maybe you could start," he said, "with what you think I should say when a Hopkins-trained vascular surgeon tells me my associate is a miracle worker."

"Oh, Doc, really!" She glanced at her watch, picked up her knapsack, and looped it over her shoulders. "You tell him thank you very much, and forget it."

"I might have been able to forget Cooney," he replied. "Maybe I could have chalked up his recovery to luck and the

man's own constitution, though Straun says he's got an ulcer and some other things that don't support it. But let's let that one go. Then there's your ankle, and maybe I could forget that, too, if I believed you were so upset you could have misjudged how bad it was. But when I get to Francis"—he shook his head—"no, I can't forget that one. And in the long run, I can't forget three separate, *miraculous* recoveries in the same week."

Rolling her eyes, she started toward the door. "This is really getting silly."

"Is it? Then tell me how to explain these things. I thought if anybody could, it would be you, since one of them was your own injury, and you were there the other two times."

"Doc, you're asking me to explain the impos—"

He waved her off with an impatient gesture. "Kate, I'm an old man, and I've been doctoring for a lot of years. I've *seen* miracles. I don't need you or anybody else to tell me what they look like. And I've learned not to make excuses for them because miracles don't need excusing." He looked at her from under his furrowed brow. "But if they start happening too often, and if they seem to happen when one particular person has been in the vicinity, well, it makes me wonder if that person *has* something. Something special. I think you know what I mean, Kate, and I was hoping you'd do me the courtesy of giving me a straight answer."

She let go of the doorknob, her eyes widening in genuine horror as she thought she understood the direction of his thoughts. "Oh, now, wait just a minute! You think *I* cured Francis and fixed my ankle and—" Abruptly, she turned back toward the door. "This is crazy. You're talking nonsense, and I've got other things—"

"What you've got is four hours of appointments, starting in half an hour, so I don't know where you think you're going."

She froze, her hand on the doorknob. Behind her, she heard his chair squeak as he rose.

"Relax," he said. "I'm leaving. Besides, I don't think there's much you could say I haven't already figured out."

What was *that* supposed to mean?

She stood staring at the door, frantically looking for an answer to the question, while, behind her, she heard Doc making preparations to leave.

"I was going to tell you about the other phone call I got," he said. "Came from a doctor out in California by the name of Martin Anderson."

Kate whirled to face him, her heart pounding at a rate that made it impossible to keep the anxiety out of her voice. "What did he want?"

Doc looked her up and down, then gave a half-disgusted grunt. "So, you know who he is, do you?" He began sorting papers on his desk as he continued. "What do you *think* he wanted? He was looking for Sam. And when I said Sam didn't have a phone, he asked for an address. I gave him mine and said I'd forward a letter for him, if he wanted to send one."

"How did he find Sam?"

"Called his father in Detroit. Apparently Sam sent his folks a letter last week—didn't tell them where he was, but there was the postmark, of course. Anderson looked up the post office, then got the name of the local doctor. Interesting, don't you think, that he did it that way, sooner than getting, say, the state police to track Sam down?"

"Is he—" Kate broke off, hearing the panic in her tone. Drawing a shallow breath, she tried again. "Is that all he wanted? An address?"

"Well, that would have been the end of it," Doc said, "except he started asking me about my practice, about the area. Seemed a mite long-winded for prime-time long distance. But he's a pleasant sort of fellow—a little excitable, but bright—and Earl Carver was late for his appointment, so I chatted with Anderson until Earl came in. Then, when I said I had a patient waiting, Anderson got nervous. He hemmed and hawed for a minute or two." Doc paused, a medical chart in his hand, to turn his head slightly toward her. "Then he said he'd appreciate it if I didn't mention to Sam that he'd called."

Her gaze followed as Doc crossed the room to stick the chart into the filing cabinet. "What did you tell him?"

Closing the cabinet drawer, Doc shot her a somewhat in-

dignant look. “Well, I asked him why, of course. He said to forget he’d asked, but that if I was going to tell Sam about the call, would I give him a message? He didn’t want Sam to know he’d called without knowing why, because it might worry him. Well, then, *I* started worrying, wondering if there was some medical reason Anderson needed to talk to Sam.” Mumbling a little as he headed toward his desk, Doc said, “The man’s a neurologist, and I began having visions of untreated epilepsy and malignant brain tumors. But Anderson said Sam was fine. Absolutely healthy. And besides, he wasn’t Sam’s doctor. He was his friend—so he said.”

Reaching for his black bag on the desk, Doc paused to look at her. “Is that right, Kate? Is Martin Anderson Sam’s friend?”

She nodded. “Yes, he’s . . . Yes.” Taking a step away from the door, she asked, “But what was the message?”

Doc picked up his medical bag in one hand and hooked a thumb in his suspenders. “He said he was trying to find out if Sam was all right. Said he knew how bad things had been for him in California before he left, and he was sorry for whatever part he’d played in that. He hoped things were better now. And he hoped Sam would stay in touch and not worry that he’d tell anyone else where he’d gone. He swore he wouldn’t. He wanted Sam to know that he wished him well—he said that several times.”

She held Doc’s gaze, waiting, but when he didn’t continue, she ventured cautiously, “And that’s all he said?”

“Yes.” He arched an eyebrow. “Should he have said more?”

“No.”

“And *is* Sam all right? Or is Anderson justified in being worried?”

Kate swallowed hard and answered, “He’s a lot better than he was when he left California.”

“You’ve seen quite a bit of him lately, haven’t you? Starting the day you hurt your ankle. And the next day—the morning Francis recovered his hearing. And Bob Bradley mentioned to me after church yesterday that Sam was with you at the campgrounds when you were there with Cooney.”

Doc paused, and she knew what was coming.

"In fact," he added slowly, "maybe I ought to have a talk with Sam about our recent outbreak of miracles. Maybe he could shed some light on it for me."

Kate felt the tears welling up in her eyes. "Doc, please, don't," she whispered hoarsely.

He was angry, and she didn't blame him, although his words were not unkind as he asked, "Don't what? Don't talk to Sam?"

She knew he didn't expect her to answer. With a deep, tired-sounding sigh, he walked past her toward the door, saying, "I think you've got the same problem Martin Anderson has. The man's worried sick, and I knew there were things he wanted to say but didn't. And I didn't know how to tell him without saying it outright that he didn't have to protect Sam from me finding out something I already knew."

Pausing with his hand on the doorknob, Doc looked at her. "But I understood Anderson's hesitation. The man doesn't know me from Adam. And he didn't know I'd already been faced with some of the results of Sam's having picked Bourner's Crossing as a good place to . . . shall we say, hide his light under a bushel? But I have to admit"—he raised his chin in a look that broke her heart—"I'm a little disappointed you don't trust me any better than Martin Anderson does."

"I do," she said quickly, one tear rolling down her cheek. "I'd trust you with my life."

Doc's indignation lasted half a minute longer; then, slowly, it faded, replaced by the calm understanding she'd grown to expect from him.

He sighed again. "But it's not your life we're talking about, is it? And I don't suppose I can fault you for that."

She took a step toward him. "Doc, I . . . I'm sorry. I promised."

"And I'm sorry for being impatient." Cocking one eyebrow, he added, "But I would appreciate it if you could get out of that promise sometime soon so we can talk about this sensibly. Or have Sam talk to me himself. Because I'd hate to go blundering into another conversation like the one with Anderson and wind up making a mess of things for Sam . . . or for



you.”

“For pity’s sake, you don’t have to worry about me. I’m not—”

“I don’t suppose the fact that you bounced in here this morning looking prettier and happier than I’ve ever seen you has anything to do with Sam’s Jeep being parked in front of your house all night.”

Kate felt a sudden heat creeping into her face. When Doc merely looked at her as if to say, what did she expect, her gaze slid away.

“I guess Sarah was up with the birds, checking,” she grumbled.

“I don’t know. Probably. But I saw the Jeep myself.”

“Well, either way, you’re getting awfully personal.”

Doc was unabashed. “Maybe I am. Maybe I’m getting *too* personal. But I’m concerned because I’m thinking about what it would mean for a woman to be . . . well, let’s say, in love with a man who can do the things you thought I was accusing you of doing.”

He waited until she gave him a hesitant look. “It’d be a terrible responsibility, Kate.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

She nodded, then ducked her head as she spoke very carefully. “If a woman were in love with a man who could do those sorts of things, she’d have to find a way to protect him, if she didn’t want to see him broken by people who wanted to use him—people who were so desperate to have what he could give them that they didn’t see their demands were too many and too great for him to handle . . . people who didn’t understand it was all still new to him.”

Drawing a shallow breath, she continued. “So for a while, at least, until he had a chance to learn his limits and how to handle those people on his own, this woman would try to help the man she loved buy the time and the peace he needed. And she’d feel very selfish about it. Because aside from not wanting to see him hurt, she couldn’t stand the thought that he might get scared and leave . . . and that she’d lose him.”

"I guess it would be pretty bad if that happened."

"Yes. Very bad."

Doc was silent for a moment, then asked, "Does this woman have any ideas about how she might protect this man of hers?"

"A few," she replied. Then, abandoning all pretense, she said, "First, I'm not going to ask him to use his gift for my purposes. I'm going to trust him to make his own decisions about it. Because the giving has to come from inside him, or it isn't a gift at all—it's a duty, and there's no joy in it. And the ability he has to perform the duty becomes a terrible burden."

Doc nodded slowly. "Sounds wise. What else are you planning to do?"

Kate held his gaze unwaveringly. "I'm going to ask the only other person in town who knows not to tell anyone else."

"I'd say this falls under the heading of doctor-patient confidentiality, wouldn't you?"

"Definitely." Closing her eyes, she added fervently, "And I'm going to pray like mad that Martin Anderson means what he says, that he wishes Sam well."

She opened her eyes to find Doc frowning thoughtfully.

"The man sounded sincere," he said. "I don't think he's going to cause trouble." Tilting his head, he added, "By the way, I think tonight would be a good night for me to be on call. Don't you?"

"Doc, you don't have to . . ." Kate stopped, realizing her foolishness, and instead simply gave him a grateful look. "Thank you."

His mouth sloped into a smile of both approval and reassurance. "Don't look so worried. I think we can cover the tracks that man of yours is leaving behind him. In fact, it could be quite an interesting challenge." Reaching out to give her arm a pat, he added, "I don't think we could do it forever, but between us we ought to be able to buy Sam the time he needs."

But who would buy her the time she needed? Kate was afraid, knowing what she had to do, that the timer was about to run out.

## Fourteen

At four o'clock, Kate closed up the office and started out the old lake road. Yesterday's warm sunshine had disappeared; the sky was overcast, the air chilly. She reached for the denim jacket on the seat beside her as she hesitated at the turnoff to Sam's, then drove on to the Nielsens'.

She found Lynn doing laundry and sent her straight to bed, ignoring the young woman's protests that she'd been fine all weekend. Then, grimacing in disgust at the Nielsens' ramshackle living conditions, Kate went looking for Erik. She found him putting a roof on one of the camp's small cabins.

No, Erik said, he'd had no idea Lynn's condition could be really serious. She hadn't told him that, and she certainly hadn't said anything about any bleeding the previous week. And he guessed he knew why. They didn't have any medical insurance, they were strapped for money, and they had just enough put aside to pay for Lynn's prenatal care and to have the baby in the hospital—provided the hospital stay only amounted to a day or two. Sheepishly he admitted that he'd been worrying out loud a lot and that, in not telling him the whole story, Lynn had probably been trying not to make him feel any more pressured.

Kate figured he was right, and she promptly told him that he, at least, could forget her fee. Erik's pride wouldn't let him accept her offer, but he swore he'd see to it that Lynn kept her appointment the next morning with the obstetrician, and Kate left feeling a tad less worried, after telling him where she'd be for the rest of the evening, should Lynn need her.

Sam's Jeep was nowhere in sight when she arrived at the cabin, but the door was unlocked. She went to the kitchen with

the notion of fixing dinner and found a pot of fresh vegetables—carrots, broccoli, peapods, and onions—chopped and ready for what looked like a Chinese-style stir-fry. Stuck in a book, lying on the counter, was a note penned in straight, definitive strokes: *I'll be back in time to cook. You relax. Read this, if you want to. Sam.*

Smiling, Kate looked at the book, which was tattered from numerous readings. The author was a physician with impressive credentials, and the back-cover blurb described the book as a collection of accounts given to the physician by people who had experienced death. Thumbing through the first couple of pages, Kate walked slowly toward the couch. And there she spent one of the most thought-provoking hours of her life.

Sam, it seemed, was not alone. Rather, he was part of a growing number of people, most of whom had suffered a grave physical crisis—heart attack, drowning, or the like—that by all natural laws should have killed them but had not. In some cases, improved resuscitation techniques had brought the victim back, either from the brink of death or shortly after clinical death occurred. In other cases, though—cases like Sam's—no apparent reason could be found to explain why the victim, who had been declared dead, was suddenly alive again. In all cases, those who'd had close brushes with death, in the process of trying to assimilate the extraordinary experience, found that their physicians were either useless or, worse, downright obstructive.

Kate immediately understood the problem from the medical point of view. Nothing in her training even began to address how to help a patient who related a story such as the one Sam had related to her; in that respect, at least, her training wasn't much different than, for instance, the average cardiologist's. Doctors and nurses were taught to consider the physical, not the spiritual, ramifications of death. They certainly weren't taught how to respond when a patient began telling them what had happened to their nonphysical being while vital functions had ceased.

Now, however, it seemed that a growing number of sensitive professionals were listening to and recording near-death

survivor's experiences, despite the almost universal claim among those who'd visited that noncorporeal realm that no words existed to describe it adequately. As Sam had told her, there was no language. The first thing that struck her was the phenomenal similarities among the experiences near-death survivors claimed to have had. In content, sequence of events, and detail, each story had elements in common with the others, and a few elements were present in nearly every one.

A tunnel—a vast, dark space. The dying soul moved through the tunnel, beckoned toward a light—a clear, white light, dazzling yet not blinding. The gate to heaven, Kate thought, recalling Sam's words to Francis when he'd likened the light to a sunrise seen while flying over the water. As the dying person moved closer, the brightness became a "Being of Light"—a name chosen by the book's author from among the many given by the socially and religiously diverse group of near-death survivors. Although the names the survivors used differed, their descriptions of the Being of Light did not: All were certain they'd met a superior being, and all said that, in the being's presence, they'd felt completely accepted and flooded with a kind of warmth and love that defied any description.

The purpose of the encounter for the dying soul also seemed clear. The Being of Light posed a question, not in words, but in pure thought: Was the person prepared to die?

To help answer the question, the soul was given a display of his or her life events, the events flashing by quickly, although each remaining distinct. In the review, the survivors claimed they didn't feel they were being judged, but through it they reached an understanding of what had really mattered—what they'd done that counted, and what had not. Often, the things the person had thought important, in the face of death, appeared to have been only a waste of time.

A waste of time.

How would a man meet eternity having come to such a conclusion about his life on earth? Would he be glad for a chance to try again? Or would he resent being sent away from that better place? And what would he do differently? Would he plunge into his second chance with enthusiasm and confi-

dence, knowing immediately how to proceed? Or would he hesitate, uncertain about which pieces of his old life were worth keeping and which, indeed, had been a waste of time—or, worse, genuinely wrong?

And suppose the man returned from death with some special gift? For Sam was not alone in this, either, she discovered. Telepathy, visions of the future, uncanny knowledge of subjects never studied, and, yes, healing: Not all near-death survivors acquired such skills, but many did, in varying degrees. How would the man who felt his life had been a waste view such a gift? Would he feel compelled to use it to make his “second” life into something better, something worthwhile? Would he experience it as a burden? Or would he simply feel confused?

Kate was tucked in a corner of the couch, her eyes closed in thought, when a rough male voice, coming from behind her, whispered something in her ear that made her blush furiously.

“Sam Reese, you are—”

“Hot.” His hands slid down the front of her jumpsuit to cover her breasts. “Hot and hard, from thinking all day about you and . . .”

He muttered something else that made Kate gasp—not in shock but at the instant arousal he sent coursing through her. Her head turned toward him, her fingers curling around the back of his neck, but she caught only a glimpse of windswept hair and clear gray eyes before his mouth covered hers and she was wrapped in a greeting that was both intensely erotic and achingly tender.

Finally, with his lips still nibbling at hers, he said, “I’m sorry I’m late. How was your day?”

Kate smiled. “Fine, but why do I get the feeling I’m supposed to ask *you* that question?”

“Because knowing what to say is one of the things you do best.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.” Giving her another quick kiss, he put a leg over the back of the couch and rolled across it, ending up on his back with his head in her lap. Bending a knee to lay the

lower half of one leg along the top of the couch, he got completely comfortable, then prompted, "So ask me."

Kate chuckled. "How was your day, Sam?"

"Good," he said. But then his eyes narrowed. "No. Make that great. I had a great day. Now, ask me—"

"*Why* did you have a great day?"

"I healed a kid with braces on his legs."

At her burst of laughter, he tugged on her braid. "What? You think that's funny?"

She couldn't have said what she thought it was. With his head in her lap, her hand resting on his flat abdomen, and his fingers leisurely unbraiding her hair, she was suddenly struck by the absurdity of the cozy scene.

*And how was your day, dear?*

*Oh, the usual. I healed a kid.*

*That's nice. Now, what would you like for supper? Meatloaf or stew . . .*

"I'm sorry," she said, unable to wipe the grin from her face.

Sam's eyes sparkled as he reached up to tap the dimple in her left cheek. "You think you're pretty smart, don't you?"

*No, I think I'm in love.*

"Where did you find this lucky child? Tell me about it."

His shoulders moved against her thighs as he shrugged. "Well, it wasn't a big deal—that was the great part. I went fishing over at Gogebic, and he was sitting by the lake in a folding lawn chair, with a fishing rod in his hand and a tackle box beside him. His mother was sitting a ways off, reading. He and I got to talking, and a couple of times I unhooked his line when it got hung up in the grass. We both caught a couple of pike, and I had one good size bass—" He stopped to give her a quick look. "I've been throwing them back."

"I figured that out." Her finger traced a line down the front of his blue T-shirt. "So, you and this boy were fishing together. How old was he?"

"About ten or eleven. When it came time to leave, his mother came over, and I realized this little squirt of a woman was going to carry the boy the whole two hundred or so yards

to their car, because he couldn't handle his crutches in the tall grass and soggy ground."

"And you offered to do it for her."

Sam's eyes closed briefly. "It was perfect. I put him on my shoulders and held on to his legs, and . . ." His eyes opened, his mouth slanting in a crooked grin.

"And by tomorrow he'll be walking by himself," Kate concluded.

"Hell, no. His muscles'll have to develop first."

Her brows drew together. "Then how do you know it worked?"

He started to answer, but hesitated.

"Don't tell me," she said. "You just know."

"Right. I usually know pretty quick when I touch somebody if I can help them or not." He gave her a wink. "The really good part is, by the time they realize the boy's better, they'll have forgotten all about me."

That made him happy, which made her happy. She relished those moments of happiness as he pulled her down to lie next to him, his mouth coming together with hers in a kiss that promised much more. Lying there, with her arms around him and her breasts and belly and thighs being pleasurably crushed by the provocative movement of his hard, muscled body, she would have given anything to let the moment end as it was meant to end. There was a small problem, however, in the area of her conscience.

"Sam, I have to tell you something."

"Hmm?" His mouth was trailing in the wake of his fingers as they unbuttoned the front of her safari-style jumpsuit. He'd gotten as far as her belt and was hooking his finger under the front clasp of her bra when her hand covered his to stop him.

"Doc knows," she said.

Chuckling, he went for the clasp again. "Honey, don't kid yourself—by now, the whole town knows. But we're both a little old to be sneaking in through back doors and—"

"That's not what I meant."

She held her breath as he went utterly still. Then, slowly, he moved his hand away from her bra and lifted his head to



look at her in disbelief.

“You told him?” he whispered hoarsely.

She shook her head. “He guessed. After phone calls from the audiologist and the surgeon who treated Ray Cooney—who both said what they saw was a miracle—he thought about my ankle and decided they were right. Three in a week was too much for him to pass off as an interesting coincidence.”

“Ah, come on!” He levered himself up on an elbow to look down at her. His face was rigid, and his body radiated tension. “Nobody could have guessed without—”

“Sam,” she interrupted. “I think you’ve been around big-city doctors and hospitals too long. Old country doctors don’t have as many ways to solve their problems, and that probably makes them more inclined to take a leap of faith when the occasion arises. Doc knew you’d been in all three places at the right time, with me, and he knew darned well that *I* didn’t do it.”

“But still! If you’d just played dumb, he couldn’t—”

“I did. He was convinced before he talked to me.” She drew a shallow breath. “Something else happened that clinched it. Martin Anderson called, looking for you.”

The slight widening of his eyes was the only sign of shock he displayed; yet Kate saw the emotion flickering through those crystal-clear pools, and there was no mistaking it for anything but fear.

“He was worried about you, and—”

“Shit!” Sam was off the couch before she could finish her sentence. He stood with his back to her, a hand on his hip and the other rubbing the back of his neck. “Of all the . . . How the *hell* did he find me?”

“The postmark on the letter you sent your dad last week.” She sat up, buttoning her jumpsuit. “Sam, it’s all right. Listen to me a minute.” He wasn’t listening; he was pacing wildly, muttering curses under his breath, but she went on anyway. “Anderson asked Doc to give you a message. He’s worried about you. That’s all. He wanted to know if you were all right. And he swore he wasn’t going to tell anyone where you are.”

Sam’s mouth twisted in a look of derision. “Yeah, sure.

And he said that right after he told Doc Cabot that he had the answer to all his problems living right under his nose.”

“But he *didn’t* tell Doc,” Kate persisted. “Doc *guessed*. The things Anderson said—like how he was sorry for his part in making things so bad for you in California, and how he hoped they were better now, how he didn’t want you to worry about him calling or knowing where you are—those things only confirmed what Doc was already thinking. Sam, the man’s your friend!”

“Yes, he’s my friend. And he’s done things for me no one else could do. He’s also a damned good doctor who cares about his patients and who works like hell twelve hours a day trying to make them well. He’s a *good person*.” Pivoting to a stop, he leveled a look on her. “But he’s human.”

“That’s right,” she returned, “and human beings learn from their mistakes.”

Sam drew back, his look becoming suddenly, frighteningly calm. He stared at her for a moment, then, very quietly, he said, “They sure do.” And without another word, he strode toward the bedroom.

Kate knew what she’d find before she stopped in the doorway to the smaller room. Still, seeing him haul the large duffle bag from beneath the bed, shake it out, and unzip it made every muscle in her body knot with panic.

Her heart was racing in her chest as she said, “And this is learning from your mistakes?”

“No,” he muttered, “this is correcting one before it’s too late.”

“What mistake was that?”

The only answer she got was a harsh laugh as he dropped the bag onto the bed.

“I’d really like to know, Sam. What have you done wrong that leaving is going to fix?”

“How about everything?” He walked to the dresser and yanked open the top drawer. “I went looking for a quiet, out-of-the-way place where nobody knew me. And when I found it, instead of leaving it that way, I wrecked it.”

“I see.”

Snatching a stack of T-shirts out of the drawer, he headed toward the bed, where he dumped it, saying, "Everything I've done since I got here was a mistake. It was a mistake to talk to people or to try to get to know them. It was a mistake to get involved with anything or anybody. It was a mistake to pretend to myself I might be able to have something like a normal life."

"How do you know you can't have a normal life? You haven't tried."

Apparently, he wasn't going to try to answer her, either. Her short fingernails dug holes in the palms of her hands as she watched him pass back and forth from dresser to bed, emptying the drawer. But when he removed the pile of white briefs, the last items in the drawer, she spoke on a quavering note.

"I suppose last night was a mistake, too."

His hesitation as he closed the empty drawer was slight, but she knew the question had hit home. The next drawer scraped open, and he gathered up several pairs of folded jeans, turning to carry them to the bed. But after he'd dropped the clothing onto the growing pile, he simply stood there for an instant, his shoulders rising and falling in a single shuddering breath.

"No," he murmured.

But that was all he said. And the stoic lines of his face were in place when he walked into the bathroom, returning a few seconds later carrying comb, brush, razor, shaving cream, and bottle of shampoo.

She bit her lower lip. "It wasn't a mistake," she said, "but you can just walk away from it like it didn't happen."

"Dammit, Katie!" The things he held bounced on the mattress as his hands sliced downward through the air. "Do you think I want to?"

Her eyes flickered to the bed, then back to him. "I don't know, Sam. I only know you're doing it."

With a crude, violent oath, he flung himself away from the bed, halting with his back to her to run both hands through his hair. "*Why*? Why do you need to hear me say what we both know? So you can suffer a little more?"

"No, so I can suffer a little *less*." She hesitated, then added, "Or don't I matter to you at all?"

"That's crazy."

"Is it? I didn't ask you for promises or commitments, but it seems as if you might take a minute out of packing to"—her throat tightened—"to say you're sorry you're leaving."

"Would that make you feel better? If I said I was sorry? All right. I'm sorry. I'm sorry as hell."

With that, he pulled open the closet door and snatched a handful of shirts and slacks off the rack. And he went on emptying the closet, the nightstand drawer, and the bathroom medicine chest, dumping everything in a heap on the bed, as he continued. "What do you want, Katie? You want me to stick around a while longer, see how far we can stretch this out? Well, forget it. I'm not going to stay another day, another week, just so we can agonize a little longer over what we *aren't* going to have. You want to cry? Fine. That's the way you handle things. But it's not how I handle them."

"Oh, that's right," she returned, the bitter tears running down her face. "You're a *man*, aren't you? And men don't cry. And they don't get scared. Men don't *feel*. So, tell me something, Sam Reese, what does that make *you*?"

His hand hovered over the traveling alarm clock beside the bed for all of three seconds before he picked it up, snapped it closed in its case, and dropped it into the canvas bag.

Kate was beyond caring what he thought of how she handled things, as she sobbed, "How long is it going to be before you admit that men—*real* men—are human beings, and that they *do* get hurt and scared? Or aren't you ever going to admit it? Maybe you plan to keep running away from it forever."

"I'm not running from anything," he mumbled.

"Oh, yes, you are." Taking a step into the room, she insisted, "You're running from me—like you ran from Marty Anderson and everybody else you cared about—because you're afraid I'm going to let you down. I know you've been hurt and that you've had to learn to take care of yourself. But, Sam, can't you trust *anybody*?" As he scooped up a couple of

paperback books from the dresser top and started toward the bed, she stepped into his path, grabbing his upper arms, as she pleaded, "Is it really so hard to imagine trusting me?"

He met her pain-blurred gaze for a moment with eyes that were dry and unrevealing. His voice was especially rough, though, and not quite steady as he said, "I think I've made it pretty damned clear how much I trust you. But I don't trust Marty. And I don't trust Doc Cabot."

Breaking free of her grip, he walked away, and she whirled to follow on his heels.

"That's not fair. You don't even know Doc. He's not going to use you, and he's not going to tell anybody."

Sam gave her a cynical look, then began stuffing items into the empty duffle.

She let out a slightly hysterical cry. "For pity's sake, Sam! Look around you! There's nobody here but you and me. Nobody beating at your door. Nobody begging you for help. You healed a little boy today, and you said yourself, by the time they realize it, they'll have forgotten you. And you could go on helping people like that for *years* without anyone knowing!"

"Like Doc Cabot went all of two weeks?"

"He's the only doctor in a hundred miles! He was bound to find out!"

"Yeah, and I'll keep that in mind when I look for another place to stay."

With a groan she turned away. An instant later, though, she turned back, saying, "Don't you realize the same thing's going to happen no matter where you go? Sooner or later, some smart doctor is going to figure it out. And other people probably will, too. Wouldn't you be just as well off having it happen here as any place else?"

Apparently not. He was going to leave without saying a word. He was going to walk out as if none of what had happened between them meant anything to him. As if *she* didn't mean anything to him. And she couldn't stop him. She couldn't reach him.

Pacing the distance to the window and back, Kate stopped at the foot of the bed to watch as he jammed his belongings

into the canvas bag. Jeans, toiletries, shirts torn off hangers and given a cursory fold, item after item carelessly thrown in without a moment's hesitation. As she watched, she felt the cold fingers of hopelessness steal over her, drying her tears and numbing the raw, tearing pain in her heart.

"You're not listening to any of this," she said with almost nerveless calm. "You're not listening because you think I don't understand. You think I can't possibly know what it's like for you. Well, you're right. I'm not ever going to understand how it feels to live with a gift that comes from a place—or a power—that I know only through faith."

Shaking her head slowly, she added, "But, Sam, there are a few things I do understand—like how it feels to ache inside for other people's pain, and how it feels to be exhausted from trying to meet everybody's needs, and what it's like to wonder if you're ever going to get your own needs met." She paused, her gaze taking in the sight of him silently proceeding with his task. "And something else I understand is that the only mistake you've made since you got here is what you're doing right now."

The last pair of socks was stuffed down the side of the bulging duffle, and he pulled the top edges together, tugging at the zipper. Her lower lip trembled, the pain overcoming her numbness, as she watched him lift the bag from the bed and sling the strap over his shoulder.

"But you're not going to believe me," she said. "You're not going to let anything I say matter. So, go ahead. Leave. Go . . . go live on some Arctic ice floe, where you don't have to worry about people messing up and hurting you. Or maybe"—her voice cracked as she lashed out—"maybe the hotshot test pilot can find some big, fast plane and fly away and never have to see another living soul, ever again!" She met his scowl with defiance. "Oh, but, wait! He can't just fly away from his problems anymore, can he? Because along with everything else that terrifies him, he's scared of flying, too. Scared of the thing he likes and does best. And he's *so* scared, he'd rather blame his fear on the curse he got in heaven sooner than even *try* to get over it."

“That does it.” The canvas bag landed with a thud on the floor beside the bed. With his fists planted on his hips, Sam demanded, “Who the hell do you think you are, lady? Seems to me you’re the *last* person who ought to be accusing me of being too scared to go after what I want.”

“Am I?” she retorted. “Well, at least I’m honest with myself about what scares me—which is more than I can say about you.”

“Honest! Ha!” His gaze raked her from head to toe. “What’s honest about you? Here you are, stuck in this little backwoods town, fixing old ladies’ dinners and handing out advice on teething rings and looking after women with babies in their bellies. You fill up your days taking care of other people—playing mother—just like you’ve been doing all your life. But out the side of your mouth, you say you want your *own* family. And it’s so damned clear you want one—that you were *made* for one—that even a stranger can see it! So where is it?” His mouth twisted in mockery. “And *don’t* tell me you thought you were going to get it with that ball-less wonder I met at the garage last week. No, while you’re busy accusing *me* of being too scared to go after what I want, you tell me why you wasted a year collecting tight-lipped kisses from some limp-dick moron who wouldn’t know what to do with you in bed, *if* he ever figured out how to get you there.” Shaking a finger at her, he raged, “If you’re not scared of going after what you want, tell me why it took *six years* after that sonofabitch fucked you over for another man get to you. And *then* tell me why you picked the man who looked least likely to give you what you *really* want.”

Kate fumed at his arrogance, her eyes flashing as she spoke through clenched teeth. “Is that what you think? That the reason I’m not married and raising a family is because I’m scared to go after it?”

“You got a better reason?”

“How about sterility.”

Silence rolled through the room like a thunderhead, and the force of it made him step back, the breath rushing out of him, his face going chalk white. But his shock soon turned to

horrified regret.

“Oh, Katie, I’m—”

“*Don’t* tell me you’re sorry.” She spun away, her long hair swirling in a protective cloud around her shoulders. And with her arms tightly hugging her waist, she stood shaking—shaking with anger and pain and the strain of keeping the secret for so many years.

But there was no reason to be silent anymore. Sam had melted through every barrier she’d put up around her once-broken heart, and now he was breaking it for her again. And it seemed very important at that moment that he know exactly what his leaving would do to her.

Drawing a shallow breath, she said, “I was involved with a man, another graduate student, during my last year in Ann Arbor. I wanted to marry him. But when I found out I was pregnant and told him, it turned out he didn’t want to marry me. And when I wouldn’t take money from him for an abortion, he walked out.”

Behind her, Sam swore. “Honey, you don’t have to—”

“Yes, I do.” The simple statement stopped him, and she went on. “I’ve accused you, more or less, of being a coward, and you’ve accused me of the same thing. And it may be a case of the pot calling the kettle black, but at least you’ll know the facts—as many as I know about you.”

“I don’t need to know any facts to see that either of us accusing the other of *anything* is about the dumbest thing we could be doing right now.”

“You’re probably right,” she replied. “But I’m going to tell you, anyway—and you’re going to be quiet and listen.” And, lifting her chin a little, she went on. “After Rick left, I was . . . well, it was pretty bad. But it tells you something about how much I loved him—or didn’t love him—that after I’d cried for a couple of days, I didn’t care that he’d left. He was expendable. But the baby . . . the baby wasn’t.”

When she heard Sam start toward her, she took a couple of steps away from him, stopping at the dresser. She avoided



looking in the mirror, though, not wanting to see him behind her, watching her, as she continued. “For four months I walked around trying to figure out what to do. I was close to getting my master’s, and I didn’t want to quit. I wanted . . . I wanted to come home, at least to have the baby. But in a small town, being pregnant and unwed is about as scandalous as it gets. And my family—” She broke off, shaking her head. “You’ve met them. They’d have been devastated to think I’d ever do something wrong. But *I* didn’t feel as if I’d done anything wrong, and I wanted that baby more than I’d ever wanted anything in my life—except my mother, when she died.”

With a flustered gesture, she explained, “So, I felt like I couldn’t go home. And I didn’t want to quit school. And it got to be pretty hard, trying to go to classes and worrying about what I was going to do. But then”—she hesitated, her vision blurring as she watched her fingertip trace a knot in the pine dresser top—“the problem solved itself. The baby died. I was a little over five months pregnant, and one day, it just . . . stopped moving.”

Lifting her shoulders a little, she murmured, “It happens sometimes, for no apparent reason. And when it’s early, it’s harder to feel the movements anyway—especially with a first baby, when you don’t really know how it ought to feel—so it’s easy not to notice for a long time. Then, when you do start to miss the movement, you think at first, ‘Oh, the baby’s just sleeping, and in awhile it’ll wake up.’ But it doesn’t wake up, and finally you start worrying.”

She closed her eyes, but the memories became too chilling that way, and she opened them again. “I walked around for weeks, not knowing—or, at least, not admitting it—until I went for my six-month prenatal visit, and the doctor couldn’t find a heartbeat. He wanted to do a sonogram right then, and I made up an excuse about not having the time. I was afraid. I knew in my heart what had happened, but I wasn’t ready to face it. I just couldn’t accept that my baby was dead because . . . well, I’d spent most of my life taking care of my mother’s babies,

and those babies had grown up and were starting to have babies of their own, and . . . and it felt as if I had to have one of *my* own or . . . or, somehow, my existence wouldn't be justified." With a tiny wave of one hand, she admitted, "It wasn't a good reason. It wasn't rational. But that's how it felt—like my life would be meaningless if I didn't have that baby."

She sighed, a broken, quiet sound. "A week after that doctor's visit, I started having contractions. Then I couldn't pretend anymore. Still, I waited until my water broke before I did anything about it."

Swallowing her tears, she uttered a tiny, humorless laugh. "It was stupid. I knew I was risking infection, but I guess all the information and training in the world don't guarantee a person will do the right thing when they're as emotionally upset as I was. Anyway, I eventually called an ambulance, because I couldn't drive, and about twenty minutes after I got to the hospital, I miscarried. The baby . . . it was a boy."

Raising her watery gaze to the mirror over the dresser, she saw Sam standing an arm's length behind her. He was watching her with eyes that held a world of sadness, and she held his gaze as she continued.

"That should have been the end of it, but it wasn't. The antibiotics they pumped into me didn't keep me from getting an infection—a bad one. And after it was gone, I kept having problems. So my doctor sent me to a specialist, who did some tests, and, finally, they told me . . ." She drew a sharp breath. "They told me the problems I was having were related to the infection. They recommended a hysterectomy. I said no, because I couldn't face that, either—the idea of *never* having a baby. Okay, they said, but I had to understand, there wasn't anything else they could do. I could expect my life, until menopause, to be about pain management. And they figured, before too long, I'd get pretty sick of that and come to see it their way. After all, I didn't need my uterus anymore, anyway, because"—she hesitated, then finished in a rush—"because with all the scar tissue the infection had left in me, the chances

were zero to none that . . . that I'd ever be able to get pregnant again."

Watching in the mirror, she saw Sam's gaze rake over her back, then snap up to meet hers once more—crystal-clear eyes that couldn't hide the spark of hope that suddenly flared in them, a spark followed immediately by a look of intense urgency. It was exactly the look she'd expected to see.

"But, Katie," he began, "if it's scar tissue, maybe I—"

"No!" She jerked away when he reached for her, spinning to face him as she backed toward the doorway. Every nerve and muscle in her body was trembling, and her voice had a hysterical edge to it as she insisted, "I don't want you to touch me."

"But you could—"

"No!"

"Honey, at least let me—"

"Don't!"

Her back hit the door frame, and she shrank against it, her hands splaying wide across her belly as if to hide it from him. She had to tilt her head to look up at him as he stopped mere inches in front of her. "I'm going to tell you what I told Rick Sommers to do with his money for an abortion. Keep it. I wanted him, not his money. And I want you—not your almighty gift."

He stared at her for an instant with a look of baffled disbelief. Then he spoke almost desperately. "Katie, please, don't do this. I know you're mad, and you've got a right to be. But if you let me—"

"I said don't touch me!"

His hands lifted to her shoulders. "But, honey, I want to—"

"No!" And when he took a breath to argue further, she added quickly, "If you ever put your hands on me again, Sam Reese—for *any* reason—you had better be ready to marry me."

It was all she could think of to stop him, and it worked—like a fist in the gut. He looked at her in open-mouthed astonishment, and, an instant later, his hands fell to his sides.

Shaking inside and out, her arms wrapped tightly around her middle, she nodded. "That's right. Marriage. As in building a good, normal life together. If you want children, I'll let you try to make it so we can. And if you don't, well, I've spent six years thinking I wouldn't ever have any, and I guess I can go on thinking it. But I'll tell you what I can't do." She shook her head slowly. "I can't let you fix it so I can have another man's children. Because after last night, the only babies I'm ever going to want are yours."

The silence that followed her statement was total. They simply stared at each other, Kate feeling as if she'd been cut open and left to die, Sam looking as if he'd been drop-kicked into hell. For several long minutes they watched the other suffer, and she read in his eyes all the things he couldn't put into words. The disbelief and the loneliness and the aching emptiness that longed to be filled. And the struggle—hope against fear—and, finally, the gut-wrenching ambivalence.

"Katie, I . . ." He shook his head. Then, with a softly muttered oath, he turned away, taking a few steps out of the doorway, into the main room, before turning to face her. And, again, he tried. "I don't know—" But he broke off, his chest heaving with the rapid pace of his breathing.

He didn't know what to say, she thought, because he couldn't say what she wanted to hear. He cared. He cared a lot. But he didn't care enough. And somehow, that hurt worse than if he hadn't cared at all.

She started to say she was leaving, and he began to say something, too; but then, his breath caught, and his gaze flashed across the room toward the door. She'd heard it, too—a car door slamming. A second later, someone banged on the door.

"Forget it," Sam growled. "I'm not talking to anybody until we've finished this."

"It is finished. Besides"—Kate shook her head when he started to protest—"I've got a patient up the road, in the hunter's lodge. I told her husband I'd be here."

The pounding came again on the stout pine door, and he bit

out an angry curse as he strode across the room to answer it.

She stayed where she was, wiping the tears off her face while he opened the door, but the sight of a wild-eyed Erik Nielsen sent her hurrying across the room.

“Kate!” Relief washed over Erik’s youthful face when he saw her. “I’m sorry to bother you, but—”

“It’s not a bother.” She quickly introduced him to Sam, standing stone-faced and silent beside her, then asked, “What’s happened?”

Erik stepped through the doorway, and she could feel the panic vibrating from him. “Something’s wrong,” he said. “I went in for dinner, and Lynn was crying and saying she needed you, and—”

“Is she bleeding?”

He shook his head. “No, but everything—her clothes and the sheets—everything is drenched.” Running a hand through his blond hair, he rasped, “She just keeps crying and saying it hurts and that she’s scared she’s going to die, and—”

“Erik, slow down.” Kate took his hands and gave them a squeeze. “It sounds like Lynn is in labor, and women say some pretty crazy things when—”

“But she *can’t* be in labor! She isn’t due until—”

“I know, but the thing you’ve got to do is—”

“Won’t the baby die if it’s born now?”

Kate struggled for an instant with her own fear and raw nerves. Then, by act of sheer will, she shoved everything else aside and spoke as calmly as she could. “Thirty-four weeks is early, but these days, babies born even earlier can be just fine. Lots of factors are involved, and we don’t have time for me to explain them. We’ll get Lynn to the hospital, and a neonatologist will be right there when the baby’s born. But Erik”—her brow furrowed in warning—“no matter what happens, I want you to keep yourself together in front of Lynn. She’s already scared enough. Is that clear?”

With a shudder of his big Nordic frame, the young man nodded, his shoulders slumping a little as some of the tension

drained out of him.

Kate gave him what she hoped was a reassuring smile. “Okay. I’ll follow you in my truck.”

But when she started out the door after him, Sam’s arm blocked her way.

“Sam, I don’t have time for—”

“What didn’t you tell that kid?”

“I didn’t tell him much of anything. You heard me—”

“You know what I mean.”

Her gaze flashed upward to his.

He cast a quick glance at Erik, climbing into his battered pickup, then looked back at her. “Do you want me to come with you?”

She returned his troubled gaze steadily. “I did my job alone before you got here, and I’m going to keep doing it after you’re gone. So whether or not you take the time, in your hurry to leave, to maybe solve one more of my problems is up to you.”

And with that, she brushed past him, out the door.

## Fifteen

“Pant, Lynn. Don’t push.”

“Kate, I— I’ve got to. I can’t—”

“Yes, you can, sweetie. Pant—light and high, like a puppy. Give me one more second.”

*Give me long enough to get you to the hospital.* But Kate knew, even as she carefully slipped a practiced hand inside Lynn’s straining body, that they weren’t going to make it.

“Okay, try to relax,” she said. “I’m going to be very, very gentle. I just need to know what’s going on.”

The young woman was whimpering and trembling from an hour and a half of bone-racking labor, but at least she wasn’t hysterical anymore. The sound of her screams had chilled Kate’s blood when Erik and she had walked in the front door of the lodge five minutes ago. She didn’t blame Lynn for being hysterical. What she was feeling made her want to scream a little herself.

“Well,” she said, “the good news is, this is going to be over soon. The bad news is, I don’t think we’re going to make it to the hospital.” *And the frightening news is, I can’t tell if you might bleed to death before the ambulance gets here.*

With the memory of Lynn’s slight bleeding the week before, Kate was very aware that she didn’t know the cause of the episode. If she did a thorough exam, though, which might verify one or the other of several possibilities, she could start a hemorrhage. That Lynn was almost fully dilated and hadn’t started to bleed was somewhat hopeful. In any case, Kate realized, she couldn’t do a thing to stop this baby from being born, and it was happening too quickly to try to take Lynn to

the hospital herself.

“Kate, I . . . I want to push again. Please, I—”

“I want you to try really hard not to. Give me a minute to get ready here.” Kate snapped off the disposable glove, tossed it into the wastebasket beside the bed, and looked up to meet Erik’s terrified gaze. “Go radio for Doc. Tell him to call for an ambulance and to get out here.”

With one glance at his wife, Erik raced from the room.

Kate flew into action. Talking to Lynn, reassuring and directing her constantly, she checked the young woman’s blood pressure and pulse, and listened to the baby’s heartbeat. She also put an IV needle in Lynn’s arm—“Just in case,” she said.

Transforming the bedroom into a suitable place to give birth came next, not an easy task amid the piles of plaster dust and peeling wallpaper. The smell of fresh paint from the corridor outside the room burned Kate’s nostrils as she replaced the soaked sheets with sterile ones. Another sterile sheet went over a small wooden table, which was then quickly covered with piles of gauze pads, towels, scissors, syringes, clamps, and the other tools of her trade. In five minutes’ time, she scrubbed and doused everything, including Lynn, with antiseptic, and what she couldn’t scrub and douse, she covered with a sterile sheet.

She’d stuck several clips in her hair, wound and knotted on the back of her head, and was returning to the bedroom from the adjoining bathroom, where she’d washed her hands and forearms for the second time, when Erik ran into the room.

“I can’t get it to work,” he announced breathlessly. “The radio—it’s broken again.”

Stifling the urge to shout her outrage, Kate was about to tell him to go use the one in her truck when the look on Erik’s face stopped her. Her head snapped around, her gaze following his to the bright red stain on the white sheet beneath Lynn’s hips.

“Lynn, stop pushing and pant,” she ordered, sliding quickly onto the bed. “Erik, help me get her head down. That’s it. Now lift her hips while I put these couple of pillows under her.”

“What’s wrong?” Lynn gasped.



“Sweetie, you’re bleeding a little. Nothing to worry about. I’m just going to hook up this IV, and . . . there, that’s it. Now, I want to listen for a second and see how the baby’s—”

“Kate . . . I don’t know . . . how long I can keep from—  
Oh, God . . .”

“Pant, Lynn. *Don’t push.*”

With her forehead pressed to the fetoscope held against Lynn’s stomach, Kate counted heartbeats until she was certain the baby was all right—for the moment, anyway.

“Erik”—she looked at him hovering on the other side of the bed—“use the CB in my truck. Tell Doc that Lynn’s ready to deliver and that she’s bleeding. Forget the ambulance—I want a medevac chopper. Fast.”

Erik nodded once, then ran for the doorway. At the same time, Kate saw Lynn’s belly grow taut with another contraction—and another couple of ounces of bright red blood gush out of her.

“Wait! Erik, stop!” Jumping off the bed, Kate ran into the hall, almost colliding with him as he swung around to face her.

“Go get Sam,” she told him.

“Sam? You mean, the guy—”

“Yes. The keys are in my pickup. Radio Doc on the way. Tell Sam . . . tell him I need him.”

*And please, God, let him still be there.*

It didn’t matter that the thought of being with him was impossible. Nor did it matter that an hour ago she’d sworn he was safe here and that no one would try to use him. It didn’t even matter that she’d told Doc she’d never ask Sam to use his gift for her purposes. Lynn’s life, and her baby’s, were in grave danger; she’d have sold her soul to save them. And all she was doing in asking Sam to help was selling her future—which she’d already lost, anyway.

If he was there, he would come. She didn’t doubt that. Because he’d never be able to say no, any more than she would.

Sam’s boots clomped on the bare wooden boards as he paced back and forth in front of the open cabin door. He’d

headed after Katie half a dozen times, only to turn around and come back. He'd started to fix supper, but he was too agitated to eat. Finally, he'd tried to pack up the things he'd left around the cabin's main room, but when he'd carried the items into the bedroom to stick into his duffle, Katie's words slapped him in the face: "*The only babies I'm ever going to want are yours.*"

Was she crazy? She wanted to marry him? Had she really thought about what she'd be letting herself in for? Hell, forget that. She hardly even knew him.

But as he paced to the couch and his gaze fell upon the half-hidden book tucked behind the cushion, open to the page where Katie had left off, a quiet voice inside him said, *She knows you. And she knows better than anybody what she'd be getting into. So stop looking for an easy way out of this and be honest.* Hell, yes, for once in your life, Reese, be honest.

Honest was that Katie wanted to marry him, and she wanted his babies. *His* babies. He knew what that meant; he wasn't *that* dishonest with himself. But he was too scared to put it into words. Yes, scared. Shaking, sweating, pack-and-leave scared. And the worst part was, he didn't even know why.

Leaning straight-armed on the back of the couch, staring blindly at the cold hearth in front of it, Sam asked himself what could happen. What was the very worst thing that could happen to him if he stayed here and . . . say it, Reese . . . let himself love Katie, and let Katie love him?

Was it the people who *might* come banging on his door, asking for his help? Or Marty, whom he frankly missed, flying up with a patient who was beyond his own skills? Or Doc Cabot, who practically reeked with integrity, trying to use him? Maybe it was people finding out what he could do, then looking at him like he was . . . like he was God.

He hated that. More than anything else, it angered him and made him feel strange and isolated. Still, he understood why people reacted that way to him, and he even thought he could handle it if there was at least one person who really

knew him—who knew he was only a man. Yes, he truly believed he could put up with the rest if he had just one person, one real friend, to whom his being a man meant more than his being a healer.

So why had he just spent an hour packing to leave her?

*Because you're living in the past, that same quiet voice whispered. You're leaving her before she has the chance to hurt you. That's how you learned to survive, even though it never really gave you what you needed or wanted. But it's time to let the past go, Sam. It's over. You're not the man you were before. And if you'd give yourself the chance—the chance Someone else already gave you—you could be a better man.*

It was true, his opinion of himself hadn't been too hot since he'd had to endure that unearthly replay of his life. It wasn't that he'd been a bad person. But the next time he faced that final life review, he wanted to know he'd been a truly *good* person . . . the kind of person Katie was. The kind she should have for a husband and a father for her children.

The rock-bottom truth was that Katie deserved a better man than the man he'd been. She deserved the man he could *be*. The man he felt himself becoming. She deserved a man with courage that matched her own. Which was not the courage to risk physical death in an airplane but the courage to risk his heart in love.

It was a risk he'd never taken, and the thought of it chilled him to the marrow. Honest to God, he didn't know if he could do it. He did know, though, that he at least had to tell Katie the truth. He couldn't go running off—yes, running—without saying the things she wanted to hear about what she meant to him. And in the meantime . . .

Sam turned abruptly, one hand diving into his pocket for his keys, the other snagging his jacket off the hook by the door on his way out. Maybe Katie didn't need his help—he figured if she'd really been worried about this woman she'd have said so—but he wanted to be with her, anyway. Besides, that kid, Erik, had looked about as scared as he could get. If nothing else, he could lend a little friendly support to his neighbors.

Sam nearly collided with Katie's pickup at the place his drive met the old lake road. The pickup came bouncing into the turn, and Sam had to yank the Jeep off the road to avoid a collision. The pickup swerved, ending up with its front wheels in a deep rut and its back end blocking the road.

"Shhhhhhit." Sam drew a steadying breath. But the breath caught in his throat as he recognized not Katie but Erik, jumping out of the cab and running toward him.

It was dark but for the beams of the two vehicles' headlights, the overcast sky making nightfall under the thick cover of leaves that much blacker. Sam didn't need to see the younger man's face, though, to know he was wild with panic. His voice was filled with it as he grabbed the door of the Jeep and gasped, "Kate said to tell you she needs you!"

"Jump in," Sam ordered. "You can get the truck later."

"Can't!" Erik shook his head. "Gotta get it off the road. Doc's coming. Probably the medevac crew, too, since the best place to land the chopper is—"

Sam didn't wait to hear what else Erik had to say. Throwing the Jeep into gear, he plowed through the underbrush to get around the disabled pickup. As he hit the road, he shouted to Erik, "Get that truck out of the way if you have to take it apart to do it!" And then he was flying.

"Katie! Where are you?" Sam stopped inside the front doorway of the derelict wooden building, listening for an answer.

It came, faintly, down the long hall that led past the stairs. "Here! At the back of the hall off the kitchen!"

He raced down the hallway, through the large kitchen, and into a narrow corridor of rooms. Slowing, he heard Katie speaking in that calm, gentle way she had, and he let her voice guide him toward the open door at the end of the corridor. As he approached, he heard her say, "Try to take it easy, Lynn. Pant as much as you can. I know it's hard, but—"

She broke off when he swung to a halt in the doorway, his hand gripping the frame. His gaze went straight to hers, locking briefly—long enough for him to read the fear in her dark

eyes, fear he understood the instant his gaze fell upon the woman lying on the bed.

“God Almighty . . .” Nothing he’d faced before had prepared him for this. It wasn’t only the blood—and there was enough of it, soaked into the pile of towels and gauze pads on the floor by the bed. It was seeing what should have been a natural, life-giving event turned into a nightmare. Mostly it was the helplessness, the utter vulnerability, of the young woman suffering the nightmare.

Quickly, Sam crossed the room, stopping at the foot of the bed, his hand going to Katie’s shoulder to give her a gentle squeeze, though his gaze never left the young woman.

“Tell me . . .” he said quietly.

Katie murmured a response. “She’s not in shock, but she’s close. The baby’s small, and he’s coming fast, but I’ve been trying to hold her back from pushing because it seems to make the bleeding worse. But the baby’s probably losing oxygen with the bleeding, and if I can’t get him out soon, he’s—”

“Give me a minute.”

Moving slowly to the side of the bed, his gaze skimmed the young woman’s blotchy face, the dark hair plastered to her head with sweat, the rounded belly that even to him didn’t look as big as it should be. She couldn’t have been a day over twenty, and as he saw her face contort with pain and effort, as he listened to the sounds coming from deep within as she worked to give birth, it occurred to him that he was being given yet another lesson in courage today.

Suddenly, she went all-over limp, her breath rushing out and her face turning ghostly pale. When her dark blue eyes opened and she saw him standing over her, she drew a quick breath, her look instantly becoming wary.

*Careful*, he thought. *You can’t go bulldozing your way into this one. She might be bleeding to death, but if you want to help her, you’re going to have to win her first.*

“Who . . . Kate?” Her hand fluttered in embarrassment over the blanket covering her from shoulders to hips.

“It’s all right, Lynn,” Kate put in quickly. “This is Sam. He’s a friend of mine, and he was in the Navy medical corps,

so he's going to help me. Okay?"

The medical corps? That was a good one. He shot Katie a quick glance, but she didn't meet his gaze.

Making sure he kept his eyes glued to Lynn's face—not wanting her to be any more embarrassed than she obviously was at having a strange man see her in this state—he folded a leg beneath him to sit at her right side, his hand covering hers where it was clutching the sheet. “Hi, there, Lynn. You’ve been having a bad time of it, haven’t you? But Katie and I are going to take care of things, now.”

Her frightened gaze searched his face. “Where’s Erik?”

“He’s down the road, waiting for Doc.” Carefully moving a hand to her brow, he smoothed the hair out of her eyes. “He’ll be back soon, and meantime—”

He broke off when her eyes glazed; a second later, she squeezed them shut and let out a hoarse groan, her back curling forward. The instant the contraction hit, he saw the trickle of blood coming out of her become a stream. And his response to the sight of it was as instinctive as hers had been to the contraction. Without volition, he slid his hand lightly across her rounded belly, over the blanket at first, then slipping under the edge until he was feeling her tight, smooth skin.

Watching her face closely, he said, “Easy. Easy, now. Does it hurt to be touched like this?”

“No,” she croaked, her eyes still tightly closed. “Feels . . . nice, but . . . Oh, God. How can it . . . feel good when . . . it hurts *so much*?”

“Well, I don’t know,” he answered, his fingers feathering over her, seeking the source of the bleeding. “Ladies have told me it does, though.”

“You . . . you’ve seen other . . . babies born?”

“Hmm, a couple dozen, I guess. In Nam, you know. There was a lot of this sort of thing going around over there.”

It was a ridiculous lie, but it was the first thing that came to him. And it was enough to reassure her so she could stop worrying about him and put what little energy she had into pushing—and he could do what he had to do.

His palm was already tingling as it slid downward, like a

divining rod seeking water, until it settled over the lower curve of her belly. Immediately, his head started to swim, and his heartbeat slowed to pound in a steady rhythm. Within seconds, the beat of it filled his senses. His breath escaped, his eyes drifted closed . . . and he let it come.

The heat: the bright, burning heat. Let it take over his being . . . let it crowd out any thought or wish or need of his own . . . let it flood the banks of his soul until it filled every part of him, until he was lost in it and had no sense of being separate from it. He was the channel, the opening between this plane and the next, the tunnel through which, in this place, at this moment in time, the river of fiery light could flow.

And it flowed out of him, out of his hands, into the body of a woman he didn't know. Didn't need to know. The life was draining out of her, her spirit floating lightly inside her flesh, clinging to her weakening body in a courageous effort to hold on. Her will to live was strong. She grabbed at what he offered her, and a part of him, the part that remained conscious of physical realities, heard her growl with the powerful energy that infused her. She used it, put it instantly to work.

He felt the heat begin to wane, his cue that his work was finished, and he started to back off. But, suddenly, a warning signal went off somewhere inside him. It wasn't over. Her body was healed—and then it wasn't. And for a moment, he was confused.

"Katie?" His eyes opened, and he looked at her. "I don't . . . It keeps . . ."

Her brown eyes focused on his for an instant or two, then she murmured, "It keeps tearing?"

"Yes."

"You probably won't be able to stop that. But if you can control the bleeding like this . . ."

"Yes." He didn't know what she was talking about, but somehow her words made sense. Still, there was something that didn't make sense. He hesitated, his eyes losing focus as he let himself be drawn back to that other place . . . staying there for a moment, trying to puzzle it out. . . . Then, blinking a little to refocus, he met Katie's gaze again.

“Could there be . . . another place? Something . . . disconnected? Something I can’t get to, like . . .” He didn’t know how to say it—but, again, he didn’t need to.

Understanding—and a spark of fear—flashed through her eyes, and she spoke quickly to Lynn. “Come on, now, Lynn. Let’s do it this time. Let’s get this baby born. One good push. One more. He’s coming fast. Push him out. . . .”

Sam’s eyes closed again, but he took Katie’s voice with him, let her become part of the bond, let her guide him as she guided Lynn. . . .

“That’s it. Keep pushing, sweetie. That’s it. . . . A little more. . . . I’ve got one shoulder. Now, don’t let up. Keep pushing. That’s it! Oh, Lynn, you did it! You’ve got a little boy!”

“Is he . . . ?”

“Hang on a sec.”

Sam felt the change instantly—felt the draining sensation lessen, felt it ease off with the slowing of the blood, until, a moment or two later, the bleeding stopped and, without conscious effort on his part, his senses came back under his own control.

The first thing he saw when he opened his eyes were the tears hovering on Katie’s dark lashes as she clamped the thick cord attached to the incredibly tiny wet body lying in her lap.

“Katie,” he began, “do I need to—”

“No.” She swiftly covered the baby with a blanket, at the same time she worked to suction his mouth and nose. “The clamp does it. He was bleeding through the cord.” Then, in a whisper, she added, “Come on, little one, do it for me.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lynn trying to elbow her way up to see, and he put a gentle hand on her shoulder, saying, “Take it easy, sweetheart. Let Katie get him going.” *Take my word for it—you don’t want to see him yet.*

But the seconds ticked by, and the baby didn’t respond to Katie’s vigorous efforts—and Sam wondered if Lynn might end up having to look at her boy in this lifeless state. Reaching over, he placed a hand on the baby’s wet head, knowing it was useless; he wouldn’t be able to heal what hadn’t yet grown enough to live on its own. After a few seconds, when there



was no intuitive stirring inside him, he raised his gaze to meet Katie's, letting his eyes give her the answer.

Still, she wasn't giving up. She bent to her task once more, this time lifting the swaddled baby in her arms to cover his mouth and nose with her mouth as she puffed air into his underdeveloped lungs. It took several tries, but at last he gurgled. Then, with a spluttering cough, his face crunched into a grimace and he whimpered.

It was a pitiful cry, more like a kitten mewling, and Sam thought he looked damned pale—probably, he guessed, from loss of blood. But pale was a helluva lot better than blue: He was alive. The sound of his cry was enough to make Lynn start crying—just in time for Erik to come running into the room.

At the sight of the baby, the new father staggered a little, and Sam used the moment to remove his hand discreetly from Lynn's now-flaccid stomach and get off the bed. He didn't know if she'd start bleeding again when she tried to deliver the baby's life-support system, but for now she was okay. In the meantime, he was having a hard time taking his eyes off Katie and the baby.

While Lynn greeted Erik with lots of tears and kisses, Sam moved to stand by Katie's shoulder, watching the way she touched the infant, listening to the soft, coaxing sounds she made.

"So, you didn't wait for me."

Doc Cabot's voice brought his gaze to the doorway as the older man walked in, carrying his black bag.

"This one hardly waited for me," Katie returned cutting the newborn's umbilical cord, then quickly wrapping him back up in the blanket. "I only got here a little over an hour ago."

Stopping beside her, Doc took in the scene in a glance. "And I'll bet it feels like it's been an eternity," he murmured.

"Mmm," she mumbled back—and with a pointed glance at the infant in her arms, added, "And it's not over."

"Hmm. Well, let me get washed up." He set his bag down and walked quickly toward the bathroom, rolling up his sleeves.

The room was silent. Too silent, Sam thought. Erik had

propped Lynn against his chest so she could see their son; the infant now had an IV in his arm and, on his face, a baby-size oxygen mask that was attached to the portable tank sitting on the floor. It was pretty clear what the score was: This baby might still die. And Sam hated knowing there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it.

When Doc returned, he watched for an instant as Katie checked the baby's lungs for maybe the forty-seventh time in the past five minutes. Then he filled two syringes out of different bottles on the worktable, picked up a couple of other items, and sat himself down with a grunting complaint about his old bones on the opposite side of the bed beside Lynn.

"What's the ETA on the chopper?" Katie asked him, scribbling notes on a clipboard.

"About thirty minutes, I'd say," Doc answered as he gave Lynn one of the shots he'd prepared. "I sent Scott over to the McCarron place with his van to wait for them. I'd give it another ten, after they land, before they get here."

Sam caught the look the two of them exchanged. It was too long. With ten minutes back to the chopper, then forty-five minutes to Marquette, plus whatever time it took to get Lynn and the baby loaded up for transport, they were looking at almost two hours before they could get the baby to the hospital.

"What is it—about a hundred miles to Marquette?" he asked.

Katie's "Hm-mm" was distracted as she finished the note she was writing.

"Steve could have him there in a half hour, maybe less."

Her head jerked up, and Sam saw the spark of hope flicker in her eyes as her gaze collided with his.

"I can have you at Steve's in ten minutes, tops—except, what if I leave and. . . ." He hesitated, his gaze flashing to Lynn, who along with Erik, was listening intently.

Doc cleared his throat, and Sam glanced down to see him giving Lynn the second injection he'd prepared. Sam didn't understand what Doc was trying to say, but when he looked at Katie, it seemed she did.

“We can go,” she told him. Then, as her gaze dropped to the baby, she added, “I can take the stethoscope and the oxygen tank, but I’ll need some way to keep him warm. . . . Ah. Got it.” She stood quickly, saying, “Here. Hold him for a second.”

Sam reached automatically, but it startled the hell out of him when she put the blanket-wrapped bundle in his hands. Damn, for all the infant weighed, it could have been *just* the blanket he was holding. Katie had cut a tubular gauze bandage and tied one end closed to make a funny-looking hat for the infant’s head, and all he could see was the wrinkled little face behind the plastic mask. He stared at the baby, fascinated, for several moments. Then Katie’s movements caught his attention, and his gaze flashed upward. In the next instant, his mouth went dry.

“Kate, what are you doing?” Lynn’s tone was slightly horrified.

Erik uttered a strangled sound and quickly turned his head.

Doc answered the question. “She’s keeping him warm, young lady—the best way there is.”

That sure as hell was the truth, Sam thought, but . . . God, it took his breath away to watch Katie strip off her clothes without a second’s hesitation, until she was bare to the waist. Her breasts swayed as she moved up close to him—close enough that her nipples brushed the backs of his hands, and he felt them pucker and harden from the contact.

“Okay,” she said, unwrapping the infant until he was naked, too. “Now, just turn him around and lay him up against me like . . . like this. That’s right. And if you can take one of those sheets and tear it . . . Hurry—before he gets cold.”

Sam’s hands shook as he snatched a white sheet off her worktable, found the middle of it, and gave it a hard yank. Half of it was still too big, and he folded the piece in half again before wrapping it under the baby, like a sling, being careful to avoid the oxygen and IV tubes.

“That’s good,” Katie said as he brought one end of the sheet over her shoulder, the other end under her arm, and tied the ends in the middle of her back. “His head’s up, and I can

still get to him in a hurry this way. Help me put my arm . . . Thanks.”

One at a time, he pulled the sleeves of the jumpsuit up her arms, then buttoned it over the small lump the baby made. When he got to the button just below her breasts, he paused, his gaze lingering on the deep valley between them that the sling and the baby’s head didn’t hide. Then his gaze rose to meet hers.

Three aching heartbeats later, he spoke. “Is that good?”

She nodded once, slowly.

Sam knew it was crazy. The baby belonged to somebody else, and those somebodies were watching every move he and Katie made. Everything in sight was bloody, they were in a god-awful hurry, and the whole situation could hardly have been any worse. But he wanted her—right then, right there, he wanted every sensual inch of her. He wanted her gentleness and her sense of harmony with life and her unaffected, earthy sexuality. He wanted to take her and claim her and protect her. . . .

But he’d hurt her. The pain was there, in her dark eyes—pain that the past hour had only made worse. It was torturing her just to be with him, and he knew what it must have cost her to ask for his help. Yet the only choice either of them had was to play out the scene. Somehow, though, when it was over, he swore to himself and to God, he’d find a way to make her stop hurting—or die trying.

Bending quickly, he snatched the portable oxygen tank off the floor, easing the strap over Katie’s shoulder.

“Let’s get going,” he said.

She nodded. “Two seconds.” Then she went quickly to Lynn’s side.

“Oh, Kate.” The young woman reached out, her hand fluttering over the tiny lump of her baby.

“I’ll take good care of him,” Katie told her. “I promise.”

“I know you will. I’m just . . . scared.”

“I know.” Katie smiled a little. “But he’s bigger than I

thought he'd be, and that's a good sign. Let me get him to the hospital, where they can give him what he needs. He'll be waiting for you and Erik when you get there."

The new parents both nodded, and Katie swiftly gathered up a suction cup, a stethoscope, and her clipboard, telling Doc she'd leave her notes on Lynn for him to bring. Sam draped her jacket over her shoulders, then motioned her ahead of him, out the door.

"Sam."

Lynn's voice stopped him when he reached the doorway, and he swung back to meet her gaze across the room.

"Thank you."

He shot her a wink and a lopsided smile, but as he started out again, he caught the look Doc was giving him. It was knowing and wise and . . . *amused*. Sam couldn't figure what the hell was so funny about any of this, but he got the message: He didn't have anything to worry about as far as Bill Cabot was concerned.

Giving Doc a brief nod, he followed Katie down the hall.

## Sixteen

“You sure Lynn’s going to be okay?”

“Yes, I think so.” Kate hung on to the seat with one hand and the baby with the other, watching the headlights bounce on the rutted dirt road as Sam tore through the pitch-black woods. “You stopped the bleeding—all of it that I wouldn’t have considered normal, anyway. And Doc gave her a shot of blood coagulant, just in case. She should be fine.”

“So, is this baby going to make it?”

That was a harder question. “I don’t know,” she replied. “He has a collapsed lung, but I didn’t want to try to do anything about it—not under the conditions back there—unless I absolutely had no choice.” Looking down, she touched the top of the infant’s stocking-capped head. “He needs a lot of work, but if we can get him to Marquette pretty fast, I think he’s got a chance.”

“Well, let’s hope Steve hasn’t left yet,” Sam muttered.

She shot him a quick look. “Left to go where?”

“Pittsburgh. He talked about flying the Mentor down tonight, but I’m guessing he’s put it off because of the cloud cover.”

Kate braced herself as they came to the end of the track and Sam swung onto Main Street with barely a pause, ran the stop sign at the intersection, and shot out of town over the straight, even road.

“Sam?”

“Hmm?”

“You’re too young to have been in Vietnam.”

“Right.”

“Have you ever seen a baby born besides this one?”

“Nope. And I was never in the medical corps, either.”

They exchanged a glance in the darkness, and Kate half expected to hear him growl something about not needing her to lie for him. She didn’t feel a scrap of guilt about it; the end had more than justified the means. But he didn’t say anything, and she figured it was because he’d decided he could put up with her protecting him *this* time. After all, he wasn’t going to give her the chance to make a habit of it.

“Steve’s not home.”

Standing on the Fournier’s front porch, Sam listened in grim silence as Cressie explained her husband’s whereabouts.

“He came in from work and did his ground checks and whatnot, then decided not to leave tonight because of the weather. Then he got a call from the garage to go jumpstart somebody at the campground over by—”

“Is the plane fueled up?” Sam interrupted her.

“Yes, he did all that, but—”

“Did he get a report from the weather service?”

“Yes,” she said. “He always writes it down and puts it in his flight case. But I don’t understand what—”

“Where’s the flight case?”

She waved her hand in a vague gesture. “In the plane, I think, but what’s this all about?”

Sam glanced across the dark yard to his Jeep, where Katie sat, waiting. Then he looked at the plane—a hazy shadow looming in the field beside the barn.

Drawing a ragged breath, he turned back to Cressie. “Katie’s got a premature baby she has to get to Marquette. And that’s all I’ve got time to tell you.”

That was enough to put a look of horror on Cressie’s face. “Oh, no! Whose is it? Not Lynn Nielsen’s!”

He nodded, asking, “Where are the kids?”

“Asleep, but—”

“Can you drive a Jeep?”

“Yes, but . . . Sam wait!”

“No time to wait.” With a hand holding her elbow, he was pulling her down the steps and across the yard, saying, “I want

you to drive my Jeep to the far end of the field and park it, with the lights facing straight at this end. Back it up to the edge of the trees—but not under them. You can do that, can't you?"

"Sure," she said, stumbling a little in the wake of his rapid strides. "But what about—"

"Good. When you've parked it, get out and go stand on the side of the field, at least a couple hundred yards away. Then, after I take off, drive the Jeep up here and park it for me, will you?"

"But you're not going to—"

"Yes, I am. Tell Steve I'll pay him back for the fuel."

"He won't mind about *that*, for heaven's sake! I mean, it's a *baby*, and it's . . . Oh, Lord, I . . . It's so dark and cloudy, and they said it might storm! Isn't there *some* other way?"

*Some other way that won't make me scared.* That was the problem, Sam thought. Fear would look for any excuse to get out of doing the right thing.

Twenty feet from the Jeep, he swung around to face her and grabbed her shoulders. "Cressie, do you want to see your sister happy?"

Her eyes widened. "Of course, I want to see her happy. What kind of question—"

"Take my word for it. This'll do it. Now you go do what I said, and just keep telling yourself you're making Katie happy." *And I'll tell myself the same thing.*

Catching her hand, he pulled her along, letting go of her only to yank open Katie's door, as he said, "Let's go."

With a glance at Cressie, Katie took the stethoscope out of her ears, reached for the hand he offered her, and climbed out. "Hi, Cress. Did Sam tell you what happened?"

"Sort of. Is Lynn okay?"

"So-so. I'll tell you about it later."

"Where's the baby?"

"In here." She patted the front of her jumpsuit as he put an arm around her and guided her toward the plane.

A few seconds later, when the Jeep roared by them and took a turn around the corner of the barn, she hesitated, glancing over her shoulder, then at him.



“What’s Cressie doing?”

“Marking the end of the runway.”

Several steps farther on, she glanced over her shoulder again.

“Where’s Steve?”

“He’s not home.”

Her head jerked toward him, but she didn’t say a word. And she remained very silent as they hurried the rest of the way to the plane.

When they reached it, he hopped onto the wing to open the clear plastic canopy, then pulled her up beside him. He started to lean around her to move the helmet off the seat, but when she lifted a hand and laid it against his face, his head turned sharply toward her.

Their gazes met in the darkness of the chilly spring night.

“Sam, I love you,” she said.

And for a moment, he was paralyzed. No air, no sound, no strength to move. Only the words, stealing softly into his heart. Then her name—an aching gasp. And he kissed her. A hard, rough, desperate kiss. A crushing of her lips, a driving sweep of her mouth, a moment of breathing the same air she breathed. Enough to tell her, *Wait. Wait until this is over.* Enough to lock her words inside his heart.

Then he was helping her climb into the back of the narrow fuselage and making sure the IV and the oxygen tank and the baby weren’t in the way of strapping her in. He didn’t like it, but he didn’t waste time arguing when she refused the helmet, saying she wouldn’t be able to use the stethoscope with it on. It would be noisy, he told her, and they wouldn’t be able to talk because the headset was built into the helmet. The seats were too far apart for her to reach him over the console that separated them, and he wouldn’t be able to see her, either, so she was going to be back there completely on her own.

She’d be fine, she said. He shouldn’t worry about her. Still, it stunned him the way she calmly put her life into his sweating, shaking, terror-numbed hands.

He slid the back half of the canopy closed over her, then swung into the front, his long legs straddling the stick, his hands

reaching back to pull the canopy closed over his head.

The motions were automatic, procedures learned years ago. This was the first plane he'd ever flown, and it would be the first again. The difference was that, then, he hadn't had the sense to be scared—and, now, he was too scared to have any sense. Then, he'd taken off as fast as he thought his flight instructor would let him get away with; now, if he let himself stop and think for even a second, he'd freeze up solid, and they'd never get off the ground.

Swallowing constantly against the urge to throw up, he strapped himself in, pulled on his helmet, and took hold of the stick. A quick thumb on the boost pump brought the fuel pressure up, and a touch on the starter made the engine roar to life.

*You know what you're doing. You've done it thousands of times before. There's not a single good reason to be afraid of doing it again.*

The words sounded fine, but all the reasoning in the world didn't keep the memories from flooding his mind as he flipped on the lights and ran through the sketchiest checklist he'd ever performed in his life. Switches and green glowing dials blurred before the image of earth and sky tumbling out of control, until the earth won out and everything around him—and in him—exploded. The sound of his bones cracking, the smell of his flesh burning, the ungodly howl of his own screaming. The pain—the blinding, shattering pain. And the dying. Oh, yes, that. Floating out of his body, looking down to see it there, on the operating table—crushed and burned and bloodied beyond recognition, and cut wide open with all those gloved hands inside him, trying to piece him together. The sadness that he should look that way. The aching sadness that it should end like this . . .

Those were the memories that swamped his senses as he brought the power up and the plane began to roll forward.

The ground was rough beneath the wheels, nothing like concrete, and the plane jostled and bounced its way along. It's a piece of cake, kid's play, no big deal, he told himself. But by the time he'd jockeyed into position, he was ready to reach for the oxygen mask, because he was so dizzy he couldn't see

straight and he couldn't breathe for the tightness in his chest.

Then he saw the lights—the lights of his Jeep. Way off, at the end of the long, black field: bright spots of white and amber beneath the shadows of the trees. And, somehow, seeing them there made something inside him snap. All at once, his thoughts came into clear, sharp focus.

So he was scared. Out-of-his-mind scared. But what was he really scared of: flying the plane—or dying again? The answer was pretty simple; he'd never been scared of flying anything he could get off the ground. He didn't used to be afraid of dying, either. He'd had nobody he let himself care about too much, or who he thought cared about him. He'd had no commitments, no goals, no sense of the future being any different from the past. And, so, he'd had no reason to care if he died.

So he'd thought.

Never again did he want to meet the white light with empty hands and nothing he felt was worthy to show for anything he'd been or done. And he wouldn't have to; he had five months, now, of making people's lives better that he could look at and say, "This is what I've done. This is who I've been." And the only reason he had to be afraid of dying right this minute was if this baby died and he hadn't even tried to do the only thing he *could* do to save him. He couldn't heal him. But he damned well could fly him to somebody who might.

And in doing so, he'd be healing himself—finally and completely. Because right here, in this dark field, with this old any-kid-can-fly-it plane, he had the chance to reclaim that piece of his past that was worth keeping and to meld it with his present in a way that made sense. He had the chance to have everything he'd ever wanted. And suddenly it was very clear to him that the thing he wanted most in the world was sitting in the seat behind him, waiting to see if he was going to let her down.

A man might be afraid, he decided. Afraid of being hurt. Afraid of having his heart broken. But no real man would let his fear stand in the way of having the woman he loved—or of giving her everything he was capable of giving that she might need or want.

"*I love you.*" The words pulled him forward, through the

darkness, toward the lights. They steadied his hand as he loaded the stick, coaxing the nosewheel off the ground. Forward a little more . . . and a little more . . . more, until the mains came up, and, suddenly, the jostling along the rough field became a smooth glide in the air.

*"I love you."* Unfamiliar words. Never-spoken words. Words that took the plane, and his heart, soaring over the tops of the trees and upward, into the starless night.

It was going to be all right. God Almighty, *yes*, it was going to be all right. If he'd thought it wouldn't worry the daylights out of Katie, he'd have laughed, shouted, hollered a little. He didn't try to fool himself; the jumping in his stomach wasn't all excitement, and he was damned glad he was in a plane as forgiving as the Mentor because his hands weren't all that steady on the controls. Yeah, he was still scared. But he was flying the plane, and, yes, he was sure it was going to be *all right*.

One thing, though—a naked little bundle wrapped against Katie's warm skin—might *not* be all right, if he didn't find out where the hell he was going and get there. Fast.

With a silent thanks to Steve for having had the sense to give his old war bird an extra dose of horsepower, Sam headed the plane east, immediately contacting Marquette radio, who scrambled to respond to the situation. Heck, yes, bring it in, they said; they'd have an ambulance waiting, and they'd tell the hospital what to expect. They gave him the emergency frequency for his transponder that would put him on their radar screen, and from that moment on he was never alone. Flying became a matter of following Marquette's precise instructions. And in a few minutes' time, about twenty from the time he'd taken off, the lights of the airport appeared dimly below.

## Seventeen

Kate raised a hand in thanks to the state trooper pulling away from the curb, then turned to trudge through the door of the Marquette airport. It was 5:30 a.m., she could barely walk for exhaustion, and the cup of coffee and sandwich she'd had at two o'clock were no longer staving off the growling in her stomach. On top of that, she was a hundred miles from home, and as she made her way through the sparse, predawn airport crowd, she didn't know what she should hope to find: That her ride had waited or left without her.

The last time she'd seen Sam, he'd been standing on the wing of the Mentor, watching the ambulance tear off with her inside of it. There'd been no question about his coming with her; it wouldn't have been allowed. For most of the night, she'd been too busy to think about him, yet when she arrived at the information desk and discovered he'd left her a message to look for him in the pilots' lounge, other people's crises faded with the night and she was forced to face her own.

Why had Sam kissed her when she told him that she loved him? Was he saying he loved her, too? Or was it a kiss goodbye? It could have been either or both. It also could have been merely a reaction to the moment. Hadn't her impulsive words been just that? She'd simply had to tell him she loved him. And after she'd already said that she wanted to have his babies . . . well, what was "I love you" saying that he didn't already know?

Probably his kiss had been the same sort of impulsive gesture. *One last kiss before I die*—he'd been that terrified when he climbed into the plane. As hard as he was shaking, she

didn't know how he'd gotten them off the ground. He had, though, and she'd never had a flight like it in her life: encased in a bubble of plastic yet unable to see through the darkness, the roar of the engine nearly shattering her eardrums, and her anxiety over the baby, and over Sam, roiling inside her. It could have been a hellish experience, but Sam hadn't let it become one. Despite all he'd been through and was going through then, he'd gotten them to Marquette without a single waver of a wing tip—and she was fairly certain he'd done it at a speed that would make Cressie, and maybe even Steve, faint if they knew.

Kate stopped in the doorway to the dimly lit pilots' lounge, her gaze falling upon the lanky male form stretched out on the couch along the opposite wall. His denim-clad legs were crossed at the ankles, and an open magazine covered his face. He was the only one in the small room, and as she listened to the faint sound of his snoring, she wondered if he'd already made plans to go back to Rutger. It seemed like a real possibility.

She should be happy for him. She *was* happy for him. Yet it was hard not to think that, in beating the demons that had kept him earthbound, he had given her one less reason to believe that his last, fierce kiss had meant anything at all. Her love hadn't been enough for him yesterday. Today, it was even more hopeless to think it might be, not when he could go back to doing what he liked and did best: flying never-flown-before-airplanes—alone.

Crossing the room, she stopped by the couch. An instant later, she heard his breathing change, his breath catching a little, then rushing out as his hand rose to move the magazine off his face. Blinking a couple of times, his eyes were fully alert as they focused on hers.

“The baby?” he asked immediately.

Kate managed a tired smile. “I think he’s going to be fine. It’ll be a while before the doctors will say that, but they sound hopeful. You have to learn to read between the lines.”

“And Lynn?”

“Erik had her in a wheelchair outside the nursery window when I left. They were discussing names.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“You’d never know she almost bled to death last night.”

Passing a hand over his beard-shadowed face, Sam swung his feet to the floor and sat up, mumbling, “God, to be that young and foolish again.”

She was feeling ancient herself as she said, “I think they’re a little less young and foolish than they were yesterday. Erik’s talking about selling the camp and going to Ironwood to work for his dad, and Lynn’s saying she’s not taking the baby back to *that place* once they let him out of the hospital.” Hesitating, she added, “Both of them asked me to thank you, but they don’t really understand how much they have to thank you for. Sam, it was an hour before the medevac chopper got to Lynn.”

His head came up, his startled gaze flashing to hers.

“I’m sure the baby wouldn’t have lasted that long,” she said. “Not without a respirator. You bought him a fighting chance to survive. A good chance. And no matter what happens now, I want you to know that.”

He looked at her a moment longer, then, with a faint smile, he lowered his gaze. “Well, I guess he and I are even, then.”

Before she could respond, he glanced at the clock on the wall, then stood to let his gaze skim over her. “You’ve got to be beat,” he said quietly.

“Probably no more than you are,” she replied. Although, in fact, she thought he looked wonderful—sleep-hazy and unshaven and kind of glowing. The way he’d been when they woke up together, yesterday morning.

“I’m fine,” he told her. “I went to sleep somewhere around midnight. I didn’t know how long you’d be, and I knew I’d have to fly back, so. . . .”

He trailed off, and when he raised a hand to her face to brush aside a long strand of hair—one of many that had escaped the clips she’d stuck into it so many hours ago—she stiffened at his touch. *Don’t do this to me*, she wanted to cry.

*Don't touch me or be warm and tender, when you're only going to take it away. Please, just don't make it hurt any worse than it already does.*

Sensing her response, Sam hesitated, the backs of his fingers grazing her cheek. She couldn't meet his gaze but stared at the blue T-shirt molded to his chest.

Finally, he dropped his hand and sighed. "I know. I've got a couple of other scores to even, don't I?"

Kate's brow twitched into a wary frown, and she glanced at him. But he turned to snag his jacket off the couch and sling it over his shoulder. Then, catching her hand in his, he started toward the door.

"Come on, Katie. What you need is a dose of Sam's Special Elixir. It's guaranteed to cure whatever ails you. And we've got just about enough time to catch the show, too—if we hurry."

Special Elixir? The show? Her look became pained when he shot her a wink. Did he expect her to respond to his light-hearted attitude? Was she supposed to put on her usual cheerful face and play along? She couldn't have done it if her life had depended on it, and as she allowed herself to be towed through the terminal, she wondered if he knew how hard it was for her right then simply to speak to him. . . . But he *must* know.

Her confusion deepened when he gave her a sideways grin and asked, "So, how'd it go at the hospital? Did you have to spend the night explaining away another miracle—or was this just a 'highly improbable'?"

Tossing an apology to a lady she'd bumped into, Kate replied, "Neither. But if Doc hadn't been there, I might have had trouble."

"Oh?" Sam swerved around a couple of people ahead of them.

"He altered my notes on the delivery before the medevac team got there. As he pointed out to me, you may be a miracle worker, but you're not an x-ray or a sonogram—meaning, I shouldn't have used your intuition about what was going on



inside Lynn as the basis for a diagnosis.”

“But you knew when I told you—”

“Yes, I knew, but. . . .”

Stopping in front of a door that read FLIGHT SERVICE STATION, he waited for her to finish.

She avoided his gaze as she admitted, “I don’t know how I knew. I just . . .”

“Read my mind.”

She hesitated. “It seemed like that. But not words. Just images.”

He opened the door, motioning her through it, then led her across the room to a long, high counter. Leaning on the counter he turned toward her, saying, “Images are all I get. I never know what’s happening in a technical sense, unless it’s explained to me. And I’ve never had bleeding stop, then start again, like that—like it wasn’t working. It worried me, Katie, and if you hadn’t been there to give me the clues I needed, I might have given up.” His gaze skimmed her features, then met hers in a look that was far too intimate for her nerves. “I thought we did pretty good together,” he murmured.

She’d been trying not to think about how good they’d been together. It would only be one more thing to miss.

Deliberately avoiding his clear, knowing gaze, she said, “But Doc was right. Officially, we don’t know the cause of the hemorrhage. So, instead of saying Lynn had a partial previa—”

“A what?”

“A condition where the placenta covers part of the cervix. It almost always requires a C-section.” Kate shook her head a little. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. The chart now reads, ‘cause of bleeding unknown.’ Since previas aren’t a chronic or genetic thing, the chances of Lynn ever having another one are extremely slim, so—”

“So what they don’t know won’t hurt them,” Sam concluded.

“Right.”

Picking up a flight plan form off the stack on the counter

and a pen from the holder in front of him, he began filling in blanks.

She watched him as she continued. "Are you aware that whatever you do to people when you heal them seems to act like a . . . a . . ."

"Megadose of vitamins?"

"Yes. The obstetrician was pretty well flabbergasted at what good condition Lynn was in, all things considered." A small smile tugged at the corners of her lips as she added, "Doc had a great time, acting smug in front of all those hospital doctors, saying what a fine day it was that he decided to take me on as his associate, and how some Obs he's met would do well to take a lesson from me in labor and delivery management."

She watched Sam's face as he wrote, expecting to see him scowl. Instead, to her surprise, he began to chuckle.

"So, he handed you the rap, huh? How'd you get out of it?"

"I stammered a lot."

His earthy laugh turned into a bad-boy grin as he glanced up from his writing to touch a fingertip to her cheek. "You should have just flashed your dimples at them. They'd have been eating out of your hand."

Flashed her dimples? How insensitive could he be, making fresh remarks, flirting with her, like he'd been doing since the day they'd met? Yet as Kate felt the pain—and the anger—slice through her, a voice said, *Wait*. Sam wasn't insensitive or cruel, not deliberately, like this. Maybe, though, he was feeling so good about flying again that he didn't realize what his obvious happiness was doing to her. And she almost could have forgiven him for that.

Almost.

Ten minutes later, strapped in and helmeted in the back seat of the Mentor, Kate listened on the headset to the confusing radio chatter as Sam got clearance for takeoff. She didn't

understand most of what was said, but she understood something more important: He wasn't scared. He was excited, though, and despite her exhaustion and heartache, his excitement was starting to affect her, too.

It was still dark as they zipped down the runway; but the weather had cleared so that, as the plane climbed, Kate saw the first blush of dawn starting to pearl the eastern horizon. The view was breathtaking, sitting high in the low fuselage of the old military plane, with nothing in the way of seeing the pink and lavender shades seep into the sky off to her right. Below, the lights of Marquette rapidly disappeared, replaced by an unrelieved inky blackness. Finally, it occurred to her that she was looking at the deep, chilly waters of Lake Superior.

Confused, Kate glanced to the left, then down, then to the right again, where the sky was growing brighter. When Sam did a banking turn to the right to head due east, she adjusted the microphone on her headset and spoke on a tentative note.

"Sam?"

"Hmm?"

"May I ask a dumb question?"

"Honey, you can ask me anything you want."

"Aren't we headed in the wrong direction?"

"Oh, I don't know," he drawled. Then, as the first piercing ray of sunshine shot over the horizon, he added quietly, "Are we?"

But she knew he didn't expect a reply.

It came fast, much faster than it did at ground level. The top of the sun's fiery arc appeared first, in a sliver at the watery edge, its golden beams rippling over the water's surface, reflecting in its mirror. The arc grew, swelling over the rim of the earth, the light racing ahead of it. Glittering, blinding light. Higher it rose, above the horizon, a throbbing ball of golden-white fire.

It was glorious. A breathtaking display so powerful, so pure, it could make a person forget everything else. Before long, though, the sheer physical impact of such blinding light be-

came overwhelming, and Kate had to shut her eyes.

She was reaching to pull down the black visor on her helmet when she heard Sam mutter, “So much for the show.” Then the nose of the plane took a swing upward and blocked out her view of the horizon.

Instead of turning, though, Sam kept going—straight up . . . and over, until the plane heeled onto its back. For several long seconds, the waters of Lake Superior became the sky, and the sky, the ground. Then, with a flip, the sky was where it belonged again—and her heart was somewhere down around her feet.

“Katie?”

“I’m still here.”

“The important thing is, is your *stomach* still here?”

“Definitely. It’s been growling for hours. Which I have a feeling is about to become a real advantage.”

“Lets you appreciate the full effects of—”

“Don’t tell me. Sam’s Special Elixir.”

“Honest, honey, you could use a little of it. But let me know if it gets to be too much. Okay?”

But it wasn’t too much. It was wonderful. Easy, slow rolls and great, swooping loops, and heart-stopping dives where the glistening waters of Lake Superior rushed to meet them, drawing closer and closer until she was sure they couldn’t pull out of it in time. But they did, in a twisting roll, and suddenly they were climbing again, leaving Superior in their wake.

On and on it went. The little plane playing in the early-morning sky over the “shining big sea waters.” And somewhere in the middle of it, she forgot she was tired, forgot the strain of the long night. Forgot everything but the moment—and the man who was sharing it with her.

It was a lark. A pure outburst of joy. It was also a gift. A baring of his soul, as intimate a gesture as any he could have made to her. The sunrise, and now this romp in the quiet solitude of the northern sky: *This is who I am. Take it. Take what I want to give you.*

And, oh, how she wanted to. But it was only a moment, and what she wanted was a lifetime.

When the plane finally leveled out, the Michigan coast appearing in the canopy ahead, her heart was aching. It ached even more at the ardent, slightly breathless way he said her name.

“Katie?”

“Yes, Sam.”

“Let’s go home.”

*Home . . .* She thought about the way he’d said the word as they flew westward, across the green carpet of wilderness far below.

A light morning mist still hovered over the empty field when they landed.

Kate managed her straps and helmet while Sam brought the plane to a stop by the barn. She wanted to get out on her own, didn’t want him to help her, didn’t want even to look at him. For the ride, as she was sure he’d known it would, had worked its magic. She was feeling raw and vulnerable, and she knew the first tender word or gesture from him would have her crying hysterically for him not to leave her. Before she could climb out, though, he reached for her hand, and she couldn’t avoid giving it to him.

She felt the difference in him the instant he touched her, his hand enclosing hers in his strong grasp. Energy, excitement, and that underlying urgency she was coming to recognize—it radiated from him as he helped her climb onto the wing. Their bodies brushed, and his hands went to her waist to steady her. It was completely unnecessary—the wing wasn’t that far off the ground—but he kept hold of her hand, stepping down, then turning to wait for her to follow.

He didn’t speak, but, in a quick glance, she caught the intense, compelling look in his gray eyes as they searched her features. She was afraid she knew what he was thinking—that, now, they could pick up where they’d left off, with him

trying to convince her to let him make it so she could conceive. He wouldn't give up until she let him try, for then he'd be able to leave with a clear conscience, having given her the only pieces of himself he could give her honestly.

Maybe she was being a fool not to take what she could get. Yet if she let him heal her, what would she have when he was gone that she didn't have now?

Nothing. His gift would be wasted on her. For she could never have another man's child without knowing it had been Sam who'd made it possible—and without wishing the child were his.

As she walked beside him toward the Jeep parked by the back door of the house, thoughts of another confrontation like yesterday's sent shivers of dread racing through her. When the screen door banged, she glanced up, relieved to see Steve and Cressie coming out to meet them. And it flashed through her mind simply to stay and get Steve to take her home later. It didn't surprise her, though, after they'd given Steve and Cressie a bare-bones account of the night's events, to hear Sam say they had to go. Cressie offered to fix them breakfast, and Kate was about to say she'd love some when Sam said, thanks, anyway, but there was something he had to take care of.

Her thoughts—and her insides—were in turmoil as she let him guide her, with a hand on the small of her back, toward the Jeep. She was vaguely aware of Cressie's curious looks and of Sam telling Steve he'd be back later to “settle up.” It wasn't until they were headed out the long driveway, though, that the strangeness of the men's conversation struck her.

She waited until they were halfway to town—traveling at a speed that made her wonder if Sam thought he was still flying the plane—then she spoke, more to break the unbearable tension than out of any real curiosity.

“I thought Steve was flying to Pittsburgh today.”

Sam's voice was especially rough as he replied. “He decided not to go.”

“Did the man change his mind about buying the plane?”

“No.” He paused for an instant, then added, “Steve got a better offer.”

“Really? From whom?”

“Me.”

Kate turned her head slowly to look at him. “*You* bought the plane?”

Sam’s gaze remained fixed on the road as he nodded. “Last night, over the phone, when I called to let Cressie know I’d gotten you to Marquette in one piece.”

Her gaze searched his profile, taking in the set line of his jaw, the sharp angle of his cheekbone; they’d never been less revealing. His white knuckles on the steering wheel told her something, though.

“But . . . why?” she asked.

“Why do I want a plane?”

“Why do you want *that* plane?”

“Because it’s just about perfect for what I want to do with it.”

“Which is?”

“Have fun. Mostly. . . . What are you looking at me like that for?”

She glanced away. “No reason, except . . .”

“You liked all that messing around over the lake, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I . . . I liked it. A lot.”

“It was fun.”

“Yes.”

“So. . . ?”

“It just seems, if you were going to buy a plane, you’d want something”—her hand fluttered—“I don’t know. Newer? Faster?”

Sam took his eyes off the road to give her a steady look. “Am I in a hurry?”

She held his gaze as she answered. “Aren’t you?”

“Only to get you out of this Jeep and behind a closed door.”

Kate swallowed hard, panic tightening the knots around

her heart. But as he continued, the panic washed away, and her aching heart began to swell with a very different emotion.

Turning back to the road, he told her, "There might be other times I'm in a hurry, too. Like last night. But a plane wouldn't always do the job—like if there was snow on the ground, or if you needed room for a stretcher. Or, maybe, if I wanted to transport things like packages of medical supplies or people—say, a fishing or skiing party. Between the swamps and the mountains on the coast and all the trees, there aren't enough places to land to make a plane practical. So the T-34's mostly for fun, and maybe"—his gaze raked over her once, swiftly—"maybe for teaching a certain friend of mind—a friend who could stand a little fun in her life—to fly, if she's interested. For work, I need a chopper. And a place to keep them both. A big place—like the one we just passed with those pink trees and the 'For Sale' sign on the lawn. Katie, who owns that boarded-up farm?"

She had the back of her hand pressed to her mouth and could hardly speak to answer. "The M-McCarrons. They moved to . . . to Chicago about th-three years ago."

Sam reached to catch her hand, wrapping it in his as he carried it to rest on his thigh. "The property starts here, at the edge of town?"

"Uh-huh."

"Hmm. Well, I guess it's a good thing I've spent the last ten years living on a quarter of what I made."

With her lower lip caught between her teeth and her senses focused entirely on the warmth of his hand holding hers against the rock-hard muscles of his thigh, Kate struggled against the burning tightness in her throat. No, not yet. She couldn't start crying yet. But her heart was crying, *Hurry!* as they passed her house, paused at the intersection of Main and Bournier's Mill, and took the turn onto the old lake road—with Sam letting go of her hand only for the few seconds it took him to shift gears.

He let out a shuddering breath. "Later . . . when



everybody's had a chance to rest up, we'll go have a talk with Doc—figure out how this thing's going to work. We've got to get our stories straight, so people don't end up wondering how I managed to serve in every branch of the military or in wars that happened when I was eight years old. I know people'll figure out the truth sooner or later, but the longer I can put it off, the better."

"Doc said he'd . . . he'd help. He was . . . looking forward to it."

"He said that?"

"Y-yes."

"Hmph. I bet that old buzzard's got some tricks up his sleeve I'd never think of."

"He likes you, Sam. He wants to . . . to be your friend."

"Well, the feeling's mutual. So when we're through talking to him about how to keep Bourner's Crossing in the dark about me, the two of you can start making plans to look for another partner to work with you."

"That . . . could take a while. It's hard to find people w-willing to live . . . th-this isolated."

"It better not take too damned long." He flashed her a heated look. "This town's about to find out your priorities have been rearranged."

Her vision suddenly became very watery.

A half a minute later, Sam continued. "I bet Marty could come up with somebody. He's good at solving problems nobody else can solve. Besides, then I'll owe him one, and that'll make him feel better. Can't have my friends walking around feeling guilty on my account."

"Sam, I don't think I can wait anymore to—"

"Hang in there, honey." He slammed the Jeep to a halt in front of the cabin and, seconds later, pulled her out of it and into his arms. "I know the next line's mine. And I know you've waited all night to hear it, thinking you weren't ever going to hear it. I'm sorry for that Katie. I'm sorry you had to go all this time hurting." Swearing softly, he added, "But I couldn't have

done this right in an airport. And I couldn't have done it at all yesterday. If I'd tried, I'd have ended up hurting you worse than I did."

"Oh, Sam." She bit back a sob, her fingers digging into his arms to keep from falling as the last scrap of courage and strength drained out of her.

"Katie, honey, it's all right," he tried to tell her.

But the tenderness in his husky voice only made her cry harder. When her knees buckled, he lifted her to take her inside, kicking the door shut and carrying her straight to the bedroom. Standing her beside the bed, he tugged off her jacket, shrugged out of his own, and wrapped her against him once more.

The morning sunshine, filtering through the green leaves, lit the room with a soft, golden light, but the only light she saw was the clear light in his eyes as he tilted her face to kiss away the tears running down her cheeks.

"Katie . . . honey, please, don't cry," he said. "I promise, it's going to be all right."

She hadn't a coherent thought in her head, yet she was exquisitely aware of the difference in textures as she touched his face, his hair, the broad expanse of his chest against which her face was buried. "Sam, I h-have to cry. I won't b-believe this is real if I don't."

"Then you go ahead," he murmured, "and I'll just keep kissing you. . . . God, I love kissing you." His gentle, stirring kisses were being laced more and more with passion, his mouth opening on her skin, his lips tugging at her earlobe, his teeth nibbling at her shoulder.

Finally she had to ask, "Why? Sam, I don't . . . understand why you—"

"Why I'm standing here kissing you instead of . . ." Instead of finishing the sentence, he gave the suitcase sitting beside them on the floor a shove with his foot.

She raised her head from his chest to look at him, and as their gazes met, her breath caught in her throat. She'd wanted

him, but she'd never truly seen him—not all of him. Not like this. His eyes, those beautiful prisms of gray light, had given her glimpses of a man she'd come to love, but they had never before reflected such certainty, such sureness of heart. This was a man, whole and intact, who knew his mind and who had a purpose. And that purpose was . . .

Her fingers trembled as she raised them to his face, and he covered her hand with his own, turning his head to bury his lips in her palm.

"Yesterday," he began, "you said, if I ever put my hands on you again, I'd better be ready to marry you. But, Katie, I *wasn't* ready. Not until I realized that, of all the things I was scared of, the worst would be facing the rest of my life, and all of eternity, knowing I'd lost you."

"Oh, Sam." She slid her arms around his waist, holding him tightly as he continued.

"I wouldn't be here this morning if last night hadn't happened. If Eric Nielsen hadn't shown up at the door and we hadn't ended up having to fly to Marquette, I'd have left. But sitting in that plane, staring down that damned black field . . . Katie, I realized, if I walked away from you, it wouldn't just be the worst mistake I'd made since I got here. It'd be the worst mistake I'd ever made in my life."

Framing her face with his hands, he told her, "Nobody's ever said they loved me." And when her eyes widened a little, he shook his head. "Not because there haven't been people who might have. But because I've never given anybody the chance."

How could she have been so blind? She'd always known he'd probably never said the words himself, but surely, she'd thought, someone—some woman who believed she could tie him to her—had said them to him. But, no. When Kate thought about all the times she could have told Sam she loved him, all the times she'd thought he wouldn't accept it—the times she'd been afraid to tell him for fear of having her love rejected—she saw how it could be that he'd gone thirty-eight years with-

out hearing the words. And, suddenly, that last, fierce kiss that she'd thought meant goodbye came to mean something else, something precious.

She started to say, "I should have told you when we—"

"No." He stopped her with a quick kiss. "You picked the right time, just like you always do. Hearing the words then, when I most needed to hear them—" He drew a ragged breath. "I can't explain what it did to me. But I can tell you, I'd never have gotten that plane off the ground if you hadn't said it. I swear, Katie, nothing has ever made me feel as good inside as knowing you love me—nothing, except . . ." His gaze fell to watch his fingertip trace her lips, then rose to meet hers again as he said, "Except knowing I love you."

Her lips formed his name, but no sound escaped past the tightness in her throat. The look in her tear-filled eyes spoke for her, though, as, one by one, he pulled the clips from her hair. He caught the heavy curtain as it fell, angling her head as he lowered his. And then he kissed her, his mouth taking hers with a devastating tenderness, making the tears stream down her face and leaving her weak and trembling.

"I love you." His lips tugged at hers in between rough-spoken phrases. "And I love kissing you . . . and making love with you . . . and just being with you. . . . I love having you fly with me. And I love helping people together, the way we did, last night. But most of all"—his mouth covered hers for a brief, deep joining—"Oh, honey, I love telling you I love you and having you melt like this, all over me. Marry me, Katie. Let me tell you I love you for the rest of our lives."

"Oh, Sam . . ." She turned her face into the pocket of warmth where his neck met his shoulder. "Yes, I'll marry you. And I'll move to the desert with you, if you want to go back. I'd never ask you to fly helicopters when you really want to fly planes with names like Pegasus."

"We're not going anywhere," he growled. "And I don't want you believing it's some big sacrifice on my part, either. I came here thinking I needed some temporary peace and quiet,

but I'm starting to see that it's got to be permanent. I think I'm always going to need a place like this—a quiet place I can call home, where I can pay attention to what's going on inside me without a lot of distractions from the outside."

A trace of humor crept into his voice as he added, "If I feel like I'm getting lazy and need a challenge, I'll make a trip down to Mojave and tell Chris I want to take his latest toy up for a spin. But, honest, I think the chances of that happening are about zero, because I've got all the challenges I'm going to need or want right here."

His hands roamed her back and hips, lingering on the curves. "This is a good place, with good people. A good place for a pilot to make a living or to be useful in an emergency—or just to enjoy flying for its own sake. It's a good place to meet kids with hearing problems or braces on their legs. And it's a good place for me to learn more about this new envelope I've been given. I think I'm ready, now, to see how far I can make it stretch—which, from what they told me at the research center, could be a lot further than I've stretched it up until now."

As his lips nuzzled at her temple, he added, "I think I'm going to be able to stretch myself in all sorts of new directions, being married to a woman who loves me and understands what I'm about, and who seems to know just what it takes to keep me sane. And besides all that"—his hands slid down her sides to tighten on her waist—"she likes to fish . . . and to mess around in planes . . . and she makes love like no other woman I've ever known. And from what she tells me"—his hand slipped between them to slide across her belly—"yeah, I've got a feeling she's going to give me the prettiest, dimple-cheeked babies a man could ever want."

Kate squeezed her eyes closed, whispering against the pulse in his neck, "Sam . . . Oh, Sam, can you really . . . ?"

"Oh, yeah," he whispered back. "I can really."

She hadn't dared ask, hadn't dared hope or even let herself think about it for fear she'd be one of those his touch wouldn't heal. But hearing the certainty in his voice brought

the words, and the tears, pouring out of her.

“Oh, Lord, Sam, I *do* love you, and I’ll make you such a good wife. I promise, I will.”

“You think I don’t know it? You think I’m not going to wonder every day of my life how I got this lucky? Katie, I swear to God, I’m going to do my best to be the kind of husband you deserve.”

“Oh, I know. I know you will.”

“I’m going to take such good care of you.”

“Sam, please, kiss me. Please, I—”

He kissed her again and again, hot, wet, abandoned kisses. Luscious, deep, swirling kisses. He kissed her until she was gasping for breath. But he didn’t give her time to breathe, and she didn’t care. She was aching, melting . . . burning with a need fueled by a staggering, almost blinding happiness after so many long hours of heartache.

Her hands shook as they tugged at his clothes, and she made a tiny, frantic sound when her efforts got her nowhere. Finally, she simply clung to him as he swiftly undressed them both, peeling the clothes from her trembling body, then tearing off his shirt at the same time he kicked his jeans and briefs aside. His gaze held hers as he lowered her to the bed. Then, as he came down to lie on top of her, his eyes closed, his breath catching and a look of almost tortured pleasure crossing his features at the first full contact of their heated flesh. Settling onto her, he whispered her name, and she wrapped him close, sinking into the mattress beneath the marvelous, solid weight of his body.

He was warm and hard and male. He was hers. And she needed him desperately, needed him inside her that very instant, before she died of this terrible, throbbing emptiness. But he was determined, it seemed, to set her on fire. That’s what his hands told her as they raced over her, stroking her, molding every curve and hollow. He said, it, too, in words—dark, erotic words muttered hoarsely against her lips, her thighs, the curve of her belly. Finally, when his mouth opened over the taut peak

of one breast, his cheeks going hollow beneath her fingers as he drew her inside, she cried out.

“Sam, please! I can’t wait, I—”

“It’s gonna happen, Katie. Right now. All of it.”

And then he was kneeling between her legs, draping her thighs over his, and pulling her down the bed toward him. He lifted her until she felt the velvet-smooth head of his erection testing the wet heat at the entrance to her passage. When he didn’t complete the union, she let out a throaty, almost agonized moan.

“Easy, honey,” he soothed.

Yet he held back, and she opened her eyes to see him watching his hands as they traveled slowly up her thighs across her belly, her breasts, her shoulders, then, just as slowly down again.

“Sam, please, you’re—”

“Shh, it’s okay. Feel me . . . there?”

“Yes!”

“I’m not going anywhere. But I need a minute to do this right. And, honey, that’s the only way I’m going to do it.”

She couldn’t imagine anything being any more right. But then she began to feel it: that shimmering warmth, emanating from the palms of his strong, long-fingered hands. Like the first flickering tongues of flame, it began to lick at her skin, sensitizing it, bringing it to life. And she realized suddenly, with a small, startled gasp, that his hands flowing over her were telling her that he’d meant what he said: It was going to happen, right now—*all* of it. He intended not only to make love to her but to heal her. He wanted, needed, to do both at once—never mind whether or not it was even possible.

With her body completely vulnerable, she lay panting and shaking, her hands clutching the bedspread, watching the sweat appear on his forehead and upper lip. His concentration was total, an astonishing thing to witness, as his hands continued to move over her with exquisite care and deliberation. The warmth built slowly, sinking into her, sinking deep inside to awaken her

soul the way he'd awakened her body; it grew until, finally, it equaled the liquid heat of arousal that he'd kindled in her.

She didn't expect him to speak, knew it was hard for him when he was like this, yet he did, in a rasping, broken whisper.

"Last night," he began, his eyes drifting closed. "Seeing you with the baby—both of you naked like that . . . It was the sexiest thing I've ever seen in my life. The most beautiful thing I've ever seen anybody do. And I'll never be able to say . . . to say how it made me feel to hold that little body up against you . . . to feel your soft skin and his soft skin touching my hands . . . to see his head lying there, between your breasts." His hoarse whisper faded until it was barely audible. "I want to see you do that with *our* baby, Katie. I want to come inside you and see your belly get big . . . and know there's part of me growing in you." And as his hands slid downward, over her abdomen, to settle over her womb, he finished. "I want to see that baby slide out of you and hear it holler—loud, like it ought to sound. And I want to hold it and touch it . . . and know it's mine."

"Sam . . . Oh, Sam . . ."

"Take it, Katie. Take it all—everything I want to give you. Let my love work a miracle on you the way yours has worked one on me."

And with a cry of absolute surrender, she yielded herself, and every desire or hope she'd ever had, to him.

He came into her slowly, filling her body as he filled her soul to bursting with the flesh and the spirit of his being. Filling her so entirely that, for a moment, she felt as if she'd never be able to accept the full, shattering power of what he was giving her, for her body and soul together didn't seem enough to hold it.

She cried out once more, a little frightened. And then, it was as if some part of her did burst open, for suddenly there was no sense of being separate from him. No limits between them. No limits at all. There was no *him* or *her*. No needs or wants or thought or emotions. No fear.



There was only the heat. Throbbing white heat. They were dissolved in it, lifted by it, floating in a radiant, glowing beam of it. Like the beat of a pulse, it thrummed in a rhythm that was the measure of all time. And it was sexual and spiritual and mortal and immortal. It was all things possible. It was the best of what can exist between a man and a woman when they open themselves to each other and to the power of love. It was the piece of heaven that can exist on earth when human hearts allow it a place to dwell.

She wanted to stay there forever, to remain in that place of total rightness. To exist there with him, with the essence of life flowing from him into her in a steady, endless stream. The knowledge that she was bound, body and soul, with a man from whom it seemed she was drawing her life's breath filled her with awe. So much so that she began to wonder how she ever would give it back to him. How could she, a mortal woman, ever hope to satisfy the needs and desires of a man who could give her this most unearthly gift?

That thought came with the awareness that the energy had shifted. Reality was breaking up into its different planes and separateness, returning. Slowly, her senses were being given back to her, gradually coming under her own control. And with the awareness of her flesh being distinct from his, of his hands still lying low on the curve of her belly, came the intuitive answer to the question: She knew how she would give back to him the gift he'd given her. She would return it in kind. A perfect gift for a perfect gift, both gifts born of love and joy.

But he would have to wait for his. And as her senses began to clear, sharpening to a level of clarity that was acute, she realized he hadn't yet given her *all* that was necessary to make her gift to him possible. He might be able to evoke the light of heaven, but he still lived and breathed in this world. And he would go on living and breathing in the world—with her—for a long, long time.

At that moment, she was very aware—and very glad—that the hands now gliding over her breasts were simply a

man's hands, that the muscled, hair-dusted, and scarred body coming down to cover hers was merely a man's body. That the steely hardness filling the depths of her passage was the flesh that rose from a man's loins. And when she opened her eyes to the morning sunlight, the face she saw above hers was a man's face.

The face of the man she loved.

He gazed down at her with eyes warmed by passion and the trace of a smile curving his lips. And he said, "Now, Katie . . . let's see if we can make a miracle—together."