



Paradise Road

By
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Chapter One

“You look very familiar. Have we met somewhere before?”

Kylie Donovan tensed slightly at the question. That was a conditioned response for sure, considering how many countless times the question had been posed to her. Even now, so far from Hollywood and the role that had launched her to childhood stardom, that question often came up. It didn't help that, every now and then, an out-and-out mean-spirited remark would follow. Reminding herself that this was a new day, or as the cliché went, the first day of the rest of her life, she regained her composure enough to offer a heartfelt smile.

“I don't believe I've had that pleasure,” she said.

The clerk behind the store counter had to be in her early fifties, by Kylie's guess. A petite woman, slender build, hair streaked here and there with gray. Her face, still pretty, beamed with a pleasant smile.

“Well, maybe I haven't had the pleasure, either!” the woman said with genuine friendliness. “I'm Mae Clayton.”

“Hello, Mae. I'm Kylie Donovan.”

That was the clincher. Then again, maybe not. That was the story of Kylie's life--people remembered her face, but not always her name.

“Kylie Donovan. *Hmmm*. Seems to me I've heard that name before.” The clerk began ringing up Kylie's order of fresh fruit and vegetables, a package of corn meal, and AA batteries. On the counter, to the side, was a small display with boxes of fruit-shaped marzipan candies, prompting Kylie to add a box to her order on impulse. “You're new in town, though, aren't you?”

“Yep. I've visited before, but now I'm here to stay.”

“Have family in town? Nearby?”

“No.” After a moment, at the risk of revealing too much about herself, she added, “It's interesting, but I found this place by accident. Long time ago, back in the Dark Ages, when I was about eighteen.”

Mae laughed. “Honey, it couldn't have been that long ago. You're still a baby. Oh--those just came in fresh from the farm. Beautiful, aren't they?”

Kylie realized she was referring to the tomatoes she had been inspecting. Their casual conversation had relaxed her. She understood that Mae Clayton probably wouldn't connect her twenty-ish face with that of the little girl she'd played on TV years ago, the one who'd been known to millions of the shows' fans as little Melissa. That seemed now like it had happened a century ago.

Maybe it would dawn on Mae later, but not necessarily now.

“Sold,” Kylie said, adding two fat tomatoes to the other items on the counter. They were firm, ripe, the perfect shade of luxurious red. She decided she'd have one tonight as a favorite side dish of hers for dinner, sliced up in thin slices and roasted with a

light coating of olive oil and a dusting of herbs.

"How did you 'accidentally' find Berrentine Cove?" Mae asked. "With a town this small, you must have used a microscope."

"Actually, I was visiting a friend who lived here in Virginia. You know, the interesting thing is I don't recall the name of the town, and I haven't seen her in years. But I took the train from New York--I was living on campus there--and somehow I got off at the wrong stop."

"Let me guess! That wrong stop was Berrentine Cove?"

"Fortunately for me, yes. Once I got here, I figured I'd have a look around, not let it be a total waste of a trip. I came back not long after that, and I don't know what it was, but I never wanted to leave. I never believed in love at first sight until then. Always thought it would happen with a man, though--not a town."

Again Mae laughed, even more heartily. She packed the last of Kylie's order in a paper bag.

"That'll be seventeen ninety-five," she said. "And you're a young woman. There's lots of time for love at first sight with a man, too. Of course, with the town, you'll never have a spat with it over the lawn getting mowed."

Kylie chuckled as she accepted her change. "That's true. I'm not in a hurry for my Prince Charming to come along, though. It'd be nice, but I'm just concentrating on getting my life in order here in my new home."

"You're a smart lady, Miss Kylie. Where do you live?"

"About five minutes from here, on Paradise Road."

"Good, that's close. I hope we'll be seeing you in here more often."

"Oh, you sell marzipan. I guarantee you'll see me in here at least once a week."

Kylie exchanged waves with Mae Clayton on her way out of the farmer's market. Heading to her metallic green Ford Explorer, she was greeted by a brisk early autumn breeze that carried the refreshing scent of mountain air. She could see the Appalachians in the distance, their silhouetted forms slicing into the blue, cloudless sky.

Ah, that exchange was painless enough.

Not only had Mae failed to recognize her, but she had gotten the opportunity to be herself, just Kylie Donovan, with no ghost of Melissa Colton to contend with. At times she didn't mind; mostly, though, she welcomed the chance to live in the moment, to be a person instead of a memory from some total stranger's childhood.

It was a short drive from town to the road that led to home, her *new* home. Just the day before she'd found another way, a shortcut, a more scenic route that afforded her a view of the lake and the rustic cabins that dotted the land around it.

She was coasting, in absolutely no hurry, all the more reason that the siren screeching loudly from the police car behind her caught her by surprise.

"*Me?* You can't be chasing me," Kylie mumbled.

A glance in the rear-view mirror told her otherwise. No other cars were on Paradise Road, just her lonely little gas-guzzler. Through the windshield she could see the cop behind the wheel, a female officer. Smirking, she gestured for Kylie to pull over.

Sighing, Kylie obliged. *Welcome to Berrentine Cove!* She was getting a summons? For what? She hadn't traveled far enough from town to have done something

worth a ticket. Whatever her offence, it wasn't exactly the homecoming she would have preferred.

"Problem, Officer?" Kylie asked through the open window.

"License, insurance, and registration." The cop sniffed and bent forward at her lithe waist to peer at her through the window. Her eyes were hidden behind ultra dark sunglasses, and a shock of tight, strawberry-blond curls peeked out from under her cap. She was trying to appear tough as concrete, but it was hard to look menacing when a good, stiff breeze could blow her away. "Please."

"Sure." Kylie moved swiftly, fishing for the documents in her purse and glove compartment. "Um ... what did I do wrong?"

Patiently she waited for an answer. The cop looked to be about twenty-three or so, a couple of years younger than Kylie. She inspected the documents, taking her time, whistling a tune.

Kylie squinted up at her, curiously. If she wasn't mistaken, the notes together sounded suspiciously like Madonna's old hit, "Material Girl."

"You know that's a twenty-five mile an hour zone back there?" The cop's tone was terse.

"Yes, I do. I--um--believe I was going the speed limit, Officer."

"No, ma'am. Wrong-o!" Again the cop bent down. Kylie caught the name on her badge: E. TORRANCE. "FYI! I clocked you at twenty-seven MPH."

"Oh." Kylie nodded. Officer Torrance had actually said "MPH," not "miles per hour."

She did the math in her head. Berrentine Cove, small town. Small town cop didn't recognize Kylie's SUV, perhaps taking her for someone other than a local who knew the local laws and needed some straightening out. In any event, she was respectful.

"I--I guess if you clocked me at that, then I must be at fault," she conceded.

"Kylie Donovan. *Hmmph.*" Officer Torrance tapped a thin finger against her chin. "Kylie Donovan. You wouldn't happen to be the same Kylie Donovan that played that annoying, cloying little chick on that old TV show--what was it called again? The one with the chubby dad?"

Kylie's stomach sank. *Could you just give me the ticket already?* she wanted to shout.

Yet she couldn't do that, especially once she realized there was an audience looking on. Right behind the cop, several feet away but close enough for a front-row view, was a quartet of men unloading sheetrock and other materials from a truck. One of the crew in particular had looked from the cop to Kylie, doing a double take. Through his sunglasses he fixed her with a stare.

"*Daddy's Home,*" Kylie answered. "Yes. I'm *that* Kylie Donovan."

"No kiddin'!" the cop exclaimed. "Well, what do you know? Kylie Donovan. That character you played, Melissa, what a Goody Two-Shoes. Anyway, imagine this! We got a real celebrity, right here in Berrentine Cove. Oh, wait till I tell the guys down at the station that I just busted my first former child star. *Cool!*"

Chagrined, Kylie forced a smile. That cop couldn't have been more than five feet tall and a hundred pounds sopping wet, but for a little thing she sure had a mouth on her.

All four of the men, hearing the commotion, stopped fully in their tracks and turned to watch. The one with the sunglasses slowly removed them and looked straight at her. She wondered if he'd heard the part about the show. *Great*. Embarrassed, Kylie felt heat rushing to her face.

"I'm not a TV star," she said softly.

"No. Not anymore." There was a hint in Officer Torrance's voice, ever so subtle, of cattiness.

"Never was." Kylie set her jaw firmly, then added, "Shaun Walker was the star. I was just one of the actresses who played his kids."

If she had thought it couldn't get any worse, it suddenly did. Officer Torrance commanded, "Would you step out of the car, please, Ms. Donovan?"

"Step out of the--why?"

"*Why*? Because I said so. That's why. That a problem, Ms. Diva?"

For a moment, Kylie froze, her hands locked on the steering wheel. The words she wanted to say, a rebuttal to being called a diva, something she'd never been, burned on her tongue, but she kept them to herself. Whatever was going on, it was better not to argue, even if the rigid expression on the cop's face had made her flinch.

"Not a problem at all," she said.

Thank heaven for small miracles, she mused, noting that the men who had been looking on had discreetly turned away, tending to their own business. Now she could see they were following the orders of the worker with the sunglasses--probably one of the bosses--and bringing the materials into what looked like a large home.

Home, or better said, a mansion, a mansion that looked to be dilapidated and in much need of repair. She guessed they were renovating it. The one with the shades, his sandy brown hair tousled by the wind, cast one more glance over his shoulder at her, a long, lingering glance. His brow creased with a disapproving frown that was decidedly directed at the cop.

Kylie hid a grateful smile behind her hand. She could have been wrong, but she took the man's reaction as a sign that he empathized with her.

"Wow! You're all grown up, huh?" Office Torrance declared. "You used to be so tiny on that show, too."

"Excuse me?"

"I said you were so tiny back then. You're all grown up now, though, hopefully law-abiding, too."

Kylie didn't know whether to laugh or be insulted. Was that a slam about her weight? She wasn't the spindly little girl or the young teen in size four clothing who'd grown up on that sitcom, but she wasn't overweight, either.

And of course she'd grown up. Was she expected to remain a kid forever? She towered over the cop at five-feet-five and wore a size ten. She was shaped like a real woman, not a Hollywood waif.

Then again, most people *were* bigger than the pint-sized Officer Torrance.

"I used to watch that show ... sometimes," the cop admitted, "when nothing else was on. I always thought it was kinda, I don't know, hokey."

Kylie half expected to be cuffed and helped into the squad car. She could imagine,

with a mild case of dizziness coming on, the humiliation of seeing her mug shot on the cover of *The National Enquirer* with the caption reading, FORMER CHILD STAR CHARGED WITH GOING TWO MPH OVER THE LIMIT--AND BEING HOKEY.

"You probably liked the cool shows, right?" she asked the cop sweetly. "Like--I don't know--whatever was cool back then--"

"Well, *Daddy's Home* was anything but cool." Amused by her own retort, Officer Torrance handed the documentation back to her victim. "I'm gonna let you go this time, but drive carefully from now on. No more speeding."

"But I wasn't--all right. Thank you, Officer."

Hokey. Daddy's Home was anything but cool.

Kylie tried not to slam the door to the glove compartment in her frustration. There had been nothing innocent about those remarks. Spoken with a sly smile, they had been intended to be hurtful. She wouldn't have been surprised if they'd been born from envy. It certainly couldn't have been the first time, although most women who as girls had envied Kylie or the other young actresses had grown up themselves and gotten over it. In any case, the insults had stung.

"Excuse me, Miss. I couldn't help but overhear. Are you really Kylie Donovan? The one from *Daddy's Home*?"

Wonderful! Now she had to contend with Mr. Fixit. Was the end of that day even in sight by now? All this, and she was so, so close to home, to closing the door behind herself and hiding herself inside her new house. Had she only been going more than two miles over the speed limit, she might have already been on Paradise Road, pulling safely into her driveway, having missed that whole vexing episode with Officer Torrance.

She turned in the driver's seat and saw him bending his over-six-foot frame down to look in through her window. He was a few years older than she, somewhere in his early thirties. Good-looking, too, with the hunky build of a man who was no stranger to carpentry. Not that she was in the mood to admire a ruggedly attractive man right at that moment.

"I'm afraid so," she replied.

"You are Kylie Donovan? *Wow*." He grinned then nodded at the cop. In the rear view mirror Kylie could see that the cop was getting into the car and getting ready to take off. "I see Charlie's Angel--well, in Ellen Torrance's case, that'd be Charlie's *devil*--got to you, too."

"Too? You mean that charming woman has struck before?"

He laughed. It was a great laugh, warm and masculine. "Yes, that 'charming' woman has struck before. She got me last week for going three miles over the speed limit."

"Now that's *reckless*. I was only going two miles faster."

"She didn't let me slide, though. I got that ticket."

"Well, who told you to be such a menace on the road?" Normally, Kylie wouldn't have been so casual with someone she didn't know, but the teasing eased her nerves.

And luckily, the construction foreman had a sense of humor. Laughing, he shook his head. "Unbelievable, huh? Ah, well. I guess she figures she's doing her job. Cops have a tough job."

Kylie smiled. She could have agreed with that statement with no problem, had she not been put through the wringer by the critical Officer Torrance. She was more enchanted at that moment by the man's gentle manner, that voice that put her at ease, with its timbre and depth.

Not to mention he's reeeeeeeeeeeally cute. I sorta noticed, not that I have time for that.

"But anyway," he said, shifting on his feet awkwardly. "I won't keep you. I'm sure you're busy."

"Not really. But the tomatoes I bought earlier are going to turn into butter if I don't get them home soon."

Sauce, you dummy! Kylie scolded herself. *Tomatoes turn into sauce, not butter.*

Her *insides* were what were melting into butter, with those eyes of his claiming hers in another of those stop-your-heart looks. She was the celeb--well, supposedly, anyway--and he was the fan. So why was she the one with the jitters?

"Right." Mr. Fixit cleared his throat. "I'll let you go. One more thing, uh ... I just wanted to say you were great on that show. So were the other two kids. The guy who played your dad, Shaun Walker--he was terrific. Don't see him much anymore."

Kylie had started the car and felt the engine humming through the gentle vibration of the steering wheel in her hands. Either that or it was that little shake going through her, a jitteriness that hadn't been there before that rugged man had approached her.

"I know. And that's a shame. Shaun's a very talented man." There was more to that story; nothing tawdry, just health issues. Or as someone once said, life had gotten in the way for Shaun. Yet for the sake of protecting her old friend's privacy, she left it at that. "And he was a kind man, too, a sweetheart."

"Yeah? Well ... I always thought he was the kind of dad everybody should have. The kind of dad I would've liked to have, anyway. Oh, you're way too busy for this." He paused, gave her window edge a light slap. "Anywho, I can't tell you how much I ... I really loved your show as a kid."

Those words, especially after that humiliating episode with the beat cop, went straight to Kylie's heart.

"So did I," she murmured with a smile. "Much appreciated. Thank you."

"I'm ... uh ... it's been great to meet you, Ms. Donovan."

He looked like he wanted to say more, perhaps even introduce himself. Instead he minded his manners, and pushed away gently from her car. Kylie waved to him, free then to drive the last couple of blocks to her new home.

There she was in Berrentine Cove, Virginia. She would've thought that would have been far enough from Los Angeles, far enough from her old life, from the past, from her charmed childhood, from the disappointments and broken dreams that had followed.

She should have known that she could drive to the ends of the earth, and still people would remember her as Shaun Walker's youngest daughter on *Daddy's Home*, the sensitive and sometimes mischievous Melissa Colton.

Which was why she wasn't letting the man in charge of renovating that old mansion, however appealing she'd found him with those big, gorgeous green eyes of his, and those ripples filling his shirt sleeves earned from hard physical work, take up much

of her attention.

After all, as a kid he might have known Melissa. The whole world seemed to know and love Melissa Colton.

It was only Kylie Donovan who had been invisible. Kylie Donovan, finally finding her way out of a beloved but fictional character's shadow, smiled as she drove into the driveway of her new home and her new life there on Paradise Road.

Chapter Two

To call restoring the old Edmund Monroe Estate a challenge was definitely an understatement.

Once it was finished, the place would be a beauty. That is, *if* it was to ever be finished. It was only the first week the project was underway, but the goal of turning a respectable profit on the initial investment seemed almost impossible at that point.

Robert Harrison took a short break from his work, allowing himself to catch his breath and to let the sledgehammer's head touch the floor. He adjusted the mask on his face, the one preventing the dust from entering his mouth and nose, as he broke down the water-damaged and cracked walls of the old place. Then he consulted his watch.

Had he really been at that task for three hours? It felt much longer than that. Obviously, Bobby knew he had to account for the fact that it had been a long day in general. Given the hours transporting the lumber and sheetrock, the time spent going over the plans, and the work itself, he was just about ready to call it a day.

Just about. Not quite yet. A few minutes more. Closing out the hour would be good, no loose ends. Then he could quit for the day.

Suppressing a groan, Bobby ignored the muscles in his arm that throbbed hard in protest and raised the sledgehammer, crashing it again and again against what was left of the master bedroom's northern wall.

Well, it was what had once served as the master bedroom, anyway. That was back in the late 1800s, when Edmund Monroe, a shipping magnate, had lived in that mansion with his family. Over the years it had been home to other well-to-do people, but none quite as wealthy or as colorful as Monroe.

Bobby stopped again briefly, this time to wipe the beads of perspiration from his brow with his sleeve. He looked around before proceeding with his work, his breathing heavy with fatigue.

Crazy as it sounded, he felt he owed it to the old place to restore it, bring it back to its former glory. It could be done, no doubt about that.

The old mansion had personality and character unique to the places built by craftsmen of its time. It had been known for a long time as the Penny Manor, nicknamed after the Monroes' youngest child, born late in the couple's life. The place was aged, sure, and it had been abandoned since the last owner had gone bankrupt in the nineties. Because of the property taxes it had become an albatross around the neck of the bank that had foreclosed on the mortgage. Price-wise, the institution had let it go to Bobby and his business partner for a song.

With time, and lots of TLC, the place could be sold, preferably to someone with deep pockets. Renovated, with its history, flavor, and location, it would make a fantastic bed and breakfast.

Again ... with time, a healthy dose of luck, and a truckload of money that was

currently being poured into the renovations.

And even more blood, sweat, and tears.

"Yeah, now I know you're crazy, Harrison, crazy or secretly a superhero with superhuman powers."

Bobby laughed even before turning to face his business partner, Vincent Montenegro.

"I think I'll feel more like Clark Kent than Superman tomorrow when I drag myself out of bed," Bobby admitted.

"Then it's way past quittin' time, Harrison. Knock it off. You'll need to be at a hundred percent tomorrow. You dig?"

"I'll be at a hundred and ten." Bobby leaned back and almost lost his footing, righting himself with a hand on a portion of wall.

"Uh-huh. See what I mean?" Vince leaned against the doorframe, nodding knowingly. "This is a trademark with you. You always want to do too much, too soon. We got time."

Reluctantly, Bobby rested the sledgehammer against the wall. He quipped, "What can I say? I'm driven."

"Driven. Yeah, okay, as long as that's another way of saying 'terminally hard-headed.'" Vince struck his own temple lightly with a closed fist in demonstration. "You *are* driven. I'll give you that. You also need a break. Which is why I really wish you wouldn't stay here tonight."

"Aw, come on. You know I usually do stay in the places we work on. No reason why I can't." Bobby followed his partner out of the room, promptly removing his mask. "The water's on. Electrical's not on, but that's okay. I've got a flashlight."

"That's *not* okay, man. What about--what do you call 'em?--creature comforts?"

"Creature comforts? What is this? The Hyatt?" Bobby chuckled. "Hey, I got a makeshift shower and a sleeping bag. I'll grab a beer and a bite to eat, some sleep, and I'll be good to go in the morning."

His partner led the way down the winding staircase, which had once been grand and rather cinematic. Now its carpet was faded and frayed, its wooden stairs previously eaten in spots by termites. Those stairs creaked painfully beneath the weight of the men's feet.

"You're making me feel guilty," Vince said. "I don't even *own* a sleeping bag. But you're making me feel like I should get a blanket and rough it for the night in one of the tubs upstairs."

"You can forget about that one. You've been here since six this morning, Vince. Go home, have dinner with your family."

"Well, if I don't my wife's gonna kill me." He grinned at Bobby. It was easy to see it had been a rough day for Vince, as well. The olive skin of his Hispanic face glistened with sweat, and his shirt was coated here and there with patches of sawdust. "Sure you'll be okay?"

"I'll be fine."

"I'd feel better if you didn't sleep here. There's a Best Western right when you get into town. Even better, I know a little inn closer to the heart of town. Good rates,

good food--”

“Vince, are you a businessman or a mother hen?” Bobby pulled off his work gloves. “No hotel, no inn. We got enough expenses right now. Other than getting some dinner, I’m staying right here.”

Vince threw up his hands in defeat. “Have it your way. You’re going to hate this place by the time it’s sold and off our hands.”

Bobby didn’t answer right away, giving that statement some thought. At last he shook his head. “Nah. I don’t think I could ever hate this place.”

“We’ve worked on better places than this.”

“I guess, maybe. I don’t know if it’s this place or ... it’s the town. There’s something here that I really like. Can’t say exactly what.”

That sentiment had been on Bobby’s mind all day, though it had taken him that long to actually express it. Without a word, he walked Vince Montenegro out to his car, parked right next to Bobby’s truck, which bore the logo for *Harrison & Montenegro Enterprises* on the driver’s side door.

“It’s a nice town, yeah.” Vince’s tone was noncommittal. “You know, though, Harrison, I can’t imagine you settling down anywhere.”

“Me, neither. Sometimes I think I got some gypsy in my blood.”

“Maybe, but I did notice you made a friend earlier. That was good.”

“A friend?” It took Bobby a moment to realize what his friend was referring to. “That wasn’t a friend. That was a famous person. Who knows what she’s doing here.”

“You mean besides checking you out?” Vince teased.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, but that would only be in your wild imagination, Montenegro. She probably thought I was just another crazed, obnoxious fan, taking up her time.”

“Then it was *you* who was checking *her* out.”

“Not really. I--well, she was pretty cute. I actually had a crush on the other girl when I was a kid, the one who played the oldest daughter on the show, her big sister.”

“Oh, yeah, I remember her, too.” Vince slid into the front seat and turned the key in the ignition. “What was her name again?”

“Autumn or August. Something like that. This one today, that was Kylie Donovan.”

“So you had a crush on the big sister, but it’s the little sister’s name you remember, interesting.” Vince flashed him a rakish wink. “Sure you don’t want to crash at my place? Have some of my wife’s delicious Cuban home cooking. You’ll have to spend the next week working it off.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I think Mireya will kill me if I don’t let her have you to herself for a little while.” Bobby closed the car door for him. “Drive safe, you hear?”

“I hear ya, *amigo*. See you in the A.M.”

* * * *

By the time Bobby had showered and taken the short drive into town, the temperature had dropped a few notches. After parking the truck in the lot behind the restaurant, he turned the collar of his jacket up and burrowed his work-callused hands into his pockets. Still, having been raised in the Northeast, he rather enjoyed the chill of

an autumn night.

The name of the restaurant was the Stone Fireplace. That was one of the things about Berrentine Cove that had Bobby the most intrigued. Unlike other little towns he'd passed through while working on a property, Berrentine Cove didn't have one foot in its past and the other getting a firm hold on the future. He had yet to see a Starbucks or a Dunkin Donuts, a Ben & Jerry's or a Costco, or any other big-business name.

To paraphrase an Alan Jackson song, the big money had yet to come in and shut down the little man in that town. Other than a couple of big-name hotels--the Best Western, which was on the edge of town, and the Embassy Suites, actually in the next town over--the mom-and-pop businesses, from that restaurant to the B&Bs and small shops, reigned as the jewels on the town's main thoroughfares.

And this particular restaurant couldn't have asked for a better location. Bobby allowed himself to take in the breathtaking view in the distance of the Appalachian Mountains, darkened and mysterious figures against the starry canvas of Virginia sky, before heading in through the establishment's doors.

In spite of the cold, he was looking forward to a nice, frosty beer, a good, delicious meal starring any variety of meat, just as long as it was red and juicy. Later, his sleeping bag and a deep, long slumber. That was all he needed.

And something else

Maybe he should have taken Vince up on his offer to join his family for dinner that night. Vince had the right idea--he'd packed up his pretty wife, Mireya, and their toddler son, Beau, and moved them into a rented house a half hour's drive from the Penny Manor. They would reside there until the place was renovated. It wouldn't always be like that, especially once Beau was old enough to start school. Yet for now, the Montenegros found traveling together to some jobs something of an adventure, and Vince was content to never be too far from his Mireya and their little boy.

The same couldn't be said for Bobby, although it might have been that way for him, too. That is, if life hadn't thrown its curves.

Tonight it didn't matter. Bobby had his work. It wasn't about the money, even if he did do pretty well for himself. It had never been solely about the money.

"It's late, so we have a booth available," the young hostess leading him past the salad bar informed him with a trace of Southern twang to her voice. "If you'd like that...."

"I'd like that just fine," Bobby told her. "Of course, I just need to eat something before I pass out."

The young woman smiled, beckoning him with an outstretched arm to sit at a cozy booth near the rear of the dining area. "Here's our menu, sir. Your server will be right with you. Can I get you something from the bar while you wait?"

"Thanks. I'll take a beer."

"What kind?"

"Whatever you got on tap's fine."

"Kay. I'll be right back with your drink."

Bobby perused the sizeable menu by the toned-down light of the lamp on the wall behind the booth. It didn't take long for him to make a decision. Evidently, the Stone Fireplace's specialty was barbeque. He'd give the brisket--something hearty and filling--a

try.

“Hello there. Here’s your drink. I’ll be your server tonight. My name is--”

He lifted his gaze, recognizing the face instantly.

“Kylie Donovan?” He couldn’t stop her name from sounding like a question.

“Um ... good. Introductions aren’t necessary.” She coughed out a good-natured chuckle, pulling a pad and pen from her uniform’s pocket. “Will you need a few minutes, or do you know what you’d like?”

While he’d waited, the restaurant’s soft lighting, the gentle music flowing from the sound system, and the warmth of the room had begun to make him drowsy.

Well, he was fully awake now. Awake enough to understand that she didn’t want to continue the conversation along that vein.

“The brisket,” he replied. “With the coleslaw and the potato salad and the biscuits.”

“The works. Good.”

She’s no old hand at this, Bobby realized, watching as it took her longer to scribble down his order than most waitresses. The other telltale sign that she was a rookie was the tip of her tongue darting out to moisten the corner of her top lip. She was a rookie, all right.

A cute one, at that. And he couldn’t help but notice that her lips were full, curved into a somewhat flirty shape, and what made it even more irresistible was that it wasn’t intentional.

“Can I get you a salad? Soup?” she offered.

“No, thanks. But, uh, if I can get extra biscuits...?”

“You got it.”

Bobby nodded, seeing her light brown ponytail trounce girlishly behind her as she stepped away.

Yeah, I got it, all right. Kylie Donovan, the TV star--at least, she was a star when she was a kid--was waiting on him in a restaurant. Complete with a black-and-white waitress outfit that showcased a grownup woman’s curvy figure that he, as an earthly male, couldn’t help but appreciate. Then, too, he could still see the little pixie on *Daddy’s Home* in her adult face, in her silky smile, in that turned-up nose.

The term “surreal” didn’t begin to cover it.

And what was more, Kylie Donovan was either standoffish ... or she just didn’t want to be constantly haunted by the shadow of her childhood stardom.

Bobby took a slow, satisfying sip of his beer. Fine, then. He understood that, and he would certainly respect her wishes. He’d been called a lot of things in his life, but a male groupie wasn’t among them.

He had just been struck by the sadness of it. There was no getting around that. Kylie Donovan shouldn’t have been fetching him, Bobby Harrison, professional entrepreneur and amateur nomad, a beer. She should have been cruising on a luxury yacht somewhere smack-dab in the middle of the turquoise waters of the Mediterranean, sipping fruity cocktails while working on her tan and skimming through movie scripts sent by her agent.

Within minutes she returned to his table, placing a basketful of biscuits and

wrapped pats of butter in the center.

"That enough for you?" she asked.

Bobby welcomed the mischievous glint in her eyes with a grin. "I'll say, more than enough. I'll probably eat every last one of those, too."

"Well, don't spoil your dinner. I've had the brisket. You don't want to miss that."

Playful. Friendly. Anything but standoffish. Maybe she was warming up to him?

Then she asked, "Weren't you the one I spoke to earlier in the day? The one in front of that big mansion when I was ... I was, um--"

"On your way home ... with your tomatoes?"

Not too suave or smooth on his part. But he could tell by her smile that he'd successfully avoided saying something along the lines of "on the verge of being frisked and cuffed like a common perp" by Officer Law & Order.

"Ah. I thought that was you." Kylie nodded. "Small world, huh?"

"Must be an even smaller town."

"Yep. Which is fine by me. I've had enough of big towns." She cleared her throat. "You know my name, but I don't know yours."

"I'm Bobby Harrison. And I'm tired of those big towns, too. Not that I'll be staying in this one for long, either."

"No?"

"No. Once my work's done, I tend to move on. I find the next big project, fix it, sell it, and then the whole thing starts all over again."

"Sounds exhausting, no wonder you need all those biscuits and a good meal. Can I get you another beer?"

He almost accepted then wisely changed his mind. "I'd better not. I'm tired and I'm driving. One's enough."

"How about a Coke instead?"

"Coke sounds great. Thanks."

The nondescript music playing over the speakers stopped with the last song. Hearing a low rustle of noise, Bobby looked to his right. A live band with five members was setting up their equipment to play. He had glanced at the sign posted in the restaurant's foyer mentioning live music, noticing it only fleetingly. That brought back memories he didn't need or want of the last time he'd watched a live band perform. That had been so many miles away and a couple of years ago.

Uh-uh, that's wrong. Not a couple of years; more like four. That was your twenty-seventh birthday.

Four years. How quickly time marched on. That should have been enough time to heal. Mostly, Bobby had.

There was still a residue. Some scar tissue remained where the pain had once been, when the young woman Bobby had once loved had left him wounded.

"Here's your dinner. Enjoy."

Kylie's voice, sweet and alluring, as well as her presence, nudged him back to the present. She placed his Coke and dinner plate on the table, treating him to the mouth-watering aroma of the barbecued brisket. Her inexperience at waitressing almost caused her to knock the pepper shaker over. With a dexterity he had to admire, she caught it right

in the knick of time.

"Oops! Sorry about that," she apologized. "I'm a little ... new at this. It's my first week."

"You're doing just fine, Kylie."

Was she reacting to that? Hearing him call her familiarly by her first name, not Ms. Donovan? She looked unsure at first. Then, smoothing down the apron of her uniform, she gave him a smile. Her hazel eyes held his. Long enough for him to realize they were the eyes of someone whose life hadn't been a bowl of cherries.

"You mind sitting so close to the band?" she asked.

"No, that's okay. What do they play?"

"Oldies, I think. Like 50s stuff."

"That's cool. I love the oldies."

"Me, too. I hear this band's not bad, either. They play some 60s, too." She slapped her thigh lightly. "Well, I'd better let you enjoy your meal."

"Uh, Kylie, if you don't mind my asking you something. You know, you don't have to answer this. I'm ... I'm not trying to pry or anything."

She slid her pad into her pocket and folded her hands in front of her. Slowly, she nodded.

"This is just a little job I'm doing right now." Her tone held a slightly brusque edge to it. "It pays the bills for now. I haven't been here very long. But I'm starting my own business, or trying to. I'm just doing this until I can get my business off the ground."

Bobby shook his head. "Oh, I didn't mean that. That's--I'm happy for you, Kylie. I wish you the best. But asking you what you're doing here in this place ... well, that's just rude."

Her eyes widened with surprise, pleasant surprise. Now Bobby knew he hadn't imagined the thin edge of defensiveness in her reply.

"What did you mean to ask me?" she asked.

"Shaun Walker. When I met you, you said he really was the way--well, you know--the way he came across on the show? If he wasn't, you don't have to tell me. I don't really want to know. But if he was..."

"Shaun Walker is most definitely as sweet and as lovable as he came across on that show. Probably even sweeter and more dear, but then I'm prejudiced. He's one of my all-time favorite people."

That answer brought a smile to Bobby's face. "Good! I'm really glad to hear that. I always thought you guys acted like a real family on that show. My dad wasn't around, so...."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

He shrugged. "My mom, my little brother, and I were on our own most of the time. In the beginning, he came around when he wanted to. When he *felt* like being a dad to us. But your dad--your TV dad, I mean. That seemed so real on TV, the affection he had for you and the other kids."

"It *was* real and mutual. We loved Shaun, all of us; the kids, Heather Underwood, who played our mom. He was nicer to me than my real dad was. Only, unlike your dad, he was around a lot. That didn't make it better." Kylie took a step back. "Well, I'd better

get back to work and let you enjoy your dinner.”

Bobby was about to say something else, but Kylie walked away so quickly that he was left alone with his words.

He was nicer to me than my real dad was.

As he began digging in, savoring his meal, Bobby assumed that comment could be filed under “TMI.” Too Much Information. It was as if Kylie had caught herself before she could divulge more.

Or maybe he was flattering himself. Maybe she wouldn’t have said anything more personal about herself at all. After all, they were nothing more than strangers to each other. She was a former child star, and judging by how far that little fish had strayed from the water, she was starting her life away from the celestial fantasy heaven of Hollywood, down on earth with the mere mortals.

And he was a businessman and a loner, a square peg that had never fit in anywhere. A man who had been in love once, but that was some time ago, and love wouldn’t be coming around again. He didn’t belong anywhere; he still didn’t belong.

Least of all in a little town like Berrentine Cove. As always, he’d be moving on when his work was done. That was his passion—work; his passion, his present lover, a member of his very small family, his livelihood, one of the few things that he’d ever called his own.

Kylie Donovan seemed to him like the sort of woman who was looking for more than that. She *deserved* more than that.

The band started off with the playfully romantic song, “Sincerely.” It was just the right speed, just the right beat for the mellow. Bobby polished off every bite on his plate and all but one of the buttermilk biscuits, enjoying the music and washing it down with the icy soda.

Every so often he would let his gaze search for Kylie. He’d see her at one of the other tables, waiting on other customers or consulting an older waitress.

Once or twice Bobby saw her lift her chin and her eyes scanned the room ... stopping at him. Then she would demurely look away. But he wasn’t about to flatter himself, oh, no. He wasn’t foolish enough to think she was attracted to him.

As attracted as you are to her, he finished the thought in all honesty. Because that was exactly what he was--attracted to that woman. The attraction was powerful, too. It seemed his eyes couldn’t get enough of her.

Attracted or not, he wasn’t about to act on that impulse. He wasn’t opening himself to being wounded again. Most importantly, he had one goal and one goal only--to get the Edmund Monroe Manor back to mint condition. That was what he was good at, restoring former glory to a place made of brick and mortar. He was no good at romance.

That little girl doesn’t want me. That wasn’t the exact line from the first song the band had sung, but close enough. Bobby was sure his head was playing tricks on him, because that line had jumped out at him like it was hitting the mark, like it was meant for a former glittering star like Kylie Donovan and himself, the mere mortal.

“Dessert? It’s on the house.”

He looked up to see Kylie setting down a dish containing a big, warm slice of apple crumb pie topped with a dollop of vanilla ice cream. Over the ice cream was a

drizzling of caramel topping, dangerously sweet, scrumptious from start to finish, too good for one taste alone.

“Have room for a few bites of this?” She smiled.

“Yeah, but you’re terrible to tempt me that way.”

“It tempted me earlier, too, and my willpower was no match. I don’t want to feel like the only one who’s been bad.” She giggled then added seriously, “The next time I talk to Shaun, I’ll tell him you asked about him. He’ll be very touched to know he’s remembered so fondly.”

“Really? No way!”

“No lie. I’ll probably talk to him real soon.”

“I’m thrilled you’re telling him.” Bobby took a forkful of the pie and paused. “How about that big sister of yours? On the show, I mean. What was her name? Autumn, August?”

“Autumn Davidson?”

“That’s it! Autumn Davidson.”

“I don’t see her much anymore, sorry to say. Last I heard she was married, had a couple of little ones.”

Placing a hand over his heart, Bobby heaved a dramatic sigh. “Ah, she broke my heart! I was about her age. I had a huge crush on her.”

“On Autumn? You had a crush on Autumn?” Bobby watched that bottom lip push out in a little-girl pout, and then she stuck her tongue out at him. “Let’s see *her* bring you pie!”

She turned on her heel and stormed off. Not really mad; it wasn’t really a tantrum brought on by jealousy. Although ... Bobby acknowledged secretly that would’ve rocked. He knew it wasn’t because Kylie tossed a peek at him over one rounded, pretty shoulder, and flashed him a wink.

She was teasing him, being playful, *flirting* with him.

And he liked it. No--he *loved* it.

That little game and the pie, as it turned out, were Kylie’s way of saying goodnight. A middle-aged waiter returned in her place to bring him his check and to collect the money.

“And the young lady who was serving me?” Bobby ventured to ask.

The waiter placed Bobby’s charge card on the table. “She went home, sir. Her shift’s over.”

“Oh. Okay. Thank you.” As he replaced his American Express into his wallet, he wondered if Kylie would be the recipient of his generous tip.

Maybe that was the reason she’d mysteriously taken off. Maybe it was her pride in not wanting to be present, after their little chat about her past, when he tipped her.

As he would have tipped any waitress who’d given him such excellent service. But that wasn’t altogether true, since he hadn’t seen her in that light. He had seen her as a woman. One he wouldn’t have mind in the least wrapping his arms around.

Deep down, Bobby knew it was just as well. From their encounter that night, he guessed she could be just as tempting to him as that dessert had been.

Except the dessert wouldn’t have been quite as delectable as Kylie. And he

guessed, correctly, that she could be a whole lot more dangerous to his heart, and damn near impossible to resist.

Chapter Three

Snow was falling ever so softly that morning, the first snowfall of the season. Since it was the sort of dusting that made driving a bit tricky, Kylie took her time driving the Explorer along Ulysses S. Grant Street.

She didn't mind the easygoing pace. It gave her a chance to see Berrentine Cove donning its winter coat. This would be Kylie's first winter here, and she had to admire the way the tree-lined street, with its idyllic rows of Cape Cod and colonial houses on both sides, wore a pristine coating of white. She almost expected to see an excited Jimmy Stewart trotting up the center island, as he had towards the end of *It's a Wonderful Life*.

At the traffic light she made a left onto Route 14, which took her into the heart of town. Past the Square, the white brick church, and the bakery, Kylie found it--her own reason for excitement.

Not to mention the reason her nerves had been jumpy for the past couple of nights, ever since the deal was sealed at the lawyer's office for the closing.

Finding a spot right in front, she fished for the key in her coat pocket as she stepped gingerly to the door. The sign over the store still read DALE'S GIFTS. The windows were darkened. All the porcelain dolls, the Hummel figurines, and the handmade jewelry that had filled the display were gone now, along with the shop's owner, Dale Fenty.

Oh, you'll do a brisk business there in that location, honey! Kylie recalled Mrs. Fenty's promise as she marched into the shop. *I did very well, running my shop for over fifty years.*

Even though the heat was on--Kylie had made sure of that earlier in the week--she adjusted the thermostat on the wall situated right behind the counter.

Fifty years. That was half a century. How amazing was that! Dale Fenty wasn't the type to strike the casual observer as a tough-minded, astute businesswoman, either. With her regal head of snow-white and soft-spoken nature, she was more the grandmotherly type, typically found in her kitchen making strudel or tending her garden.

Looks can be deceiving, Kylie thought.

In fifty years, Dale Fenty--wife, mother, grandmother, and businesswoman extraordinaire--had sold Hummels and other collectibles, dolls, jewelry, antiques, knickknacks, vintage wedding dresses, all sorts of pretty things.

Who was to say? For the next fifty years, if in fact Kylie lived that long, she would be selling clothing and accessories for women. Another whole lifetime of pretty things.

And wouldn't that be the perfect name for a boutique? Pretty Things. It would look great on the new sign and her business cards, when she finally got around to ordering them.

Surely, that depended on Kylie making her own shop a success ... and not falling

flat on her face. She couldn't lie to herself. That was the part about that little adventure that had her seriously freaking out.

Her cell phone blared an obnoxious electronic rendition of 'Straight Up'. A little throwback to her pre-teen years, when she was about ten, the age she'd been when she'd wanted to look, sound, and dress like the cool, hip, genie-ish Paula Abdul.

"Hello?" she said.

"Little girl! It's great to hear your voice!"

Kylie smiled and set aside the broom she'd found in a small closet to sweep the floor.

"Shaun Walker! Where have you been?" she asked. "I called you two days ago. I've been so worried about you."

"I know, I know. I figured I'd better give you a buzz before you sent out the cavalry for your old dad. The Mrs. and I have been doing a lot of running around."

"Oh? Please tell me that running around wouldn't include to the hospital."

"See? Not on the phone with me for even a minute, and already you're scolding me."

Grinning, Kylie leaned against the counter. "Well, I have to be strict with you, because if I'm not--"

"I understand. You're still a pain in the butt, but a pain in the butt that cares about me, of course."

"Of course!"

"What are you up to right now, darlin'?"

"First tell me how you and Lorelee are. Are you taking care of yourself, or are you giving her a hard time?"

She could hear him breathe a sigh on the other end. "Yes, I'm taking my meds, going to the doctor regularly, eating more fruits and vegetables. You know ... rabbit food! And staying out of the hospital."

"Good! I'm proud of you."

"I even feel good enough to go for a visit. Go see my other child. The one the good folks at Blue Planet Productions gave me."

She was both delighted and stunned. "Really, Shaun? It's been months. I can't wait to see you and Lorelee again."

"Tell me about it. The woman's driving me crazy. Says she can't wait to see *her* little Kylie. We'll be there next week. We checked the Internet and found out there's an Embassy Suites there."

"A hotel? Oh, come on. I have a guest room, nice and comfy, and less expense for you two."

On the other end Shaun hesitated. "Eh, I feel like we're putting you out."

"Not Lorelee! She's a guest. We'll let you tag along just to keep her company. Okay?"

Whatever doubts and stress she'd been feeling that morning in anticipation of preparing the shop for business--and the very real possibility of her failure--evaporated with the wonderful timbre of Shaun Walker's deep rumble of laughter.

"Now you listen to me, young lady," he said, employing the stern voice he'd

occasionally use on the show. Never mind that his fictional alter ego was just as much a big, tender-hearted teddy bear. "I'm not going to see *you*. I'm hoping to meet my devoted fans ... all *one* of them. That young guy you told me about."

"Ah." She bit her lip.

"Naturally, I still have to give my approval. I have to see if he's good enough for my Kylie."

She blinked in confusion. What had Shaun gathered from what she'd told him in her voicemail about Bobby Harrison? And had something Freudian been beneath the surface, that she'd sent mixed signals without noticing?

"Oh, no, Shaun! He's--Bobby's just a friend," she corrected him.

"Really now? You sounded ... well, kinda bubbly talking about that just-a-friend guy."

"No, honest. We're not an item. We're not even real good friends or--or--anything."

She struggled, reaching for words to change the subject. Fortunately, Shaun inadvertently came to her rescue.

"Look, I'll let you go. We're headed out to do some early Christmas shopping. We'll see you next week?"

"See you then. Call me when you get all your information on your flight. I'll pick you up."

"Sure thing. See ya, darlin'."

The phone call was Kylie's only interruption that day. The venerable Mrs. Fenty, with the help of her sons, had left the shop spic and span. Nevertheless, dust never takes too long to gather again.

Kylie spent the next two hours with the broom, a mop, handfuls of paper towels and household cleansers. Afterwards she made a list of items she would need on hand, including light bulbs and stationary items for what would become her little office at the rear of the shop.

Mostly, though, she agreed with Dale's assessment during their last conversation, that the interior paint needed refreshing. A fresh coat of color, preferably a calming but whimsical pastel, would rejuvenate the shop's overall appearance and complement the relatively new cherry wood molding.

Whatever did I say to make Shaun think Bobby Harrison was the new man in my life? Or is that just Shaun's wishful thinking?

Chagrined, she pursed her lips as she drove carefully along Route 14. The snow was still coming down, heavier than it had been earlier. But she guessed she'd have enough time to stop at the hardware store in town, pick up a can or two of paint, and still make it to the restaurant in time for her shift.

That news had annoyed her to no end. She wasn't irritated with Shaun; Kylie could never be angry with him.

No, the one she was irked at was Bobby. Maybe it was silly and unreasonable of her--and so what if it was? It bothered her that Shaun, who knew her better than her real father, had detected something in her words the day she'd talked about Bobby. It bothered her that Shaun was looking forward to meeting the man.

And Bobby ... had disappeared into thin air. Kylie understood why, too, all too well.

She pulled into a spot in the parking lot behind the hardware store and walked to the entrance, the new carpet of snow crunching beneath her boots.

It wasn't her imagination. Fine. *She* had been the instigator, the one who'd initiated the flirtation that night. But that fish had definitely nibbled at the bait she'd set out for him. He'd taken big, greedy bites of that hook, too.

Yet, like so many times before--and lots of guys before him--Bobby's curiosity had been quenched. Then he'd up and disappeared, just like that.

The scenario was like an old workhorse of a song that gets overplayed on the radio. Guy meets her, the little-girl-slash-young-teenager on the sitcom he'd watched on his family's living room TV. At first, he was taken by it, intrigued.

Then Guy realized that the little girl, the teenager on the show, had never grown up ... but the actress who played her sure enough did. And she wasn't a star or a goddess at all. There was no magic in her veins; she didn't exhale stardust. She was a woman of flesh and blood, as much a mortal as he. Nothing more, nothing less.

The guys that had come before Bobby had moved on. They'd collected one of those "brush with former greatness" stories, and were never to be heard from again.

Kylie tried to swallow her frustration and to concentrate on selecting the perfect shade of paint from the swatches in the store's display.

The thing that hurt the most was knowing she'd fallen more under Bobby's spell than he under hers. His looks were secondary. Okay, he was handsome in that real-guy way. Handsome wasn't new or novel to her, after growing up in a town where it was an unspoken law that everybody had to look good, healthy, and tanned all of the time. Bobby also had a voice that she liked, just the masculine quality of it, how it could both stir her and calm her.

But there was something else about him. Maybe it was an air of mystery, however rough. What he'd said about Shaun, about the show. What had his life been like before? It had been easy to talk with him, and yet her heart did somersaults with one of his deep, penetrating gazes.

The man behind the counter brought her out of her reverie with the humdrum query, "Flat or satin finish, Miss?"

"What? Oh." Kylie adjusted her wool scarf around her neck. "Satin. Thanks."

How ironic, she mused, and yet how logical it was, that she should be walking down the aisle of a hardware store with her cans of paint in her hands and find the infuriatingly charming man currently making some major home improvements on a big, old mansion coming straight towards her.

She saw him before she noticed the man walking beside him, a Latino man with short-cropped hair beneath a baseball cap, wearing faded brown corduroys, about the same height and build as Bobby.

Kylie almost dropped her paint cans, heavy as they were. Maybe she should pretend she hadn't seen him? That would be ridiculous, considering they were practically on a collision course, headed straight towards each other. Defiantly, she lifted her chin, awaiting his reaction, daring him to avoid her now.

And to her utter dismay, Bobby was no jerk about it. He met her gaze with his own, his smile warm enough to heat up that cold, snowy Virginia morning.

"Hey, Kylie!" he called to her.

Instantly she returned his smile. Her first instinct told her to be as frosty as that day. Smile, say hello, maybe make lightning-fast small talk, then breeze away with an attitude that just fell short of indifference.

No such luck. Bobby moved too quickly for her, taking the cans from her hands.

"Those look really heavy for you," he said. "Where are you headed? To your car?"

"I--yes. My car," she replied before she could think of an excuse to stop him.

"Uh, Mr. Harrison? Introductions?" The man with him smirked mischievously at Kylie. "His manners are atrocious, aren't they?"

"Yeah, like yours are so great!" Bobby retorted with a wink at her. "Kylie, this is the Montenegro half of Harrison & Montenegro Enterprises, Vince Montenegro. We're working on the Penny Manor together. Vince, I told you about Kylie Donovan."

"Yes, you did." Vince extended his hand in grand fashion to her. "And I remember thinking you were one beautiful little lady on that show. Eh ... what was it called? The one with the dad, he was so funny--"

"Shaun Walker. That was *Daddy's Home*." She smiled, noticing how her hand was enveloped by Vince's much larger one.

"Oh, that's right! *Daddy's Home*. That was a nice show. They don't make shows like that anymore." Vince folded his arms across the expanse of his chest, shaking his head. "Shows that make you laugh, about a family that isn't perfect, but they love each other, that you wouldn't mind having as next-door neighbors."

"I know," she agreed. "I don't watch much TV anymore. All they seem to make are those silly reality things."

"I saw in the newspaper the other day that TVLand's bringing back *Daddy's Home*," Bobby said. "And they're supposed to be having a *Daddy's Home* marathon."

"Oh, no!" She laughed.

But she couldn't help but think, *He noticed that about the show in the paper. So what? That doesn't mean anything.*

That show, that show, that infernal show! Sometimes she hated that show--and she especially had trouble with that little Melissa Colton.

"There are enough episodes of *Daddy's Home* to make a marathon? Really?"

Vince wasn't being facetious. He appeared earnestly surprised.

She shrugged. "Probably. We were on for a few years."

"Well, that's true."

Bobby gave a nod and interrupted with, "Let me take these to her car, Vince, and then we can talk."

"Actually, I have to be going." Kylie looked from Bobby to Vince. "I have to be at the restaurant. I'm pulling an earlier shift today."

"Oh, all right." Vince tipped his hat to her. "It was a pleasure, Ms. Donovan."

"The pleasure is mine. And it's just Kylie, Vince."

"Kylie." He repeated her name softly with a gentlemanly bow of his head. His

accent was a quirky mix of something seasoned with salsa and folksy Southern twang.

As they made their way to the door, Bobby turned to her. "I feel like I'm rushing you."

"No, not at all. Your business partner, Vince, seems like a nice guy."

"He is. He's also a good friend. I don't have many of those."

"I don't think many of us do. Oh, my car's right over there."

A twinge of guilt niggled her. Why had she been so upset with Bobby, exactly? He didn't have to do that, help her with those weighty cans. He could have been distant, greeting her cordially, engaging in some forced chitchat, and then gone his way.

Could it have been her own insecurities coming back to haunt her and nothing more?

"Giving your home a fresh coat?" Bobby asked casually.

"No. Though my house could sure use it. That's for my shop."

"Your shop? Oh, your business, you mean? How's that go--Kylie, *watch out!*"

But it was too late to heed the warning. Kylie was stepping off the curb when her left foot slid upward, causing her to lose her footing. Her left leg arched in the air and she went flying backward, landing on the snow-covered sidewalk.

"*Whoa! Kylie!*" she could hear Bobby exclaim over the sound of traffic moving in the parking lot.

In that position, reclining on her back, she stared up at the fat, rapidly flying snowflakes as they continued their tumble down from a colorless and cloudless sky. Then Bobby appeared over her. His brow was creased with a frown, his face mere inches from hers, his breath coming out in light puffs of visible white air.

"You okay, baby?" A moment later he corrected himself, "*Kylie.*"

"I'm okay." She licked her lips, allowing his hands--bare, with no gloves--to grasp her gently by her arm and help her into a sitting position on the ground. "I guess my coat broke my fall."

"You sure? That was a bad spill."

Baby. She couldn't dwell on that word. He hadn't meant it. It had just come out. But if that was true, it had come from *somewhere*.

"I'm okay. Just a ... a little disoriented."

"Oh. You scared me there for a minute. I saw you flying and I had the paint in my hands."

Bobby helped her to her feet. Seeing her dust the snow from her coat, he tapped it off her back, then her waist ... then caught himself. He looked at Kylie, who realized at the same time that his hand was moving in a more intimate direction.

Where it had no place moving.

"Sorry about that, ba--Kylie," he mumbled.

Baby. Again.

But it didn't mean anything, it didn't mean anything, it meant absolutely nothing. How would she ever get that through her head?

"Know what's funny, Bobby?"

He grinned at her dancing eyes. "What's funny?"

"I'm down there on the ground, thinking, 'Good thing I didn't hit my head.' And I

thought about those shows on TV, where the person hits her head and gets instant amnesia, you know?" She laughed. "Not that that would be totally bad."

"Getting amnesia? That wouldn't be bad?"

"Not really, no. To forget who I was, here I've been, for a little while, at least."

Okay, Kylie, she chided herself. You can stop making yourself look silly now.

Bobby slid his hands into his jeans pockets. "What I know of you, I still disagree with you, even more. Amnesia would be like losing yourself. That could never be good."

"That's sweet of you to say ... baby."

Without batting an eye she watched him falter, finally giving in to an unsure chuckle. Kylie could have gotten away with that. He'd called her "baby," and she presumed it was subconscious; she had called him "baby" to be playful.

Or had she meant it seriously? She could have left him wondering about that. That would have been the wise thing to do, wise and safe.

But suddenly she had the urge to completely throw caution to the wind. The distance between them was so minute, so precarious, that there was one thing she was itching for. She'd been itching for it almost from the start.

Tilting her head back and gazing up at him, she whispered, "Kiss me."

Bobby stood perfectly still. He cleared his throat and ran a hand through his hair.

"Um ... what?" he whispered back. "It sounded like you said...."

"Kiss me."

She held her breath, wondering wildly if she'd ever release it. She bit back the question she trusted only her eyes to ask.

"Okay," Bobby said with maddening calm. He leaned forward and answered her question.

A peck on the forehead. *On the forehead.* The way one of Autumn Davidson's boyfriends on the show would have kissed the character of her little sister.

Disappointment stung her. Hard.

Yet she managed a smile.

"How's that?" His voice shook mildly.

"That was--um...." Kylie sighed. "The way you wanted to kiss me, I guess."

"Yeah. Sort of."

Disappointment gave way to embarrassment. What a disaster. Tomorrow she would start the day wanting to bury herself under the bedcovers, before the rest of the world came to the realization that Kylie Donovan was crazy, too.

"Kiss me, the way *you* want to, Kylie."

She had taken a step away, prepared to put the paint cans on the ground into her SUV's trunk, drive away, and hide herself at the Stone Fireplace.

Instead, she faced Bobby. She kept her hands in her pockets because they were trembling--and not from the cold, either. She tipped back her head, closed her eyes, and stole a kiss from his lips.

One brave, hungry little kiss. She was giving him a taste of what felt like a current of electricity, of a thrill, running through every part of her.

"There's your kiss. The way *I* wanted to kiss you," she told him, almost in frustration.

You can never see him again after this, you know. What if you left town for a while? Her stress level had just hit “9” on her emotional Richter scale. Come back when he and his friend are done fixing that old....

Her thoughts trailed off when she saw Bobby fail to back away from her. He drank in a breath. Then his hands reached up to cup around her face, closing in the space between them.

And his mouth found hers in a long, unhurried explosion.

“And that’s how I wanted to kiss you.” He seemed reluctant to release her. “And I’d better get back in that store before I do something crazy ... like kiss you again.”

Chapter Four

It occurred to Bobby as that last kiss drew to a bittersweet end that at least Kylie had just taken a rough spill to the ground. She might not have been thinking straight.

So what was *his* excuse? Besides his total lack of willpower when it came to turning down an invitation for a steaming-hot kiss from a woman like Kylie Donovan?

He stood before her, suddenly remembering they were out in public, in the parking lot behind the hardware store. With effort, he dropped his hands from her face and dug them resolutely into his pockets. Her mouth was still moist from their kiss, and he watched her finger dab at the corner of her lips.

"I have to ... um...", she stammered.

"Get to work. Yeah." He waved towards her car. "Let me get those cans in the car for you."

"Sure? I'm keeping you from ... whatever."

Bobby led the way to the rear of the Explorer. After Kylie unlocked it he stored the paint cans in a corner of the cargo area.

"It's fine. Vince knows what we're getting. A few odds and ends so we can get some stuff done today."

"How's the place coming?"

"Coming along." He was afraid to small-talk now. Afraid wasn't precisely the word; he was uncomfortable.

He didn't want to talk so much as to ... do some more kissing. It was going to take a monumental effort on his part to concentrate on his work that day.

Yet as for the kissing, that couldn't happen again. That little episode would have to be a one-shot deal.

"And you're working the early shift," Bobby repeated.

"Well, *earlier*. I'll be done by seven tonight."

"Seven. Sounds good."

"Maybe I'll see you."

"Yep. Maybe." He smiled, gave the Explorer's rear door a slap, and gave her a little salute. "Careful on those streets, Ms. Donovan."

Careful on those streets? Kylie looked confused, as if that remark sounded as goofy to her ears as it had to his. He saw her clearly suppress a giggle.

"I will. Don't work too hard," she advised him.

"Ah ... same to you."

When he walked back into the store he spotted Vince at the counter. His friend paused after signing the credit card slip and turned to him. The teenaged clerk at the register was piling boxes filled with Italian ceramic tiles into a cart.

"Want us to take these out for you, sir?" the clerk asked Vince.

"Thanks, but we got it." Vince slipped his wallet back into his inner jacket pocket.

"Sorry I took so long," Bobby told him.

"Nah, don't sweat it." Vince started to reach for the cart, but to make up for being away during the purchase Bobby took the cart and steered it to the exit. "You were out there for a while. Hope the pretty lady said 'yes' to a date."

"Please. I wish I had time for dates."

His friend held the door open for him and the cart, narrowing his eyes.

"You should have time for a date. Don't be a fool. *Make* time for a woman like that." He helped Bobby guide the cart to the truck outside. "All of life sure shouldn't be just work."

"Thanks for the advice, Dr. Montenegro."

"Yeah. You keep being flippant, not taking that seriously. You'll work yourself into an early grave." Vince switched gears in the conversation as they piled the boxes into Bobby's truck. "So *nothing* happened between you two? You were gone for a bit. That's disappointing."

Bobby worked quickly until the last of the boxes were stacked in the pickup. Against his better judgment he told Vince, "I kissed her. She kissed me. Uh--we kissed each other."

"When was this?"

"When else? When we were back here."

"So you mean you walked her back here to help her with those cans, and then you two starting making out like a couple of teenagers in the throes of prom night magic? You animal, you!"

Against my better judgment. Bobby knew he shouldn't have mentioned it, but now it was too late. He started the car as Vince climbed into the passenger side of the truck's cab.

"She *made* me kiss her," Bobby said.

"Oh, I see. You were coerced. That's even better."

Bobby waited until they were out of the parking lot and back on the road, choosing his words.

"Okay, so she didn't have to twist my arm. I think I should make sure it doesn't go any further, though."

"Why not? You two can't even wait for a real date to swap spit."

"There won't be any 'real date.' What would be the point in it? I'm not here for that. I'm here to build this house. And besides, I don't think I'd be what she's looking for."

"Uh, I guess. Maybe." Pulling a pack of gum from his pocket, Vince offered one to Bobby and popped one in his mouth. "Maybe all she wants is a fun evening, somebody to talk to over a good dinner. A glass of wine and a guy who kisses her the way she likes being kissed."

"Hmmm. That, I could do." He meant to sound dismissive of the subject. If there was any doubt in Vince's mind that he wanted out of that conversation, the doubt was eased with his next words. "If we get time today, you want to lay down these tiles?"

* * * *

We'll get to the floor tomorrow. You'd better not do it tonight after I leave. I don't

want to have the paramedics carry you out of here on a stretcher.

Bobby mulled over Vince Montenegro's warning as he stood in the doorway to the master bath. Did he have the stamina left to tackle it that night? For the second time in minutes, he checked his watch. 6:32.

Tomorrow was another day. Although, in all honesty, that wasn't the only reason he'd glanced at his watch. Neither was tackling the bathroom the only thing he was contemplating.

Kylie was getting off work in less than half hour. He'd had that--and her kiss--on his mind all day.

One thing was settled--tomorrow he'd work on laying down the tiles with Vince. He could have done it alone, at the very least started it. But what was the rush?

Taking slow strides, he walked the few steps from the master bath to the smaller bedroom on the second level. He flipped on the light switch to observe the room.

It still fascinated him, how different a room looked once it was gutted. Once the old walls, often constructed of plaster, were ripped out, then the wallpaper and floor and tiles, the whole façade, was stripped away.

All that was left was the room the way the builders had seen it while they were first putting up the place. Before the trimmings and the life had been added to it, before it was made habitable for human beings.

Rubbing his hand against his pants leg, he surveyed the room. It was ugly, uncomfortable, desolate. Nothing more than planks of old wood running in horizontal or vertical patterns in the walls, floor, and ceiling. Behind that was the insulation, padding bulging through silver covers, adding to the ugliness of the room. Basically it looked old, dirty, fit to be destroyed.

That was something he loved about his work. Not the only thing, but a good part of it. Checking out a property and its location was tedious work; going through the routine with the real-estate people and the lawyers was mundane stuff, a necessary evil.

The essence of the work he and Vince did was in that room. *That* was the part that kept him going, that had him pushing his limits, sometimes unreasonably so, on his energy and strength.

There was something that never grew old for him about making a place beautiful again. Something that drew him in about the prospect of changing a room, a house, a mansion, any building, from a collection of bricks and mortar that had become nearly worthless to somebody's idea of a dream home or ideal place of business.

It was a powerful feeling to know that he could do such a thing, and do it with his hands. Bobby loved the way he felt with a hammer or a power drill in his grasp, like an artist with his paints and blank canvas. That he could walk away knowing he had made some changes for the better that would last forever. To him, there was nothing like that in the world.

Forever?

After switching off the light he headed back down the hallway and down the stairwell. His stomach was growling. No wonder. Lunch had been hours ago. He was going to have to head into town for dinner. The craving for caffeine was gnawing at him, too.

His watch now read 6:41. Before leaving the place, he straightened up the area Vince had been working on--the kitchen. Vince was great, but Bobby always teased him about being an overgrown hyperactive kid, without an organized bone in his body. Bobby did him the favor of moving all the spare tiles and tools into one corner of the room.

Something that would last *forever*? Who was he kidding? Nothing really lasted forever. The house he and his friend had worked on at the start of their collaboration in California had been erased from the landscape by the brush fires two years ago. Then there was the restaurant in Florida they had worked on and sold for a pretty penny that had been reduced to a pile of debris by one of South Florida's notorious hurricanes.

And don't forget that three-story apartment building. The place had taken a year to totally renovate, only to be sold and destroyed later on by developers whose mission was to put up a mall in Maryland.

"Forever" didn't always apply when it came to real estate. Yet it didn't take away the pleasure and pride that Bobby took in his work.

He ran down a list in his head of things he and Vince had to take care of in the coming weeks. They'd hired an electrician, because neither Bobby nor Vince did that kind of work, at least not to the extent that it had to be done. The electrician would come in with his guys to rewire the whole mansion, bringing it into the twenty-first century and up to code requirements. They would also have to go through the estimates on another thing they left to the experts--converting the place from oil to gas heat, and ditching the radiators for modern-day, fuel-efficient central heating and air.

By the time they were done, Bobby thought as he locked up the place and sauntered to his truck, with real estate doing as well as it was, the Edmund Monroe Manor would fetch them a handsome price.

Maybe he was crazy, but even if a finished, one-hundred-percent improved property garnered them a king's fortune, it still couldn't compare with how he felt as he watched a pile of wood and cement rise from the ashes--and all by the work done with his hands.

And he would have the calluses to prove it.

Bobby was doing fine until he was behind the wheel of his truck, waiting for the engine to heat up. He'd had so much to think about that week, and yet the memory came back to him as he sat looking out through the windshield.

No--the memory didn't just come back; it burst in with force, as painfully as if it someone had driven a knife through his chest.

A small plane, one of those Cessnas, was gliding across the sky. High above him, thousands of feet above the manor, it flew. It had the grace of an eagle. From that height its lights appeared tiny and shimmering bright, like chips of gold against the darkening sky.

It was the kind of plane his younger brother had always loved, the kind Luke had said he would fly someday.

Swallowing hard, Bobby watched it as it flew across the view through his windshield. He hadn't thought about Luke in a while. Probably because he was always so busy, so thankfully busy. That made him feel guilty, even though this was precisely why he avoided thinking about his brother very much.

Luke had been gone now for twelve years. Bobby had been nineteen when he died at the age of fifteen. But it might as well have been yesterday that they buried him, he still missed him so much.

What do you think about this one, Bobby? Luke had asked his big brother all those years ago, pointing out a picture of a small plane in a magazine. *Isn't that the coolest thing you ever saw in your life?*

Luke had a formidable collection of pictures of planes, models of planes. Bobby had helped him with the models because of Luke's disability. His body was fifteen; his mind was that of a five- or six-year-old.

I'm gonna go into the Air Force someday. They teach you to fly--for free!

But the Air Force wouldn't have taken Luke Harrison. Bobby knew that, their mom knew that. Their father knew that, too, though he had left when Luke was little.

He liked to think that his little brother was flying now. He'd fly and not even need a plane, for all eternity.

Now it was 6:52.

That was it. He had been hoping 7:00 would come and go without him noticing it. No such luck.

He put Luke and yesterday behind him, though he intended to give his mom a call this week, see how she was doing. He steered the car down the Manor's driveway to the street.

For now, he needed to take care of the present time ... and it was best if he did something about Kylie Donovan before that ended up being another complication in his life.

Chapter Five

“Okay, let me make sure I have this right.” Kylie used the eraser of her pencil to point at each person at the table. “Cheeseburger, no lettuce or tomato, with fries and a Diet Coke; the Yankee pot roast platter, cup of coffee; two orders of the chicken fingers, a side order of fries to share, a strawberry shake and a chocolate milk. That’s it?”

One of the two kids, the boy of around four, waved his chubby little hand in the air to get Kylie’s attention.

“I get the chocolate milk,” he said.

His sister, who was a couple of years older, turned to him and pointed out sharply, “She knows what she’s doing!”

Her dad frowned at her from across the table. “LeeAnn.”

“It’s okay. I appreciate the vote of confidence,” Kylie whispered. Her remark won smiles from the young parents.

After placing the order with the kitchen, she heard the manager on duty that evening, Gerry, behind her.

“See that? That’s a pro at work.”

Kylie turned to see Gerry with the new and rather jittery-looking waitress, Allie, beside her. Gerry was pointing in Kylie’s direction.

“You know, I am just humbled by all this praise I’m getting tonight!” Kylie said.

The manager clicked her tongue and told Allie, “If this lady’s getting praised, you know she deserves it.”

As she picked up an order for a different table, Kylie confided to the new girl, “If I could learn this, you can, too. Gerry’s being too kind, but I was like a tornado hitting the Stone Fireplace when I first came here.”

Once the orders had been delivered to table nine, Kylie checked her watch. A quarter after six.

She wasn’t much of a clock-watcher, mostly because she knew that if anything could make a work day move slowly, it was that. In an odd way she was grateful for the often hectic schedule of a waitress, compared to working on the production of a television show. Though she had been a minor while filming *Daddy’s Home*, and not allowed to work the same hours as an adult, she had spent many a long, dragging day on the set. So much waiting, waiting, waiting happened in television production, between waiting for the production folks to set up and script changes to be made and all the other technicalities necessary to make the final product appear seamless to the viewer.

At the restaurant there was no such thing as boredom. As one of the show’s producers had once told her, boredom was a luxury. Kylie realized that applied to waitresses and other people who spent most of their working hours on their feet, most of all. The time flew--and *fast*. Occasionally there would be slow periods, stretches of time when it seemed as if no one in the world was hungry enough to come into the restaurant.

Kylie was busy enough that she had learned not to complain, to appreciate the luxury that was known as boredom.

That evening she wasn't clock-watching because she was bored or tired. Her feet, even in those low, rubber-soled shoes, weren't exactly hurting, but she was definitely looking forward to putting them up. She was also hungry, but that wasn't a biggie. Some times were harder than others, especially trying to stick to healthy meals.

Or *healthier*. Serving plates filled with cheese-laden fries or the sinfully amazing desserts the Stone Fireplace was famous for was a challenge, every single day, to maintaining her weight.

None of those reasons accounted for her keeping a vigilant eye on that clock. The real reason had Kylie watching the door, too. It almost felt like her heart was standing on tippy-toe, waiting to be disappointed or to shout, "Yes!" at the sight of Bobby Harrison coming in to pick her up.

If that happened.

She delivered dinner to the cute family of four at table seven. Next she proceeded to table five, which the hostess had just given to a group of guys in their mid-twenties. Five young men, to be exact, all trying to squeeze into one booth, much to Kylie's amusement.

"Good evening. I'll be your server tonight," she started off as she handed out the menus. "My name is Kylie. Our specials today are right up there on the board. Can I get you gentlemen something to drink while you decide what you'd like for dinner?"

"Sounds fab. Now by something to drink, Miss, do you mean perhaps....," the one at the other end of the booth on the left side, with hair that was a mass of thick brown waves, asked, "something of the alcoholic persuasion?"

That was a British accent lacing his words.

Smiling, Kylie said, "If you'd like something like that, yes."

Her reply brought a flurry of cheers and appreciative remarks across the table. Apparently they were all British. Two ordered glasses of wine, two ordered beer, and the fifth, who took ribbing for being the designated driver, ordered a Sprite with a twist of lemon.

"Are you guys visiting or just passing through?" she asked out of curiosity.

"Just passing through, although that's turning out to be a mistake," the studious-looking one with the silver wire-framed glasses explained. "We decided to take a drive up to Washington, D.C., but we really should have made time for this wonderful little town."

"It is a great place, isn't it?" Kylie said.

"Very charming," the guy beside him said, "Very friendly people, too."

Not wanting to overstay her welcome at their table, she slipped her pad and pen into her pocket and dismissed herself with, "Well, if you ever come up here again, you should plan on paying us a visit. I'll be right back with your drinks."

6:31. Still no Bobby.

Please don't be a no-show, baby.

She sighed as she distributed the drink orders to her customers from the U.K. First of all, Bobby had time. It wasn't seven yet. Then, naturally, he had quite a bit on his plate

with his work. A few minutes late was no big deal.

And the time--plus picking her up at the restaurant--had been a suggestion, not something set in stone.

But he *was* coming. He hadn't said so in so many words, but his kiss had told her a different story, that he wouldn't let her slip through his fingers.

"Miss, *Miss!*" the studious-looking customer called her back to their table after she had delivered their dinner orders. "Could we ... um, well, we were just saying that, uh...."

She addressed him patiently. "There a problem, sir?"

The blond guy at the end of the booth on the right prefaced his words with a shake of his head. "Oh, no, no, Miss. No problem at all. What we were saying was ... do you remember that show on the telly, *Daddy's Home*? Very popular some years back?"

Kylie knew where they were headed and grinned. "I remember it very well, yes."

"Ah! You know what we're going to say, don't you? That you look like a grownup version of that little teenager, Melissa Colton."

"Oh, do I really?"

The chubby one frowned. "We're not the first to tell you that, are we?"

"Nope. And you couldn't be wrong, either. That would be me."

Silence fell over the table. Then the men erupted with jubilant laughter, making her give a little jump in surprise, all of them talking at once.

"I *knew* it! I told you it was Melissa!"

"She's even cuter in person, don't you think?"

The curly-haired one raised his voice to be heard above the others. "I take it you never received my marriage proposal? I was thirteen when I sent it, along with a picture of me!"

Kylie watched the studious one pull out his cell phone camera from his messenger bag, regarding her shyly. The other four were nearly falling all over each other to talk to her.

"Why aren't you in Hollywood?" the blond demanded to know. "You were cheated out of an Oscar, I know that for a fact. You were my favorite little actress when I was a kid."

His friend beside him gave his shoulder a shove. "Don't listen to him, Ms. Donovan. I loved you more than he ever could!"

"I don't suppose, Miss Donovan," the one with the glasses finally spoke up, "that I could get a picture taken with you?"

Kylie gestured for him to step out from behind the table. "Sure. That'd be lovely."

"I don't suppose I could have your hand in marriage?" the curly-haired one joked. "Because--now you won't believe this, but--I am *still* available!"

She laughed with them, thinking up a quickie comeback. "Aw, that is so sweet of you. But I'll have to take a rain-check. I'm in the process of starting up my own little shop."

A chorus of 'awwwws' went around the table. The guy with the glasses was standing as he handed his camera to another of his buddies. He stood awkwardly beside Kylie, reaching to put his hand on her waist and then respectfully dropping it.

“Well, that was a nicer rejection than some of the others you’ve gotten,” the blond told his marriage-minded friend. “They usually say, ‘Not even if you were the last man on earth.’”

Kylie drew next to the one who wanted a picture, wrapping an arm around his waist and encouraging him to do the same.

“Be still my heart, he’s touching *Melissa Colton*!” the chubby one called out with awe, drawing laughter from a neighboring table.

The one with the glasses didn’t hesitate to correct him. “Melissa Colton was a fictional character. This lovely woman’s name is *Kylie Donovan*.”

Kylie said nothing to that, though she was touched by those words. There was nothing rehearsed or forced about her smile, either, when it came time to snap the picture.

Her name is Kylie Donovan. Wow--just wow!

“Hey, why should he be the only one in the shot with her?” the chunky guy protested. “I want one with her, too!”

“No, you can’t take a picture with her, man,” one of the others argued. “We’d all want one with Ms. Donovan. And we’ve been enough of a nightmare for her to deal with already.”

The blond caught her attention. “Ms. Donovan, how about all of us together? Would that be all right?”

Cautiously, Kylie looked around for Gerry. Her manager had just gotten through singing her praises, and now there she was, causing a commotion, whether wittingly or not, in the dining area.

Yet it was only one little picture. How long could it take?

“I suppose that would be all right,” she said.

It would have been better had the guys been quiet and orderly about it, but they were about as quiet and orderly as cavemen pouncing on their dinner before it had a chance to run away. After the whooping and cheering, the one with the camera asked a woman at a neighboring table if she minded taking the picture for them.

Kylie found herself in the center of a cluster of young men, all gushing about how sweet it was of her to take the time for them. She spotted Allie, looking dazed, and a snickering waiter across the way. As luck would have it, Gerry was looking on, too. She didn’t seem to find the scene as amusing as the waiter.

That was all right. In time, Kylie knew she would become her own boss. On the other hand, for now, Gerry was her boss. She wasn’t expecting any special treatment because of having been famous ... once upon a time.

There was also another little matter--she was in her waitress uniform. When those guys returned home to England, they no doubt would tell their friends, “And here’s a picture of us with Kylie Donovan, the girl from *Daddy’s Home*. She served us our dinner in this restaurant in a little town in Virginia. Imagine that!”

So what? For Pete’s sake, they hadn’t found her lying in a ditch somewhere, babbling to herself or anything. They hadn’t seen her being helped into a police car--although that cop, Officer Torrance, might have enjoyed that photo op.

They had met her while she was working a decent job, working hard, too. Compared to how badly many other former child stars had fared, she had nothing in the

least to be embarrassed about.

"You all better enjoy your dinner before it gets cold," Kylie advised them after the picture was taken. "And I have to get back to work."

"Yes, sorry about that. You've been wonderful, Ms. Donovan," the curly-haired one said. "The best of luck with your new venture."

"Thank you very much."

"That shop--it will be located here?"

"Yes, right here in Berrentine Cove."

"Then we really do have to come back for a visit the next time we're in America. Don't know when that will be, but we'd love to see you again."

Kylie smiled. "I'd like that very much."

"Thank you, Ms. Donovan," the shy one with the glasses murmured before sliding back into the booth. "It's been a real thrill."

Part of her wanted to express her own gratitude, especially for correcting his friends in pointing out that she was her own person, apart from that make-believe character they knew from TV, with a huge, heartfelt hug. Kylie refrained, instead admitting, "It was fun meeting you all. Have a safe trip home."

It was then that she saw another Bobby Harrison across the room. He stood out among her coworkers and the restaurant's patrons. He looked really good in a pair of faded jeans and a brown leather jacket that was unzipped, a navy blue scarf draped casually around his neck.

How long had he been standing there? And how much of that little scene had he witnessed? Kylie's breath caught at the back of her throat when she saw him looking from her to the table full of young Englishmen, now hungrily wolfing down their meal and recapping their adventure, then back to her again. He was frowning and his lower jaw had dropped open slightly.

That was too reminiscent for her of relationships she'd had in the past, relationships that had never had a chance from the start--and one of the first indicators had always centered round similar scenes with groups of fans.

But then Bobby's face brightened with a half smile, and she relaxed. She made her way over to him.

"Still getting off at seven, or...?" he asked.

"Getting off at seven, give or take a few minutes."

"Okay. Take your time, Kylie. I'll wait."

That time she didn't refrain from expressing her affection. She leaned forward, giving him a hug and planting a quick peck on his lips. Then she finished her work, punched out, and claimed the rest of the evening for herself and Bobby.

Chapter Six

After spending so much time roughing it in a mansion under construction, walking into that comfortable, modest and *furnished* little house was especially inviting, maybe too inviting.

Bobby had a feeling he should have suggested going to a restaurant, albeit something different to give Kylie a much-needed break from the Stone Fireplace. It was her idea for them to head to her home, where she would fix them dinner.

An actual couch to sit on, overstuffed, covered by a hand-crocheted afghan and made extra-welcoming with plush throw pillows; an ottoman that, charmingly enough, didn't match the couch, for him to rest his feet; a sound system with a radio playing relaxing jazz. Then there was the aroma of something enticing being cooked in the kitchen wafting in to tempt him in the living room.

And to top it off, an attractive woman who had changed into pair of form-fitting jeans and a rather bohemian top with a collar that revealed her soft, feminine shoulders. His hostess for the evening--his *personal* hostess.

It was going to be nearly impossible to deliver that I'm-not-looking-for-a-relationship-right-now-honey-but-if-I-was-you'd-sure-be-it speech.

"They put it on the market, calling it a dollhouse," Kylie was saying, peeking in at him through the kitchen window that looked into the living room. "And it *is* little, but I don't need that much room."

"I think it's a perfect size," Bobby said.

He almost added, *For one ... or two people*. That seemed a dangerous comment.

The house was a small ranch, with a kitchen, a living room, a dining room set right off of the living room, a bathroom, and a washroom/pantry. And of course, the master--and only--bedroom, that Kylie had disappeared into discreetly when she changed out of her uniform.

It was the kind of house that felt warm and lived in, a tranquil little haven away from the rest of the world. Through the living room's bay window, Bobby could see Kylie's Explorer--they had left her truck parked near the restaurant--and the woods beyond it.

She peeked in again. "Are they driving you crazy in there?"

Bobby realized she was referring to the two tiny finches perched on a bar in the ornate bird cage in the far right corner of the room. Close to the cage was a bookcase with a variety of titles ranging from classics by giants like Jane Austen and C.S. Lewis to more contemporary authors.

"The question is do they drive *you* crazy?" he asked, laughing.

"Me? No, I'm used to those little guys now. They keep me company. They're usually not that talkative, either. They must know you're a guest and they're excited."

He laughed again. "I miss having pets around. I think the last time I had a dog

was ... well, I guess I lived with my mom.”

“Because you move around so much with your business, right?”

“Yeah. It’s not fair to the pet.”

Or a woman. Bobby was so grateful he hadn’t tagged on that last line. If he had, he wouldn’t have blamed Kylie if she’d started throwing every last dish in her kitchen at him for making the comparison.

He rose to his feet then and went to the window. “You look pretty busy. Can I help you with something?”

He was better off when he was lounging out on the couch and she was out of his range of vision. Through the window he could see her at the stove with her back to him.

Man! Front view, rear view, it didn’t matter. That was one pretty woman. He liked the way her hair, in a casual ponytail, cascaded in soft, brownish-blond tresses between her shoulders. He’d noticed that she wasn’t one to wear much jewelry, but the two thin, plain gold bracelets moved daintily on her right wrist as she moved about cooking.

There was also something about the way she cast a look at him over her shoulder that stirred feelings in him that he had done a good job of fending off, but that were now making one white-hot comeback.

“Sure.” She sounded slightly hesitant. “Well, you’re a guest, so--”

“I grew up in a household where my mom worked, and I had to help look after my little brother. Just so you know, I’m no stranger to setting a table or doing the dishes.”

“Well, all right then. You got a deal.” She smiled, promptly producing plates, napkins, and silverware for two for him to set.

“The dining room table, Kylie?”

“Yes. It feels less crowded than the little table in here. Though I like this one in the morning to sit at, drink my coffee, read the paper.”

“I hear ya. I’m looking forward to the day when I can drink my coffee and read my paper without getting sawdust in either.”

She asked, “Where’s your mom now, Bobby?”

“She’s in upstate New York. That’s where I’m from originally. She’s doing great. She’s in some shape, my mom. She’s a secretary in a high school principal’s office, and when she’s not working, she’s either taking yoga or going hiking.”

She brought out a fluted wineglass for each of them. “And your dad? You ever see him now?”

“Not since he walked out on us. I heard he had himself another family after us, though.”

“Oh. I should’ve been so lucky with my dad.”

Bobby glanced at her curiously as she brought out the salt and pepper shakers and a glass bottle filled with what looked like homemade ranch dressing. He thought of asking her what she meant by that, but he chose not to pry.

“And your brother?”

Sooner or later, that question always came up. Another reason he tried not to get too close to people.

“He died.”

"I'm--oh, Bobby, I'm very sorry."

"Yeah. I am, too." He shrugged. "Luke was fifteen when he died. He was born with a few strikes against him. He had cerebral palsy and congenital heart disease. His heart...."

He stopped. Why go into detail? It would only sadden him and put a damper on her dinner, after all the work she had put into it.

"He was my best friend," he said in a more cheerful tone. "He was a great kid, Luke."

"I bet he was. I know he had a great big brother, too."

"Eh, well. You always wonder if you could've done more. That was probably the hardest thing." He heard himself stumbling over his own words.

Waking up in my kid brother's hospital room and finding he'd slipped away from me during the night. Never really got the chance to say goodbye. He couldn't trust himself to say those words without his voice starting to shake, and he hadn't told anyone in he couldn't remember how long.

To change the subject, he gently took the bottle of wine and the corkscrew from Kylie's hands. "Here. Permit me."

"Thanks. I'm no good at that at all. I usually end up getting little bits and pieces of the cork in the bottle. Way to mess up a bottle of wine."

"Those guys at the restaurant. They were a party, huh?"

"Guys at the restaurant?"

"I don't know if you noticed them. They asked me to take a picture with them."

"Oh, *those* guys." Bobby had his back to her as he successfully freed the cork from the bottle's neck. He was glad she couldn't see him scowl. "Friends of yours?"

"More like friends of Melissa Colton's. They were *Daddy's Home* fans."

"They were fans?"

"Fans imported from across the pond, no less. They were visiting from the U.K. They were driving along the east coast and stopped in on their way to D.C." She placed a hand over his to prevent him from pouring the wine. "You know what? Let's let it breathe for a few minutes first."

"Oh, sure, that's right." Let it *breathe*? He didn't drink wine often, so he figured she knew what she was doing. "It looked like you were having so much fun, like they weren't strangers."

"They were just very friendly guys."

Please be cool with that, Kylie thought as she brought in the chicken on a platter and set it on the table.

"That show meant so much to a lot of people, I'm sure," he said. "Especially people our age who remember seeing it as kids."

"That's very true. People either are very fond of the show or ... they think it was corny and overly sweet."

"Which is only an opinion and one that your fans tonight obviously didn't share."

Kylie handed him the salad to place on the table and smiled at his comment. "I never understood what there was to mock, either. I mean, it wasn't great theater--and it wasn't supposed to be. It was just a light-hearted, fun show that didn't take itself too

seriously.”

“You don’t have to defend it to me. I’m another fan, remember?”

She caught on that he was teasing and laughed. “Well, I understand people have a right not to like it. They’re entitled to their opinion. They just don’t have to be rude about it.”

And then Bobby asked The Big Question.

“Ever feel like you *don’t* want to be recognized by strangers?”

“It’s funny. That question--the answer depended a lot on *when* it was posed to me.”

“Yeah?”

“Well....” Kylie carried the other dishes to the table before explaining. “When I was little, when the show was on, I didn’t think there was anything more fun in the world. People you didn’t even know making this big fuss over you, treating you like you were so special. Then ... I grew up.”

And how do I condense what I’m going to say from here? She gave the table one final look of approval before motioning with her hand.

“We’re ready,” she declared. “We’re ready for the wine, too, if you still want to do the honors.”

“Sure. My pleasure.”

The dining room table was covered with pretty dishes, a white linen tablecloth, silverware, and glasses arranged in a fashion that was fancy but not pretentious. Although it was clear that Kylie had gone all out, there was no mistaking that it was a cozy meal prepared and served not in a restaurant but in a home.

What a difference from his usual supptime. If his style of dining made it to the Food Channel, it could be defined as Modern Caveman or Post Pre-Civilization Uncivilized.

Bobby reached over to pour wine into Kylie’s glass first. “Everything looks great. I don’t know where to start.”

“Oh, please, just help yourself.”

“And going back to what we were saying ... so now that you’re grownup, it’s not as much fun? People recognizing you and all that?”

That had to be discussed. Resigning herself to the fact that it was best just to get it out of the way, Kylie plunged right in as she served herself a piece of chicken.

“There are times that I just want to be anonymous,” she admitted. “Not to be mean or anything. It’s not that I don’t want to be bothered. I just want to have my coffee or my meal, alone or with a friend, and not be bother--interrupted.”

Bobby looked up from scooping a hearty helping of roasted red potatoes, glazed with olive oil and sprinkled with herbs, onto his plate. “Interrupted? Or bothered?”

Hmmm. He wasn’t letting that one slide.

“Okay. *Bothered.*” She smirked. “But I try to remember that most people are satisfied with meeting you, telling you how much they loved the show. Some of them tell you that they love *you*. And I do remember that without these people we wouldn’t have been on the air for those years. Then there are times like tonight where it *was* fun. Really fun!”

Some of them tell you they love you. It wasn't that Bobby hadn't heard the rest of her statement, but he'd sort of gotten detoured by that portion in particular. A couple of the guys hovering around Kylie that evening at the restaurant, the way sharks hover around one little lonely fish, were what a woman might have considered attractive. The one with the glasses was okay-looking, but it was the manner in which Kylie had drawn close to him, how she'd smiled at him. That had sent what felt like a current of fire through Bobby's blood.

Something that had felt suspiciously like jealousy.

He scoffed to himself, taking a bite full of the salad. That wasn't jealousy. That *couldn't* be jealousy. First of all, there was nothing between them. Hadn't that been his whole purpose in seeing her that evening? In making it clear that a kiss was just a kiss?

"Oh, good! You like the salad."

He swallowed before responding. "Not usually, but this is great. I never had salad with pieces of apples and nuts in it."

She sat back, amused. "I don't usually, either. Mostly I toss some iceberg lettuce and cherry tomatoes together, and that's it."

"Even that would be healthier than what I typically eat."

"Really? What's a typical dinner for you?"

"Whatever's close, quick, easy. Pizza. Chinese. I have to drive out of Berrentine Cove to find something like a Mickey Dee's."

Kylie laughed, piercing a couple of string beans with her fork. "It's been so long since I've been to Mickey Dee's."

"Yeah? I've been there so much since I started working on this place that I've eaten a truckload of fast food."

"That's not good. But I guess it's not easy with a place that's undergoing renovations."

Bobby almost remarked that he would have preferred Kylie's home for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and anything in between. Fortunately, he caught himself in time.

"I've passed by the house you're working on. Looks like you and your friend Vince have gotten a lot done on it already."

"Thanks, Kylie. I don't know why, but this one feels like it's taking longer than other project we've worked on." It didn't escape Bobby that Kylie, after meeting Vince only once, recalled his name.

Pausing, she washed down a bite with a swallow of wine, then held the glass between her hands for a moment.

"Maybe we could drop by the house after dinner," she suggested.

He lifted his head to check her expression. He had already gone through his potatoes and that moist, tasty chicken, which she had jazzed up with herbs and a light, creamy sauce. He was seriously thinking about going after some seconds.

"To see the Manor?"

"Yes, the Manor. Sorry, I keep calling it a house," she apologized.

"No, no big deal." He wiped his mouth with his napkin. "You'd like to see the work we've done?"

"Very much. If that's okay."

* * * *

Now he would have that serious talk with Ms. Kylie Donovan, now or before he locked up the place and she drove him back to town for his car.

All through dinner at her house, Bobby had tried to steer the conversation in that direction. He even had an idea of what he was going to say, sort of.

The opportunity during dinner hadn't come. Besides, it didn't seem very gentlemanly, telling a lady not to expect anything to come of the kisses they had shared some days earlier while filling up on her fine cooking.

The conversation had also taken different twists and turns after dinner, while he had helped her with the cleanup. While rinsing off the dishes and placing them in the dishwasher, Kylie had surprised him by talking about her childhood, unusual in that she'd spent hers mostly as a little actress on the set of a TV sitcom. But her accounts centered round those who were important to her, those who had made those memories joyful for her. Shaun Walker, whom Bobby knew was already Number One on that list, sounded like a grownup-sized kid himself, and yet a loving father figure to all his TV kids, especially Kylie. She also reminisced about Mrs. Sachs, the kids' tutor on the set, a woman who was the grandmother she'd had never had, according to how Kylie fondly remembered her.

And then there was the small collection of others, some that could be called the unspoken heroes behind the scenes. Camera men, lighting technicians, assistants, and one other child actor, Tremain Phillips, who'd had a recurring role as the bratty, mischievous neighbor's son. As it turned out, in real life Tremain had been a real sweet kid.

On the way to the Penny Manor Bobby stopped expecting Kylie to regale him with boasting about Hollywood parties and premieres, the part of her profession that had added a fairy tale but adult edge to her childhood. She only touched upon them, ever so briefly, spending more time on talking about Tremain Phillips' beloved horse, which he'd invited the other kids in the cast to ride.

Also, Kylie kept steering the conversation back to Bobby. What was his childhood like, his teen years. What did he like to do, what were his favorite sports, did he prefer movies to books, or vice versa?

It wasn't that she was dwelling too deeply, either. She was interested--*earnestly*. Kylie Donovan wasn't one of those people who became enthralled in a conversation solely if it revolved around *her*.

That attitude was genuine. Bobby could see it at the Manor while he gave her a private tour through the various areas and rooms, some of which hadn't even been touched yet, some that were partially done, and the couple of rooms that were done except for the last finishing touches.

"You know what I was just thinking?" he asked as they reached the top of the stairs on the third floor.

"What?"

"Eh. Maybe I shouldn't say this."

Her eyes widening, Kylie turned to him. "Oh, now you really have to tell me."

The hallway was illuminated by a sixty-watt bulb in an old lamp that would be replaced. Eventually. It wasn't at the top of the list of priorities.

Yet it was enough light, falling delicately on her. Blinking, he noticed how it brought out her creamy complexion. Clear, healthy skin, the kind that wasn't earned with pricey creams sold at froufrou boutiques on Rodeo Drive. It was cultivated instead by a woman who was careful in the sun and the wind, in short, someone who took care of herself.

One corner of his mouth jerked upwards in a half grin. "I was thinking that you're what I would've expected Melissa Colton to grow up to be."

Her eyes danced. "Is that good?"

"Well, yeah. I think so."

"Maybe the better question is, who do you think she was before she grew up?"

"The girl next door." No hesitation on his part whatsoever. "Sounds corny, I know."

"Not really. I do find it a compliment. But I'm curious about...."

"Let me show you something. Down at the other end of the hallway."

Sometimes, it was best to quit while he was ahead, or whatever old, hackneyed axiom could apply to changing to a subject that was safe.

"It's up through this door," Bobby said, opening the door at the end of the hall.

"That's the attic?"

"Yep, I don't know what we'll do with it. We'll restore it, but we'll leave it up to the owners to decide if it'll be used for storage or an office." He added then, "That's in the event the owners turn it into a bed and breakfast, of course."

"Ah. You mean the *new* owners. The owners right now are you and Vince. Your business owns it, anyway."

Heading up the narrow stairwell ahead of her, he nodded. "That's true. We are. I never noticed that before, but I never call us 'the owners.' I never think of myself as owning anything. Except my truck, maybe."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's hard to get attached to something that you have no intention of keeping."

At the top of the steps, Kylie kept a hand on the banister to steady herself as she sneezed.

"Bless you. Too much dust?" he asked. "Sorry about that."

"No, that's okay. It's an attic, after all."

Her curiosity was piqued. "Ever keep any of the properties you work on?"

"Never. Vince thought about it once, but he changed his mind when his wife fell in love with a different house."

Kylie nodded, thought for a moment. "Where do you live when you're not ... camping out in a house you're working on?"

Camping out. Bobby knew she was trying to be polite. Yet she also was catching on that he wasn't a get-attached-and-settle-down kind of guy. He ignored the small part of him that rebelled against her accepting that reality.

"I have an apartment in Florida," he responded.

"Florida? So that's where you call home?"

"Not originally. I was raised in upstate New York a few miles from the

Adirondacks. I moved to Florida a few years ago. Vince's family is from there, so you could say that's our base for the business. The apartment's not much, but it's someplace to, you know ... crash. Hang my hat."

So in other words, baby, the nomad's life is the life I lead--but it's not the life for you. Please try to understand.

Kylie strode across the room, taking in the empty attic lit only by a couple of bulbs. It was a classic attic with a beamed roof and a pair of windows that might have been installed by the last owner. Through them was the view of the rear courtyard. Beyond that were the mountains outlined against a darkened sky.

Kylie stood close to him to gaze out the windows. Too close. He could smell her perfume. She didn't wear a lot, but what she wore was tantalizing and teasingly feminine.

"Why is this your favorite room?" she asked.

The smart thing would have been to take a step back, away from her, away from the temptation to touch her. But he wasn't being smart; he was giving in to the desire to rest his hand on her waist. Bobby forced himself to take it away.

"It's like Billy's room, my best friend growing up. His parents had a two-bedroom house, and the smaller one was for Billy's kid brother, so they turned the attic into a bedroom for him. I never had my own room. The apartment my mom had back then was small, kinda cramped. So I shared a room with Luke."

"An attic bedroom. I always thought that would be cool, too."

Bobby gazed at her in the dim light of the attic. They stood like that for some moments, so close to each other. She surprised him by offering him an embrace.

This was the moment certainly to say something. He had put off saying it all night. If he didn't open his mouth, he knew he would basically be leading her on. If he hurt her, Bobby suspected he'd be kicking himself for a long time.

Yet Kylie's arms wrapped around his waist, her head resting against his chest--could anything feel more right than that? Suppressing a sigh, he wrapped her in his arms and held her. Inwardly he commended himself on having enough restraint not to kiss her head.

Not that that was much restraint. But he knew that if he began to kiss her again, his willpower would fly right out through those attic windows.

"I have to ask you something," he heard her say as she lifted her head from his chest to meet his gaze.

She sure had no problems speaking her own mind, he noticed. Where was *his* voice? Where was everything that he was supposed to have opened his mouth to say by now?

If he was honest with himself, the truth was that this was more about protecting himself.

"What's that?" he prompted.

"No, better than asking you--Shaun is coming next week. I want you to ask him if I really am the girl next door. I don't have everything in common with Melissa Colton, granted. But we're not all that different, either."

He licked his lips. "Hope I didn't offend you before when I said that."

"You didn't. But you don't know what it's like to live in the shadow of someone

who's the product of somebody's imagination."

Sighing, Kylie pulled free of their embrace, much sooner than Bobby would have wanted it to end.

The end of eternity. That would have been the right time to stop holding her tightly against him.

He began, "I didn't mean to say...."

"I know you didn't. I want to make sure, though, that you know that that part of my life ... well, really, that doesn't come into play anymore, for the most part. I just don't want it to ... to...."

"Kylie. I don't see Melissa other than in the way I mentioned to you. I see *you*."

This was *not* moving in the direction it needed to go. All he had to do was get the words out. Before she got in too deep, or before it was too hard for him to walk away freely. He *had* to step up to the plate.

Bobby opened his mouth, only to have it filled with another kiss. No sweet little nothing on the head or cheek, either. This was a kiss like the first ones.

The ones that had gotten him into trouble in the first place. Kisses even more satisfying than the meal Kylie had cooked for them earlier. A man needed a will of the toughest steel to pass up one of those. Either that or he needed his head examined.

Fortunately, he was able to come to his senses. It took some effort, but he finally closed his hands firmly around her shoulders and ended the kiss.

"I hate to do this, but I have to get up early tomorrow morning." His voice was a husky whisper.

"Oh. Me, too."

"So...."

"So we'd better go get your truck at the restaurant."

"Yeah. Okay. Let's do that."

"But there's ... one thing that I'd like to...."

She was driving him out of his *mind*. The longer he spent with her, the more difficult it was.

He swallowed, his Adam's apple rising and falling. "What?"

It was slightly chillier in the attic than it had been in other parts of the mansion. In addition to closing up her jacket, Kylie curled her arms around Bobby's waist and snuggled closer to him.

"There's not anyone else in the picture, is there?" she asked.

"No. Nobody else," he answered with no hesitation.

"Okay. I've just known guys who would play with your heart. I should've known that wouldn't be you." She smiled and nodded towards the stairs. "We need to head back. I have to get up early tomorrow to do a few things at my shop."

"And then you'll be at the restaurant?"

"Tomorrow? Oh, no. I have the day off. And I'll be home....," casting a conspiratorial smirk over her shoulder she added, "all day."

FYIB. For Your Information, Baby. That part was understood. In the event that he wanted to come over, to spend time together, Kylie was letting him know that her door was open.

“That’s good to know,” he said, walking down the stairs after her.

Some things didn’t have to be so complicated. Maybe a big, drawn-out discussion wasn’t necessary. It was possible that all he had to do was allow tomorrow to pass without a call, without passing by.

All there was between them right now was an attraction, a very strong attraction. Like the old cliché said, they had those fireworks going on.

Some time apart, maybe, was all he needed to let the embers from those fireworks to cool down. Because one thing was for sure--the more time he spent with Kylie and the closer he found himself drawing to her, the more he wanted of her.

And in fairness, that just wouldn’t work out for either of them.

Chapter Seven

According to the Trans America Airways board, Flight 1402 coming in from Montana was delayed. Kylie was anxious to see the Walkers again, yet she didn't sweat the wait. She strolled past the airport shops, bought herself a cup of coffee at the first eatery she came to, and fished her cell from her black leather tote.

She figured she might as well use her spare time to make that call. Get it over with. It wasn't a call she looked forward to making. Maybe she couldn't be blamed for "forgetting" to respond to the letter she'd received with a call.

Yet there was one little problem she had to contend with if she didn't call--her own sense of right and wrong. She might be justified in ignoring the letter, but she still wouldn't have felt right about it.

She surprised herself by remembering the phone number. It hadn't changed in the decade or so since they'd moved there.

Maybe, if no one was home, she could get away with leaving a message, possible, yes. She could say that she did call, but no one was home. If they called her, she could beg off by saying....

"Hello?"

She sat up straight, cleared her throat. "*Dad?* That you?"

"Kylie? Hey!" Her father--her *real* father--chuckled. "Yes, yes, it's me."

"You sound sorta ... different. You sick?"

"Yeah, I got that flu that's been going around."

"Oh. Sorry to hear you're under the weather." Absently, she studied her nails. Behind her, a young mom and dad with three little ones were getting settled at a table. "Mom doing better?"

"I see you got my letter. Yes, she's doing much better. She's going in for surgery in about a week."

Until she heard those words, Kylie hadn't been listening as intently, watching the blinking Christmas lights in the shop window across the wide airport corridor.

"Surgery? On her eye?" She tried not to sound alarmed.

"It's all right, Kylie. It's a very simple procedure. They do it right at the office. The recovery from cataract surgery is fairly easy, too."

"Seems like Mom is too young to go through that." She paused for a sip of her coffee. She'd drink it, even if it was too weak for her taste. "Is she home?"

"Not at the moment. I can have her call you when she gets back, though."

How cordial he was being, how soft-spoken. She tamped down on her irritation, recollecting how her father hadn't always been that easygoing or patient with her.

"I'd like that," she said quietly. "But ask her to call me tomorrow or this week. I'll be in and out today. I'm picking someone up at the airport, in fact."

"Really? Who?"

“Shaun and Lorelee.”

“Oh, they’re coming in for a visit? That’s great. I wish we could do that.”

“Maybe when things settle down I’ll pay for you both to fly out here.” She hated the fact that she had to force herself to make that offer. Not because of her mother, either. But her mother would never come without him.

“When things settle down?”

“Well, I mean I just moved here, that, and I’m setting up the business.”

Unbelievable! She shook her head. She had called her mom to give her the new address, told her mother about the business she was starting. Her mother must have mentioned it to him.

Of course, her father couldn’t be bothered to remember.

“Oh, yes. The store, right? How’s that coming along?”

He was still pouring on the charm. Kylie knew where that conversation was headed. He had touched upon it in his letter ... the reason he’d contacted her in the first place.

She pushed up her sleeve to check the time on her watch. “I’ll be opening it shortly. Look, um, Dad, I have to get off. The battery in my cell is low anyway because I forget to charge it up last night. So, how much exactly do you and Mom need?”

There was a slight hesitation on his end. “Well, honey, I mentioned the amount in my letter.”

“I know. But I don’t have that much. I can do about four hundred. Does that help?”

“Oh. Four hundred? Can you come up to at least a thousand?”

It might have been the year that had passed or the distance she had put between herself and him, specifically. But she wasn’t exasperated with him as she might have been in the past.

Rather, she was only saddened, deeply saddened. Enough that she wished her cell would just lose its signal altogether, in essence freeing her from that uncomfortable situation.

“Dad, I wish I could give you and Mom a thousand dollars. I really do. But I don’t make that much at the job I’m doing right now. I’m opening up a business, and a lot of this is coming out of my savings. Four hundred is the best I can do right now.”

“Of course. All right. Four hundred would be fine.”

“Okay. I’ll get that out to you tomorrow, latest. I’ll send it Priority. If the business takes off in some months, then I can do more next time. Okay?”

After saying goodbye, Kylie tossed her phone back into her tote. With her father it was hard to say what the money was *really* for. In his letter he had claimed their home--a much more modest house than the one the family had resided in during Kylie’s heyday, or whatever that crazy time could be called--needed improvements. If memory served her right, the money was to be used on a new water heater and new aluminum siding.

Both of which, together, would come to considerably more than a mere thousand dollars. That was what made his request so suspect. The last time her father had asked her for money, the reason he’d given was that the car was in dire need of a new transmission. Kylie later learned from an aunt that the money had gone to a Caribbean cruise.

Which she didn't begrudge her parents--except a; at that time she had been in the process of picking up stakes and moving way across the country, so money had been tight for her, and b; her father had lied to her. Kylie had also noticed that even with Christmas not that far away, her father hadn't said a word about wishing they could be together.

Some things never changed. When it came to her dad, there was nothing new under the sun. She wasn't a little girl anymore, with him "guiding" her career, pushing her before, during, and after her work on *Daddy's Home* in that controlling, critical manner of his. Though, even as an adult, she didn't feel any closer to him because that was the way he wanted it, a relationship solely on his terms.

But she couldn't deal with any of those issues right at that moment. And there was no way would she allow him or anyone to tarnish the anticipation and happiness of the Walkers' arrival.

Again her cell rang, making her dip into her tote to find it. What now? But then her heart skipped a beat when she saw the number flashing across the screen.

"Bobby?"

She could hear a rustle on the other line, like he was transferring the phone to his other ear. "Yeah, hey, Kylie. How's it going?"

"Great, can't complain, and you?" She smiled to herself, in spite of the fact that she had previously resolved to be cool toward him the next time they spoke.

Nothing had happened between them for her to come to that decision. No argument, no cross words. But she had been hoping, the day she didn't have to go into work, that they could spend some time together. Bobby hadn't stood her up, but he had called to say he was "swamped" with work and couldn't make it.

That had had left her confused. The fact that he hadn't called for days but was calling now confused her even more. Yet she couldn't summon the emotion of anger to direct at him.

"I wanted to ... that is, I'm just checking in to see how you're doing," he stammered. "Aren't your friends coming in?"

"Yep. You have incredible timing, Harrison."

There was a smile in his voice. "Why's that?"

"I'm at the airport right now picking them up."

The sound of his laughter--she liked that just too, too much. Hearing it, part of her felt delighted, though another part of her ached.

"That is some timing, huh?" he agreed.

"They're looking forward to meeting you. Shaun's bragging that you're his last surviving fan. All the rest have died off, he says."

Please don't disappoint him, she thought, biting her lip. *Or me.*

"I don't believe that for one minute. And I'm looking forward to meeting them, too. I know when, well, when you're ready, let me know."

"I will."

"All right. I know you gotta go, so ... see ya. And ... I miss you, baby."

She blinked. "I miss you, too. See ya."

Now *that* was a surprise.

Kylie remembered the time and hurried out of the concession and into the

corridor. By now, maybe the Walkers' plane had come in.

Mixed signals, that was the reason she had been stressing over that days-long gap between the last time she and Bobby had been together.

I miss you. Nothing mixed about that signal.

Consulting the arrivals board again, Kylie saw that Flight 1402 had arrived at Gate 44. Finishing all but the last few drops of her coffee, she pitched the cup in a receptacle and followed the signs to the waiting area.

Christmas, it was right around the corner. That time of year, from Christmas to New Year's, hadn't always been a season Kylie had found herself excited about. Her parents hadn't spent the year's biggest holidays with her in several years, and the rest of her family was too far, both geographically and emotionally, to share the festivities with. The Walkers were great people, a family that time and loyal friendship had made for her. Yet they would be returning home in a few days, right in time to celebrate the holidays with their real family.

Then there was Bobby....

But she couldn't do that to him. She *wouldn't* do it, putting pressure on him. He was holding back for a reason, keeping her at arm's length, not getting too close. Exactly why, she couldn't say.

What she knew was that she wasn't about to push him. When and if he came to her, she wanted him to do it on his own.

Passengers from Flight 1402 began emerging through the tunnel that connected the gate to the waiting area. In couples and threes they came at first, then in larger groups, then again in pairs.

Finally Kylie spotted them. Shaun Walker was hard to miss, all six feet and four inches of him. His hair was less caramel brown and more silver now, and it took her a moment to realize it was him. He had shed some of that excess weight he was famous for, having carried it for years. Just the sight of his smile brought a smile of her own both to her face and her heart.

Beside him was Lorelee. She was older now, too, but she seemed to be one of those women who was graced with more beauty in her advancing years than she had been in her youth.

As Kylie raised an arm to offer an enthusiastic wave, she recognized another face in the crowd, right behind Lorelee. Her adopted parents had brought someone with them. Someone who drew curious glances from those who recognized him as he zigzagged past clusters of people and greeted Kylie with open arms ... and a kiss right on the lips.

* * * *

Bobby wiped the film, formed by the steam leftover from his hot shower, off the bathroom mirror, and filled the sink with water. There was no clock in the room and he wasn't wearing his watch, or anything for that matter except a towel wrapped around his waist. Yet he knew he was making good time and wouldn't be arriving late to Kylie's place.

Pretty good, considering he'd quit working on the place rather late. It was the dining room that had done it. He could have kept working on that room until it was done, even if it had taken all night. Even Vince had seemed reluctant to stop that night. Once

the new hardwood floors were down and all the new windows and wainscoting were in place, the once-gutted room had begun to take shape. More than that, it was turning out better than when it was no more than plans on a blueprint.

After lathering up, Bobby leaned over the sink and closer to the mirror as he brought the razor carefully along his jaw. This was the bath he preferred to use, the smallest of the three that were finished. They had maintained its style, the old-world charm, right down to the clawed foot bathtub, although he never used the bathtub, opting always for the shower instead at the other end of the room.

To keep him company he had hauled in his old radio, the one that he was never without, with the cassette player that had broken long ago, and hooked it up with a long extension cord. He'd found an oldies station that came in pretty decently, and the last few bars of 'Santa Baby' was playing.

"That's about it for me tonight," the DJ announced in an easygoing drawl. "Just wanted to say, folks, on behalf of all my friends here at WBCT, you've been great listeners and it's been, well, the most fun we've ever had, sharing this time with you. Hope you have the best Christmas ever, and hope the New Year brings you lots of dreams that come true. Stay well and it's been my pleasure. This is Roger Bellworth saying good night."

"Sounds like his last words to them ever or somethin'," Bobby mused out loud with a chuckle.

And for good reason, as it turned out, there was a moment, the shortest of moments, of flat air, of radio silence. Then, out of the blue, a gratingly nasal male voice blurted through the radio's speakers, "Hey. It's Mel. Let's get this party started, all right now?"

With a groan, Bobby hit the side of the sink with his razor a little harder than he had to in order to shake off the excess shaving cream. Immediately following the announcement was the blare of some long-forgotten 1980s punk band playing their one and only hit before descending back into obscurity. They hadn't even kicked off with a good band, like U2 or Dire Straits. Rather than wasting time in searching for another station, he dried his hand on the towel before reaching up to switch off the radio.

Nice. Not only had the oldies station been 'flipped'--the term for a sudden change in format--but the station had chosen to do that with the year's biggest holidays right around the corner. While the station went automated, with a disembodied and monotone voice named "Mel" or "Johnny" or some other common name as the uninteresting host, the human DJs were ceremoniously dumped, as were their legions of loyal listeners.

It was a cheap way to run a radio station, perhaps the cheapest of ways, and it was usually implemented that same exact way--out of the blue, without any warning whatsoever, abruptly, like an earthquake suddenly ripping apart the earth.

And you've seen it happen ... how many times? In how many towns?

After washing off the excess shaving cream with splashes of water, Bobby stared at himself in the mirror. He dried his face, thinking back to the times he had personally watched a radio station "flip," coming up with four times.

Four times. In four different towns. That was more than just a sign of the times. That was a sign of someone who hadn't stopped moving, a guy who'd been going from

town to town now for a few years. And that was with very few pit stops at that rinky-dink little apartment he almost called home. One person shouldn't have seen something like that firsthand that many times--unless it was a man like him, who moved from one place to the other, from project to project.

Not the sort of guy who should have been in a relationship with a woman who deserved some kind of commitment from a man.

He headed up the stairs to the attic. Ever since he had given Kylie the tour of the Penny Manor, he had more or less commandeered that room, exchanging the smaller bedroom on the second floor, the one he'd been using from the start, for the attic as his bedroom. Finally, he had the attic bedroom he'd wanted since he was a kid, though it was silly, since he wasn't keeping the place. He'd found a full-length mirror in one of the other rooms, and propped it up against the attic's northern wall to use it as he dressed.

In a *suit*, no less. The first suit he'd owned in quite a few years, he was embarrassed to admit. Brand-new dress shirt, a new tie--powder blue, which aptly complemented the gray-black jacket and matching pants. He'd found a men's shop in a town neighboring Berrentine Cove and put everything together that same week. He'd also found the black leather dress shoes, simple but tasteful, also his first in a long time, considering he practically lived in those old, faded Timberlands, and sometimes in sneakers.

Luckily, this wasn't dinner. This was conversation over coffee and dessert. A lot better than dinner, yet Bobby knew he'd still be running into trouble. At that late hour he wasn't backing out of it, though. No way. If anything, he assumed this would be the clincher.

Meaning that Kylie would see it, plain as day, tonight. Whatever she saw in him, the illusion would be over tonight. When she saw him with her friend from those fame-filled, glittery television days, she would have to realize that Bobby Harrison, an Average Joe if ever there was one, didn't fit into her world.

He snorted to himself as he trotted down the manor's winding staircase.

Was that the deal with Kate? Bobby asked himself. *That you two were from two different worlds?*

Like any other man, he'd had his share of dates, women to share some laughs and fun times, nothing that had come close to even resembling a relationship. That is ... until the sparks that had happened between him and Kate. He had let his guard down, allowing himself to get close to someone at last.

In the end, all he'd done was set himself up for disappointment and a world of hurt.

Back emotionally in the present time, he almost forgot the bouquet of flowers and the box of cookies from the Town Bakery. That was the name of the place, located in the heart of Berrentine Cove. The Town Bakery. That had gotten a chuckle out of him. The flowers and the cookies were for Kylie, of course--for the hostess.

Bobby couldn't even begin to guess what one would give to someone like Shaun Walker, a man who probably had everything. However, he had to grudgingly admit to himself as he got into the truck and revved up the engine that he felt a twinge of excitement over meeting the actor who'd played the title role in *Daddy's Home*. Back

during his teen years, it was as if that complete stranger had looked into Bobby's heart and seen the kind of dad he'd missed out on, the kind of father he'd longed for.

Why all the excitement? Shaun Walker was an actor. He was probably nothing at all like the fictional character he'd played. Bobby surmised that he would be like most actors when it came to meeting the public. Charming but aloof, detached, with a touch or more of arrogance.

And Shaun Walker would know right off the bat that Kylie Donovan didn't belong with a traveling gypsy, a soul on the run like Robert Harrison.

Sighing, he steered out of the driveway and down the street in the direction of Kylie's home. It was better that they got this over with before he got in any deeper. It was happening, too. It was impossible to deny.

Vince and Mireya Montenegro weren't making things any easier, either. Bobby didn't rush to the door right away, lingering in his truck parked at the curb, right at the end of Kylie's driveway. Earlier in the week he'd pointed her home out to Vince, who'd driven past it with his wife.

Mireya said that little place is as good as any to hang your hat, you know. Vince's words came back to him. They were just a tease, but maybe just a little more, too.

Bobby had contended that he *did* have a home, that intermission of an apartment of his, most of the time forgotten on his travels. He didn't need a conventional home. Not him, Bobby Harrison. He belonged on the road, with his work.

Yet as a light snow began to fall from the glorious expanse of Virginia sky, he stared at Kylie's unpretentious little house. The strangest feeling flowed through him as he watched the house, a feeling that felt so much like yearning.

He shrugged it off, turned off the truck's engine, and took the gift offerings with him as he stepped out onto the pavement. Now wasn't the time for those thoughts, particularly because everything was about to fizzle down to its end.

It was time to meet Mr. Charming But Aloof.

Chapter Eight

Bobby lifted his head as the door opened. He'd been expecting to see Kylie standing there. Greeting him instead was another face, one he remembered instantly from his childhood.

"You gotta be Bobby," Shaun Walker's voice was a friendly, low growl.

"Yep. And you gotta be ... Daddy?" he kidded with a smile.

Typical! Bobby scolded himself. *Dude, do you ever think before you speak?*

He needn't have worried. Shaun Walker had a sense of humor, his face lighting up with a broad smile and a deep laugh rumbling up from his chest. Then, totally catching Bobby by surprise, the older man wrapped an arm around him and pulled him into the foyer for a bear hug that momentarily knocked the wind out of the younger man.

"Hey, little girl, Bobby Harrison's here!" Shaun shouted into Bobby's ear unwittingly before releasing him. "Bobby Harrison, Bobby Harrison. That's a great name, I really like that, one of those Boy Next Door names!"

"Thanks. Thanks very much, Mr. Walker." He stood for a moment, holding the bouquet and the box of cookies, fumbling for words.

So great to meet you. I loved your show as a kid! Those were the words on the tip of his tongue, words the man must have heard millions of times by now. Bobby licked his lips nervously, hoping to come up with something more original, with more depth and sincerity.

"Ah, make that Shaun. None of that Mr. Walker stuff. That's what the wife calls me when I'm in trouble."

"Oh, stop it!"

Turning, Bobby saw the scolding had come from Kylie. She had stepped into the living room from the kitchen in time to hear her television dad jesting and lightly giving Shaun's big shoulder an affectionate slap.

Kylie stole his attention away immediately. Up until then he had tried not to stare at Phil Colton, standing right there in front of him, in the flesh. Albeit an older version of Phil Colton, whom TVLand had once named "One of America's Favorite TV Dads." His hair, formerly dark brown, had frosted over almost completely silver. The actor had always been a big guy, around six-foot-three, and now the years had added a few more pounds around his middle, still an amiable, huge teddy bear of a man.

Bobby grinned. He saw the genuine warmth in the man's eyes and smile; that had been no act.

But then he saw Kylie. He liked the way she looked in that denim flare skirt, with a peasant blouse beneath a matching short denim jacket and red leather cowboy boots. It was a playful, country look that he found appealing. It was the first time Bobby had ever seen her with her hair drawn up, styled in a pretty French braid. When she gave him his greeting--a quick but flirtatious peck on the lips--a tornado couldn't have grabbed his

attention away from her. He watched her tug on Shaun's arm and flash him a wink.

"He's too cool to tell you," Kylie told him, nodding in Bobby's direction. "But I will. Bobby is another one, like me, who thought you made a great dad."

Perfect. Bobby smiled his approval at her for that choice of words and nodded. "That's true, Mr.--Shaun. I did."

Shaun chuckled and patted his shoulder as Kylie took the flowers and cookies from his hands. "Thank you, Bobby. You know, once in a while, our real kids would've agreed."

"That's not true. They *always* agreed," an attractive older woman with a smoky voice said from the couch.

"Bobby, that's Lorelee, my gorgeous bride of thirty-six years," Shaun said.

Immediately, Bobby took a liking to Shaun's wife, who reached up one slender and delicate hand for him to shake. She reminded him a little of the actress Laurie Bacall, with the same style of beauty, the same hint of class and strength in one sleek package. Dressed in a tailored beige pantsuit, she sat with her legs crossed, her other hand holding a fluted wine glass.

"They would've agreed, believe me," Lorelee told Bobby, motioning with a so-so gesture with her hand once he released it. "They might've said they wanted to see more of him sometimes, but they would've agreed with you and Kylie wholeheartedly."

"He was always working," Kylie added. "He was doing other things when the show was on hiatus, like that play on Broadway."

"Yes. The one that closed after the first night," Shaun reminded her with a wry smirk. "I remember it well!"

"Don't complain. That was a lot better than doing those cheesy pilots for those series that never made it off the ground, like I did."

Bobby squinted in the direction of the young guy on the couch with Lorelee Walker, whose arm was draped across the cushion behind her. He looked vaguely familiar to Bobby, who placed his age at roughly around Kylie's.

"Your son?" he asked Lorelee.

"Oh, there were times my parents *wished* that one!" the guy joked, laughing along with Shaun.

"That's not true," Lorelee disagreed and patted him on the knee.

"Oh, I don't know about that, honey. I seem to remember his parents bribing us that one time," Shaun quipped, "because he was such a handful, just to let him tag along on our trip to Mexico."

"Oh, that is so not true! He was the best behaved kid on the set," Kylie said then.

The young man on the couch reached up to shake Bobby's hand. "You don't remember me, huh?"

From the show. That's right. Bobby nodded before replying, "Of course I do. You were the boy, the one next door--"

"The troublemaker, Micky. That was me. Tremain Phillips."

"Tremain Phillips, right. The kid with the horse."

"That's me, all right. The kid with the horse!"

Bobby watched Tremain's gaze move from him to Kylie. He flinched slightly at

the expression in the actor's cobalt blue eyes. There was something in that look that hinted at more than innocent friendship.

"I know who told you that," Tremain said. "Because that was one of those facts that the tabloids wouldn't have found juicy enough."

"That's okay. They never found anything tawdry enough in my life, either," Shaun said, sighing and turning to his wife. "And we sure tried to give them some ammo, didn't we, honey?"

"We sure did, baby," Lorelee cooed. For good measure, she blew him a sultry little kiss.

"But that's all yesterday's stuff, lots of other things going on since then." Shaun gave Bobby's back a pat. "And we want to hear about you, young man. Sounds like your life is a lot more fascinating than ours has been."

"Oh, I wouldn't know about...."

"Getting the coffee and stuff, Kylie?" Tremain asked her, swiftly jumping up from the couch. "I'll help you with the table."

Bobby's first response to that was to frown at Tremain as he hurried past him to the kitchen. Catching himself, he painted on a smile.

Tremain Phillips. That was a phony name if ever he'd heard one. Yet that was the name the actor had used to introduce himself, so he figured, who was he to argue?

And he remembered him from *Daddy's Home*, of course. Phillips hadn't been the ubiquitous good-looking kid, like just about all the other young boys who populated TV sitcoms. On top of that, he was shorter than the girls on the show and his looks were on the geeky side. With an unruly mass of reddish-brown curls for hair and a spray of freckles across a largish turned-up nose, his best feature was clear as crystal--those impossibly blue eyes.

Some young people blossomed with age, becoming more attractive when they finally got out of childhood and the teen years. Tremain Phillips wasn't one of them. He also hadn't grown more than a few inches. He was now a diminutive man standing five-foot-five or so. He was average in build, maybe not toned by weights or the gym, but he was fit, like someone who ate a healthy diet and was physically active. What he lacked in looks and height, he more than made up for with a smile as big as his personality.

Normally, Bobby would have liked him. He didn't *dislike* Tremain, exactly. He just was uncomfortable with the interaction between him and Kylie. It wasn't hard to tell that she had great affection for him, in the casual way she'd touch his arm while she was speaking with him, the honey in her tone when she called him "sweetie." As for Tremain, if he didn't carry the torch for Kylie now, he had at some point in his life. Now and then it looked as if that sweet-natured, blue-eyed imp who'd been famous--or, at the very least, seen by millions of people each week on their living room TVs--would catch her in his arms and let loose with an uncharacteristically crazy kiss.

What a dilemma that would cause. What would Bobby do in the event that happened? What *could* he do?

"Half and half for me, please," Tremain was telling Bobby, who had just poured some into his own coffee. "Half and half for coffee and tea. Higher in fat or not, to me, that's non-negotiable."

Bobby managed to chuckle with everyone else at the table. He noticed that Tremain, with fingers that were rather stubby, also handled Kylie's dainty china creamer gingerly.

"You work behind the scenes in Hollywood now?" Bobby asked him.

"Me? Oh, no. That's not for me. That whole scene's not for me anymore."

Tremain added generous spoonfuls of sugar into his cup and stirred. "I don't know if it ever was, now that I think about it."

"You kidding?" Kylie clicked her tongue. "Bobby, he forgets. It wouldn't have been as much fun without Tremain."

Her old friend broke into a spontaneous grin. Bobby suppressed another scowl by staring into his cup, stirring his spoon enough in the coffee enough to cause a tiny whirlpool in there.

Maybe there had been something between them. Something Tremain Phillips had never forgotten. Bobby kept hearing himself saying the same words in his mind: *Man, what's the deal with you? Nobody told you about Kylie and me?*

"I thought about doing some writing," Tremain admitted. "I had ideas for series and stuff after the show ended."

"Why didn't you?" Lorelee asked.

He shrugged. "Probably because writing's hard and horses are more fun." He paused, laughing. "But I couldn't do that for a living, either. I thought about it, doing something, maybe opening a ranch. But I didn't know if I'd still love it if it became an actual job."

"And your mom must've passed away around that time, too, didn't she?" Shaun recalled.

"Yep, right around then." Tremain turned to Bobby, filling him in. "My dad had died when I was younger. That was one of the only times my mom wasn't on the set. She was with my father in the hospital. The director called me aside, told me what happened, told me my mom was coming to pick me up."

Bobby pulled his spoon from his cup. "That must've been really hard on a little kid."

"It was. But..." Tremain shrugged again, smiling sheepishly. "Ah, I guess I took the conversation on too sad a note. But you see that man right over there? He stayed with me and comforted me until my mother got there."

Shaun waved it off. "Oh, that's nothing that anyone else wouldn't have done. You were a great kid, Tremain. Tell Bobby how many people asked you later on if that was your real name."

Kylie laughed. "That's right! I think we started counting them, but we lost track."

"You kept in touch after the show?" Bobby asked.

"We all did," she replied. "Well, I haven't heard from the girls in a long time."

"Couple of them didn't handle the loss of the show very well," Tremain said, not venturing any further.

"And your name? You mean to say it really is Tremain?"

Bobby's teasing remark brought a round of laughter. Tremain returned the ribbing with a good-natured groan.

"It's really Herbert Aloysius Phillips, but if you tell anybody...." Tremain shook his head, waiting for the laughter to subside. "No, that's my real name. Tremain was my mom's maiden name. My dad liked it and thought it'd be a great first name. It also ended up being a cool stage name. But enough about me, since that's about as fascinating as my life gets, anyway."

"But tell Bobby what you do now," Shaun reminded him. "Since I think that was the question--or it was somewhere in there, before we all got off track."

Loralee quickly interjected, "Bobby, these cookies are delicious."

"Oh, great. Glad they're a hit," he said.

And it seemed they were. Even after Kylie's creamy key lime pie had been sliced, everyone continued to pick at the cookies that had been transferred from the bakery box onto an ornate dish.

"Okay, that's right." Tremain took a sip of his coffee and went on, "After the show, I figured I'd do the smart thing. I went back to school, got a degree in teaching. I knew my mom didn't really like the whole L.A. smog-city thing, so I moved us out to Wyoming, far from all that. I went back to school a few years later--well, make that seminary. I teach American history in a high school back home, which mostly pays the bills, and I'm also an associate pastor in our church."

But no wife. Or so Bobby gathered. Tremain would have mentioned a special lady in his life by that point, someone other than Kylie.

He felt a pang of guilt. Tremain Phillips had to be the most unthreatening guy on the planet, a little guy who would have been milquetoast if it weren't for his sunny, gregarious nature, a schoolteacher and a minister to boot.

Nobody told you about Kylie and me? Bobby mocked himself inwardly. He took a healthy forkful of pie, savoring its creaminess and the zesty tang of lime.

Told Tremain *what* about him and Kylie? Just who did he think he was, getting those possessive thoughts about her? He was here because he'd been invited and out of respect, since it seemed Shaun Walker had been as happy to meet him as Bobby had been to meet Shaun.

But there was also the other matter--once Kylie saw the interaction between Bobby and her Hollywood friends she would realize that he didn't truly belong in their world, that whatever was kindling between them really wasn't meant to be.

There were just a few little problems with that scenario. First of all, a person didn't have to be a rocket scientist to realize that the Walkers and Associate Pastor Tremain "That's My Name" Phillips weren't "Hollywood friends." They were people, *real* people, who each shared a genuine friendship with Kylie. Over pie, cookies, and coffee, Bobby discovered that Lorelee Caulfield Walker had been working as a young nurse when she met the man who would become her husband. That was the afternoon she had met an old friend from high school for lunch, a friend who'd become an actress and was working on the same TV movie-of-the-week with an up-and-coming young comic actor named Shaun Walker. The introduction had led to a flirtatious conversation. That, in turn, had led to Lorelee's friend bowing out of their following lunch date at the last minute--the friend, having conspired with Shaun, suggested her co-star would make a fine replacement, so the trip downtown wouldn't have been a total waste of time for

Loralee. The rest, as they say, was history. Shaun Walker, actor, married a lady who had nothing at all to do with show business, and that was more than fine with him. In the years that had followed the cancellation of *Daddy's Home*, roles for an aging actor had been few and far between. Shaun admitted to having been hurt by that, if not stunned; acting was more than a career to him. It had been his life's work.

But his life was bigger than his work, fortunately. During those years he went on with his second love, writing, producing several mystery novels under a pen name that had done moderately well and one screenplay that had garnered him a nice chunk of change. Speaking of change, the Walkers had had their share of that, too, between continuing to raise their children and their subsequent move from Santa Barbara to Loralee's hometown in Montana. Other than coping with the onset of Shaun's diabetes and a heart attack only a year earlier that had dictated he watch his diet and become more active than he'd been in recent years, the Walkers lived a peaceful, happy life, happier than most of the friends they'd left behind from Shaun's years in the business.

So, in short, if Bobby had thought he would be the odd man out in that same galaxy of shining stars that supposedly made up Kylie's world, he couldn't have been more wrong. Neither the Walkers nor Tremain Phillips were much different from himself.

But there was one more thing that made his original reason for being there that night so foolish. And that was that whether the Walkers and Tremain were as plastic as plastic could be, whether they had looked down their noses at him with disdain or outright declared him not good enough for their Kylie or not, the fact remained--deep down, that wouldn't have made a whit of difference. Bobby wouldn't have cared.

He suspected that if it had been obvious they came from different worlds, he wouldn't have given up easily at all. He would have hung in there, hoping that Kylie wouldn't care either, that she would think it was wonderful if her friends liked him, but it wouldn't influence her one way or the other. Bobby would have persuaded her--with words, with kisses, with his touch, with his heart.

That was the part that made the whole thing more tangled up than ever.

"That must be really challenging," Tremain was saying as he helped Bobby stack the dishes for Kylie, who had returned to the kitchen with the Walkers. "And satisfying, too."

Bobby turned to him, his eyes widening. They'd been talking about his work. "It is. It's backbreaking, too, long hours."

"You do it all yourselves? You and Vince?"

Tremain had remembered his friend and business partner's name, though Bobby had only mentioned it--what? Once? Twice? That brought a smile to him.

"Not all of it. It'd take even longer. A lot, though. We bring in a crew, and some pros. You know, when it comes time to do the wiring, the masonry. Landscaping. This is a bigger job than we banked on."

"Still, it's yours, all yours. You restore it from top to bottom." Tremain gave him a side glance. "Kylie thinks that's so cool, too."

"Yeah?" He cleared his throat. "It's a lot of hassle, too, lots of moving around. It's not for everybody, either. I stay in the place we're working on at the time, crazy as that sounds."

“Vince does, too?”

“No, he’s renting a place with his wife. Not always, but on a few of the jobs. I don’t know how much longer we’ll be working together,” Bobby admitted then. “They have a son. Cute little guy. When he gets bigger, I imagine Vince isn’t going to want all this moving around, this ... gypsy life.”

He swallowed hard, taking the silverware from Tremain’s hand. Bobby had come close to adding, *I don’t think it’d be any life for Kylie, either, do you, old friend?*

“Sounds like a young man’s game. Guess you can do it, but once you settle down, you know,” Tremain said, pausing and giving him a wink, “well, things always change.”

Bobby didn’t know how to respond to that. Luckily, he didn’t have to, since Shaun walked into the room and tweaked Tremain’s ear like he had when he was the maddening neighbor’s kid.

“You talkin’ his ear off in here?” Shaun asked Tremain.

“What would you expect me to do? That’s what I do, talk,” Tremain agreed.

“Why do you think I became a teacher *and* a minister? It wasn’t easy, searching high and low for *two* jobs that let me do all the talking.”

Bobby saw an opportunity, with the both of them getting into their own chitchat, to step into the kitchen. Lorelee must have excused herself to freshen up or return to the living room because he was pleased to find Kylie alone in there. She was rinsing off dishes and cups and loading them into the dishwasher but stopped to smile at him.

“Looks like you all hit it off,” she said in a stage whisper.

“Yeah, we did.” He smiled and handed her the rest of the dishes and silverware.

“Your friends are--well, they’re like real people.”

“They *are* real people, Bobby.” She giggled. “Cool! You had a great time with each other. They liked you, too.”

He assumed that included Tremaine. Still stinging slightly from the man’s unabashed displays of affection for Kylie, he asked in a roundabout way, “You and Tremaine must have been very close on the show, huh? You just seem like ... like you have a very close friendship.”

“Oh, I *love* Tremaine. He’s one of the sweetest, kindest people I know. He’s one of the best friends I’ve had in my whole life.”

There was nothing behind those words other than a candid truthfulness. Bobby respected that, and he still wondered if there’d been more than friendship involved at some other time, but he believed Kylie wholeheartedly.

And even if he hadn’t, he couldn’t very well have made an issue of it, either, could he?

“Looks like he’s really fond of you, too,” he said, subdued.

Kylie straightened up after closing the dishwasher door and faced him. She narrowed her eyes at him curiously then smiled.

“Well, I think they’re in the living room. I hear them in there,” Bobby said, turning to the door. “We shouldn’t leave them alone.”

“No, we shouldn’t. Bobby?”

He turned to her. “Yeah, Kylie?”

She moved swiftly, faster than he could process that her hand had lighted upon his

chest at the same time her lips had reached his in a kiss. Not a fast little surprise of a kiss, either. Her kiss was lingering, like she had been itching to do that all night. And she had found the opportunity to do so at last.

When the kiss ended she caught her breath. "I'm so glad you're here tonight."

"So am I." Bobby realized his hand was on the small of her back, that he had touched her without thinking. He drew his hand away reluctantly."

"We can talk about Christmas after they leave. I've been thinking about it and ... well, that is, are you ... are we...."

Christmas. She was thinking about Christmas ... with him. That was some *serious* thinking. Bobby drank in a deep breath.

"I--I don't know," he murmured. "I may be going away. Plans that were made some time ago."

Kylie and he were separated only by inches, so he couldn't have missed the crestfallen expression in her face, the hurt she tried to hide with a forced smile.

"Oh. Of course. I understand." She shrugged and banged herself in the temple with the heel of her hand. "I'm crazy. Here I am, talking plans, and I'm probably going to be working through the holidays."

"At the restaurant?"

"At the restaurant and on the store. I need to open it up. And I'll be mostly working on my own. I can't very well hire some part-time help yet, least not until I start turning some kind of profit."

What a mistake. What a grand mistake he'd made. Bobby caught her shoulders in his hands, drawing her even a little closer.

He began, "If there's any change, if something happens...."

"It's not a problem, really, Bobby. I'm the one who shouldn't have assumed, anyway," she said. She turned to the door, beckoning him to follow with a wave of her hand. "Let's go back in there. They're waiting for us."

"You're right. Let's go." He waited until she had her back to him and was walking fast in the direction of her living room.

Then he pretended to bang his head against the doorway's frame, inwardly calling himself every name in the book for having hurt her.

He consoled himself with the thought that it was, after all, for the best. If their relationship went any further, that would hurt her more than anything he had said that night.

And making plans to spend the biggest holiday of the year together was taking it pretty far.

Chapter Nine

There hadn't been time earlier during the Walkers' brief visit for Kylie to show off her dream, which was almost complete and ready to make its entrance into the world. The morning they were scheduled to be at the airport for their flight home wasn't the most opportune time, either. She would have skipped it altogether, yet Shaun had insisted on seeing the shop, if only for a few minutes.

Once through the door, she could barely contain her excitement. That excitement was offset by that little sadness under the surface that these weren't her parents by blood, and yet they were making the fuss her real parents should have made over her venture. The venture her real parents had barely acknowledged.

Though that wasn't the only reason she wasn't feeling as breezy as she had felt earlier that evening.

"It's not very much," she told them as Shaun and Lorelee moved around the store, admiring her hard work. "I know it's not particularly big or impressive."

"Who says it has to be big to be impressive?" Shaun pointed out.

"That's right," Lorelee agreed emphatically with her husband. "Some of the best shops--the ones you keep going back to--are those tiny, little out-of-the-way places."

"Oh, let's hope so. It sure qualifies in the 'tiny, little' department, out-of-the-way, too." Kylie laughed.

"You're also doing this on your own," Lorelee clarified, frowning. "No help at all?"

"Not for now. Hopefully, later on I'd like to hire a part-timer or two. For now, it's just me, working on getting everything together when I'm not at the restaurant."

Shaun glanced at her. "How's that going?"

"Well, I have new appreciation for how hard the wait staff in a restaurant works. I'm used to it by now. Glad to have it, too. And a little scared of the day I give my notice and open that door to the public."

"Don't be. It'll be a smash success."

Kylie reveled in those words; she didn't believe them entirely, but she revelled in them. Every time she thought about the store the butterflies in her stomach started going at it again. Standing there that morning, leaning against the counter beside Lorelee and looking around at the boxes from the clothing manufacturers still waiting to be unopened, the pile of hangers and boxes of supplies in the opposite corner, the place didn't look like much of a success, smash or otherwise.

"I hope so," she said. "I've got a lot of money riding on this little gamble."

"Things will work out for you. Just being here in this place has done you good," Lorelee said. "It's great that you chose a clothing shop, too, you know. That's one thing you can never have enough of. I think it would be a fun sort of shop to own."

"I hope so." Kylie added, "I'm going to sell bags and totes, too, maybe on that

wall over there. Cute stuff, some fun, some fancy. Know what's neat, too? There are a couple of people here in Berrentine Cove who make this wonderful jewelry by hand, beautiful things, not too expensive, unusual. I've been in touch with them about selling their merchandise right here in the store."

"See now? With that kind of enthusiasm, how can you go wrong?" Lorelee regarded Kylie with pride in her eyes then addressed Shaun. "And I suppose the next time we're out here, we'll be attending her wedding. Don't you think, honey?"

Kylie wiped her hand against her side. "I don't know about that one."

Looking at her, Shaun tilted his head. "Too soon to say that?"

"I think so. That's probably what it is."

"What do you mean, probably?"

Sighing, Kylie questioned her timing. She had been questioning if Bobby felt the same way she did--that is, when his actions and words didn't give her indication that there could be no doubt, that her feelings *were* reciprocated. It's not that she couldn't open up to the Walkers and speak frankly with them, either.

But getting into it then, right before the drive from the shop to the airport ... there just wasn't time.

"Nothing. Just me, I guess. Still trying to relate to other people as Kylie Donovan," she said, trying to brush it off.

"You related just fine to him, from what I saw. And he was relating to you pretty good, himself," Shaun said, narrowing his eyes at her. "Probably more a case of a young man who's crazy about you--from what I saw, anyway, and Lorelee said the same thing--but who has to think about it when it comes to commitment."

"Yep. A case of 'needs more time.'" Kylie glanced at the clock on the wall and took her keys from the glass countertop. She didn't want to rush the Walkers, but they had to be heading out if they were going to make it to the airport in time, particularly with all the security nowadays.

"And what do you mean, you're still trying to relate to other people?" Lorelee asked. "People like you, honey. And not just because they remember Melissa, either. You always related well to people."

"I get along with them fine, and I like people, too. It just always seemed...." She stopped, trying to choose words that best expressed what she felt. "I don't know. Maybe because my dad pushed me when I was little into this world of grownups--"

"And grownups that dealt in a world of make-believe, at that," Shaun finished her statement for her. As usual, he seemed to know where she was going with a trail of thought.

"Exactly. I've always felt like I didn't always belong. That's why I came here. Because, from the first time I came here, and that was by accident because I missed my stop and almost by fate ended up here, it felt like I *belonged* here. Well, all except for that cop." Kylie lightened the mood with a chuckle. "The one that gave me a hard time when I first got here."

Shaun's eyes lit up with recognition. He motioned with his hand. "Little cop? Skinny little thing, about yea tall?"

"Yes. That's weird! How did you know?"

"Now I'm not totally sure it's the same one, but I think that gal read Tremain the riot act for jaywalking. You know Tremain, Mr. Law and Order himself, right?"

Giggling, Kylie led the way to the door, followed by Shaun and Lorelee. "I'm totally sure that was the same woman. By chance, did she recognize him?"

"After a minute, yeah."

"And she told him how geeky she thought the show was, right?"

"Yeaaaaaaaah." Shaun nodded slowly. Despite his sense of humor, Kylie knew he hadn't appreciated the rudeness endured by their mutual old friend. "Sweet little thing, ain't she?"

"Sweet as pie, I'd say." Kylie leaned closer to him and Lorelee, confiding playfully, "I have a feeling that for all Officer Cool says she hated the show, she probably never missed an episode of it. I don't pay people like that much attention anymore."

She said that last part more for Shaun's benefit. Kylie knew the affection Shaun had for *Daddy's Home*, for a show he was proud of, no matter how sweet and old-fashioned some critics dismissed it as being today. Yet she realized, perhaps for the first time, that those words weren't far from the truth. She really didn't pay much attention to people who rudely or cattily dismissed her work.

Maybe that was proof that coming to Berrentine Cove had been the right move.

Yet she felt different once back outside, after she'd locked up the shop and was en route to the airport with the Walkers' luggage in the cargo area. She had driven Tremain, who had to be back at work, a day earlier.

Now she drove along the streets of her new town, seeing it dressed beautifully for the upcoming holidays. So far from family and friends, with Tremain and the Walkers returning to their respective homes, she felt so alone as her gaze caught the decorations of red, green, silver, gold, and blue hanging from streetlamps, stretched across one side of the street to the other, decorations in front of churches and Town Hall and shops. She had thought for sure Bobby would choose to spend the holiday with her, that a pack of wild horses couldn't have kept him away.

He probably had his reasons, she decided as she turned onto the exit for the airport. Maybe she'd had no right assuming just because he was there in Virginia, far enough away from home. On the other hand, she supposed he would be going to see his mom in New York, that those plans had been made way before he had met her. As she had told Shaun, it was way too early to expect anything from Bobby ... like him inviting her along to share the holiday with his only family.

She drew in a quivery breath. Rather than sit around feeling sorry for herself, she could consider working at the restaurant. Keeping on her feet in a busy restaurant during the holidays sounded like the best way to avoid being at home, constantly reminded that she was alone--and that maybe she didn't mean as much to Bobby Harrison as she'd hoped she did.

* * * *

Vince Montenegro had a smart-alecky smirk fastened to his face as he peeked out through the windows of the Penny Manor's foyer. Dutifully he reported, "Still no sign of your mom, Harrison. That'll teach you to buy the tickets for your flight home sooner."

"Scuse me, Montenegro, I *did* take care of all that earlier," Bobby protested,

striding into the parlor with his cell phone in hand. His forehead was creased with concern. "I just didn't call her earlier to confirm. When's that ever been necessary? I always go home. This year, she decides she's gonna drive down to see me?"

"Hey, she's adventurous. She must really like that little Mustang you got her for her birthday. She'd drive to Hawaii in it, if cars could drive over water."

His friend may have been enjoying himself, but Bobby wasn't as amused. Vince was right about one thing--his mother *did* love that car. She had put up a fuss at first when he had insisted on replacing that old heap of metal she'd been driving for years. His mom was like that, an independent lady who didn't want her son spending too much on her. Her thinking was that she was fine, she had enough to live on, even to go out with her girlfriends for lunch a couple times a month. When the old car started spending more time at the mechanic's shop than in her driveway, costing her a small fortune that was putting more than a dent in her budget, Bobby had put an end to that argument.

By driving up to her little house with her dream car, a gorgeous little midnight-blue sports car like the one she'd seen and admired in a movie. Charity Harrison had balked a bit about it being a luxury car, and a new one fresh off the lot, to boot. But Bobby had played his hand ("Mom, after all I went through to get it here, you're not really going to turn it down, are you?"). He'd cajoled her sweetly into taking it out for a spin, and she'd been having fun putting mileage on that baby ever since.

"Glad you find it humorous. I'm having cardiac arrest thinking about her driving all this way." Bobby snapped his cell closed. "And she won't pick up her phone."

"I'm sure she's okay. My grandma taking a joyride from New York to Virginia? I'd be worried about that. But your mom's a young chick of what--fifty-six? Fifty seven?"

"Doesn't mean it's good for her, doing all that driving by herself. And it bothers me that her phone keeps going to voicemail."

"Because she's probably on the road. You're not supposed to drive and answer your cell. Remember that rule? Your mom does. She follows the rules." Vince gave a solemn nod of his head. "Just. Like. Us."

Bobby went to the window himself, as if that would make the jazzy blue Mustang magically appear.

"Next thing you know, she'll probably argue with me about staying at the inn," he mumbled.

"Where else would she stay?"

"Here. She hinted at it."

Vince frowned. "*Here*? Okay, now I know where you get that insane streak from."

"My mom wouldn't mind roughing it here at all. She's lived in worse places. She and I--and my little brother, too, when he was alive--lived in worse places, the three of us." Bobby dwelt on that thought for a moment. If there was ever an understatement, that was it. "We're talking about the holidays, too. She always said holidays are no place to spend alone, by yourself, in a hotel."

"She'd be lonely," Vince murmured, nodding. "I can understand that."

Somehow Bobby doubted that, knowing that Vince Montenegro hailed from a

big, rambunctious Cuban family, where unexpected but welcomed guests often dropped by his parents' home for visits, the same way they did at the home he and Mireya shared. But Vince was being nice, so Bobby let it ride.

"This isn't comfortable for her, though," he muttered. "There's no furniture, no--what did you call them before?--creature comforts."

"So maybe she'll take your advice and stay at the inn. You're making a big deal over nothing, Bobby. What's really bugging you?"

"Nothing. Nothing's bugging me. This stupid project is taking so long to finish. Feels like we're never gonna be done here."

Huffing out an incredulous snort, Vince said, "It's a *mansion*. How long did you think it'd take to renovate? Two weeks? You know better than that."

Rather than come up with a retort to that one, Bobby stalked back to the kitchen. He had no reason to do so, other than to burn up some of that energy pent-up in him. It was a combination, actually, of energy and frustration.

"I'll ask you again, Harrison," Vince called out after him, stubbornly. "What's bugging you, man?"

Frustration? No ... that was anger. He was upset with his mother for messing up his plan, which was to board a plane bound for New York. Simply put, to run away from Berrentine Cove. Not for long, just a few days. He'd planned on returning before New Year's Eve, which admittedly would have been a traveling nightmare, with half the world waiting for standby flights. He had been counting on that time, as well as the familiar surroundings of his mother's home and taking a self-imposed break from work, to do some thinking, some self-excavating. To sort things out, because lately it felt as if his head was spinning.

He leaned against the kitchen counter, surprised by how inspecting the room with a sweeping gaze relaxed him somewhat. Knowing his mother, she would completely love the work he and Vince had done in there. The kitchen was done, one of the first rooms they had tackled. It was just too much to resist. It had called to their imagination, to their talents, to their skills.

It sure was a big kitchen, one that had once been the workplace of two, maybe three servants. First they'd torn out the old stove, a hulking, outdated monster that dated back to when bellbottom pants were in style. The refrigerator had been taken out long ago, but it had left its mark in the form of an unsightly discoloration on the square of linoleum on which it had once stood.

Tearing up old linoleum was masculinely destructive, fun work. They'd laid down sturdy burgundy floor tiles; torn out the old and battered cabinets, replacing them with strong, new cabinets of oak with brass handles; reinforced the ceiling so that it would be able to handle a large ceiling fan with smoked glass light fixtures.

Bobby had gotten the idea from a design magazine and Vince had encouraged him to go for it, to add a section on one wall for shelves to house cookbooks, nooks and crannies for mail and bills, even a platform for a computer. It had been something of a challenge, retaining the old-fashioned style of the original décor while implementing some touches of the modern: a new steel sink, a hideaway dishwasher, a Subzero fridge that blended in with the cabinets, with ample area in the center of the room for an island

that came equipped with a wine rack.

Definitely, his mom would fall in love with that kitchen instantly. He smiled to himself, realizing he wasn't angry with her.

He was angry with himself. *Furious* with himself was more like it.

"Don't listen to me, Vince," he called out. "I think I'm ... I guess not myself today."

"Yeah, well, something's going on with you." His friend sounded peeved, and he couldn't blame Vince.

At the heart of the problem was Kylie. That was what Bobby was having such trouble putting into words, what he couldn't say out loud, even admit to his closest friend.

Maybe Vince had a point. Something *was* going on with him. Like what? Insanity? He was fine until he laid eyes on Kylie. Until that cop had made her pull over right outside, right in front of him while he unloaded supplies off the truck. The lady cop couldn't have given Kylie a hard time somewhere else, where he never would have seen her, no.

Now he had to deal with feelings he had to sort out, feelings he hadn't felt in so long because work had always commandeered his attention. It was easier claiming he was mad at his mother for abruptly changing plans, at the mansion for taking so much time out of their lives to renovate.

When, in fact, he couldn't understand how he could have even thought of leaving Kylie at that time, alone, on Christmas. All because his life wasn't the same, nothing was the same, since Kylie Donovan had walked into his life.

And, man, was that scary.

"Hey, Bobby, I think your mom's here," Vince announced.

"She's here?"

"Yep, unless there's another jazzy little dark blue Mustang suddenly itching to pull up into an uninhabited mansion under construction. Oh, well, that's interesting!"

Taking long, fast strides, Bobby walked back through the parlor to the foyer. He took his place beside Vince to peer out the window.

"Bobby, remember you worrying about your mom being lonely at the inn?" his friend asked. "Well, cowboy, I kinda think that won't be a problem."

For a second, Bobby was rendered speechless. He leaned closer to the window and squinted, making sure there was nothing wrong with his vision and that wasn't his imagination playing tricks on him.

The first thing wrong with that picture was that Charity Harrison was stepping out of the passenger side of the car rather than the driver's side. What was up with that? She wasn't driving? She was letting *somebody else* drive her precious blue baby?

That Somebody Else was the reason for Bobby's confusion. A man was helping his mother out of the car. He had his back to the house but turned around as he closed the car door and turned with Charity to the walkway. Around his mother's age, maybe a few years older in his early sixties, the man was about as tall as Charity and fit, like he was no stranger to those hikes through the mountains that Bobby knew his mother enjoyed.

Before they reached the door, he and Vince observed them gazing up at the manor. The man nodded approvingly as he heard his mother boasting, "For them,

breathing new life into this place is a piece of cake. You won't even recognize this place when they're through, Jim."

He arched an eyebrow. Vince was gawking at him, waiting for his reaction, but Bobby ignored him. He was taken by how his mother looked. It wasn't just the way she was dressed, although that was pretty interesting, too. For someone who, by all rights, should have been highway-weary and wearing whatever she'd thrown on that morning--in Charity's case, that would usually mean old jeans or comfy sweatpants--she looked as fresh as a spring bouquet.

That was the description--she was blooming, like a flower. Her winter coat was open, revealing pressed black dress pants and a shimmery green blouse, perfect for the season. Though it had been a while since she'd done anything new with her hair, always wearing it in the same style Bobby remembered since his early twenties, Charity had a new, short and feathery hairstyle. She had even added definition to the gray so that it looked like platinum blonde streaks. Her arm was hooked cozily through her equally well dressed mystery man's.

"Ding dong," Vince said seconds before the doorbell chimed. "Bell's got a great sound to it."

"Yeah, it does," Bobby agreed, though the bell was the furthest thing from his mind as his friend, who was closer, opened the door.

"Well, hello, Mr. Montenegro!" Charity sang out and accepted one of Vince's heartfelt embraces. "Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas to you, Mrs ... Harrison," Vince greeted her hesitantly. "You look ravishing."

Charity laughed. Turning to her companion she teased, "Did you hear that? I look *ravishing!*"

"Ah, but that isn't news to me," came the response in a strong, resonant voice.

"And there's my son, my Bobby!"

Holding his mother in a tight hug, he was reminded of something she had said several times to both him and his brother. *I don't know if there's a woman out there who's enjoyed being a mother more than I have--and that's all because of you two.* Bobby could verify that every last word of that was the truth. Charity had enjoyed, thoroughly, her role as a parent to her boys. Raising two sons, and one with a disability, hadn't always been easy, but she had loved those years. Her husband--their father--may have disappeared from their lives early on, but it hadn't mattered in the long run. She had worked hard to make a home for her Bobby and her Luke.

When her son's arms released her, though his hand remained on the small of her back, she declared, "This was the man of the house for many years, the one who took good care of his mother and his little brother."

"Ah, so this is him," the new man at the door said. "The fine young man I've heard so much about."

When Charity stepped to the side and placed a slender hand on Bobby's waist, he caught the look that she exchanged with her mystery man. Bobby still felt protective of her; he always would. Yet something in the man's expression relaxed him.

"Jim, this is my firstborn, Bobby," she began the introductions. "You know about

his little brother....”

“Yes. I’m very sorry about that, son.” Jim smiled warmly, accepting the hand Bobby extended to him. “And I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.”

“And Bobby, this is Jim Knight ... my husband.”

Bobby tensed slightly. He was glad the handshake had ended before Jim could notice.

“Your husband?” he repeated.

“As of this past Saturday. We decided it would be fun to do something daring and crazy--so we eloped.” His mother added gently, “We were going to invite you to the wedding, dear. That’s if it had taken place on Valentine’s Day, like we planned originally.”

“But then we attended my sister’s wedding together,” Jim continued the story. “And right after the wedding we thought, ‘That’s a ridiculously long time to wait to be together.’”

An uncomfortable silence fell over the room, one that was broken by Vince blurting out, “You crazy kids!”

Charity nodded and leaned in closer to him, confessing, “That’s what it felt like, too. Like we were crazy kids. It was amazing!”

“Yeah. It’s amazing me, that’s for sure.” Bobby realized that had come out in a mutter and hastily smiled at Jim. “I just--well, it’s unexpected.”

“It was to us, too,” his new stepfather explained, his tone a touch apologetic. “Your mother and I never thought we’d fall in love. We’ve known each other for a couple years now. Always as good friends, but the friendship led to ... the altar. I can’t tell you how happy it made me when I proposed and your mother said yes.”

“I didn’t just say yes,” Charity offered, grinning mischievously. “I jumped at the proposal! I love this man, Bobby.”

My new stepfather. New? Jim Knight was his *only* stepfather. Granted, it would have been more difficult to accept if he had entered his mother’s life when Bobby was younger and living at home. Still, it seemed so unbelievably odd.

And it wasn’t like he could sit the man down, like Bobby wanted, and put him through the third degree like an overprotective dad putting his teenage daughter’s prom date through the wringer.

It was Vince again who smoothed over a clunky spot in the conversation. With gentlemanly flourish, he motioned with his arm toward the parlor.

“Come on in, out of this chilly foyer,” he invited them. “We don’t have much in the way of furnishings, but there are a couple of chairs in there. You can sit and relax.”

Charity asked, “How is your wife, Vincente?”

“She’s doing fine, thanks, Charity.”

“And that baby?”

“Gettin’ big! He’s a handful, too.”

“Now I do remember the name Jim,” Bobby mumbled, speaking more to himself.

His mother had been walking ahead of him into the room, walking hand in hand with her husband. Both she and Jim had been admiring the spiral staircase, seen through the parlor’s Mediterranean doorway.

"I mentioned him many times," she agreed eagerly. "Jim is Maggie's brother. Maggie, you know? The Lunch Bunch?"

"The Lunch Bunch. Uh-huh." Bobby remembered clearly the name his mother and about four of her long-time friends had given themselves for their once-a-month excursion to different restaurants for lunch, cocktails, and girl talk.

"Jim didn't come along to lunch with us," Charity went on. "But I'd see him whenever he picked up Maggie. Then one day he asked me if I'd play golf with him."

At that, Jim shrugged. "Not a very romantic invitation to make to your mom, I know. But I'd lost my wife four years earlier and I didn't remember exactly how to romance a lady."

Bobby sat on one of the cold metal fold-up chairs in the parlor. Grudgingly, he conceded, "Golf doesn't sound like a bad idea for a date."

"It ended up being a great idea, actually." Charity turned to Jim, her smile conspiratorial. "Especially because I never played before. And you had to stand behind me and put your arms around me to teach me how to hold the club."

A wry look on his face, Bobby exchanged a glance with Vince. He wished there was a FAST FORWARD button to press on that part of the conversation.

"I like golf," Vince said, more to make conversation.

"You've played?" Charity asked.

"Oh, yeah. Many times. Well, the miniature kind. I'm real good at sinking that ball into a castle or a crocodile's mouth or something."

"That's--that's good. That's something the little guy will like, too, when he's bigger." Jim was more than just polite; he was genuinely gallant.

"I can't wait. Can't wait to do a lot of stuff with him when he gets bigger," Vince admitted, chuckling. "'Course, we don't want him to grow up too fast, either."

"No, enjoy this time. It doesn't come again and it goes so quickly," Jim said.

Charity added to that, more for Bobby's information, "Jim has a daughter a couple years older than you, honey. She's a dance teacher with her own studio."

"Ah. Very nice." Bobby hoped his irritation didn't seep through his smile.

"And in another few months, she's going to make us grandparents for the first time!" Charity was bubbling over with excitement, looking lovingly over at Jim, who cradled her hand in both of his.

How nice of his mom to share this whole wealth of information with him now. That was what bothered him. Right or wrong--and he didn't believe he was totally wrong to be cross with her--it hurt that she hadn't shared any of this with him sooner. It made it harder for him to warm to Jim, who by all rights was probably a great guy, when Bobby didn't know him from Adam.

Vince must have felt out of place in that family moment, because he suddenly excused himself. "Listen, I have to be getting home. Mireya and I want to get up early tomorrow, get some Christmas stuff done."

Charity frowned, even as she accepted a hug. Bobby wondered if she wanted Vince there as a buffer. "Well, it was good to see you again, honey."

"Same here, Charity. Good to meet you, Jim. Congratulations."

Jim returned Vince's hearty handshake, calling him by the name Charity would

always refer to him by fondly. “Thanks, Vincente. Hope to see you again.”

“Oh, you will. Your stepson and I never stop working. If there’s a place that needs some magic worked on it, we’re there.” Vince winked before heading out to his car.

It wasn’t Bobby’s imagination; the front door really did sound like it weighed a couple of tons, the sound of it closing reverberating through the mansion. It might have just been that the place was so empty of furnishings, that supplies and equipment took up space but didn’t actually fill it. Like work that fills up a life, but there is still emptiness and echoes because work is not all there is to life.

With the three of them seated in folding chairs set in the middle of that huge parlor, it almost seemed like they were actors in a play discussing a scene on the stage rather than performing on it. Now with Vince gone, Bobby knew it was up to him to ease over those prickly gaps of quiet.

Yet he wasn’t going to pretend. He wasn’t going to gloss anything over. If he didn’t come out with the truth, it would fester in him.

“Nice surprise to see you got married,” he told his mother quietly. “But it’s not like you and I didn’t talk every few days, Mom, at least once a week on the phone. Something important, right? Falling in love again? I just would’ve thought it’d be something you would tell me about. Not spring on me, ‘Hi, by the way, I’m married.’”

Respectfully, Jim dropped his eyes, though Bobby noticed he pressed his wife’s hand in a show of support.

“You’re right,” Charity said softly. “You’re absolutely right.”

Well, that was unfair. Bobby wasn’t expecting her to agree with him. He cleared his throat and leaned forward, folding his hands between his knees.

“And it’s not like I don’t feel happy for you, either, because I do. And it’s not a reflection on Jim--”

“I know, I know. I know what you’re saying, honey. Jim told me I should call you and tell you before coming down here.” She paused. “You know, when your father left, I just didn’t want to open myself up to anyone again. I certainly didn’t believe I’d feel this way again at this point in my life.”

Hesitantly, Jim waved a hand in the air. “I can understand your mother, the way she felt. When my wife died, I never thought I’d feel that way again about anyone. Your mother was a friend to me, a good friend. She made me laugh, we had fun together. But then I saw her in a different light.”

Bobby stirred in his seat as if he had a cramp in his leg. He regretted what he’d started, all for the sake of dealing with “the truth.”

“By the way, honey, is there anyone special in *your* life?” his mother piped up.

That question had come at him with the subtlety of a bulldozer. It was a question that brought up even more heated emotion, including anger aimed at himself for the way he had ended with Kylie, the last time they were together. He hadn’t thought of it before, but he wondered if those days before he saw her again would be long enough for her to question her feelings for him.

His confusion over what was happening between them was tough enough. But confusion on her part--about him? That worried him.

He stammered, “Well, there’s ... well....”

"You know, sweetheart, it's not like we haven't spoken on the phone at least once a week. You've always been so forthcoming with telling me those deep, dark secrets of yours."

A playful grin played on Charity's lips. Bobby remembered that old trick of showing him a mirror, a trick that had worked for years. It was one of the ways she'd defuse an argument between them.

An old trick, but one that was still pretty effective, to his chagrin.

Rather than answer the question, he slapped his thigh and smiled at Jim.

"Anyway, as we were saying, welcome to the family. *Dad.*"

Jim laughed with him and patted his shoulder. "Thank you, son. That means a lot to me. Your mom always talks about you. She loves you so much! I couldn't wait to meet you."

Maybe Jim Knight *was* a good guy. What was he thinking? Bobby knew his mother. She was no foolish, naïve kid. Neither had his mom had a problem with being on her own.

Bobby knew his instincts were probably on the money, as were his mom's. If Jim Knight had been a close friend and was now her husband, then he had to be a good man. The thought crossed his mind, only for a moment, of what life would have been like, had someone like that come into their lives earlier.

"You would've liked Luke, too," he found himself saying.

Jim looked thoughtful. "I'm sure I would have."

Bobby caught his mother smiling at him. Her voice was a near whisper as she murmured, "You and I, Bobby, we always remember him."

"We do." He rose to his feet. "I have to learn to be a better host. This place may be under construction, but I have a few sodas in a small fridge in the kitchen. Sounds good?"

"Soda would be very nice," Charity said.

"I'll get them. Then you can tell me all about Jim and all the plans you two have been making. I'd be real interested."

I have a stepdad. Okay, that was a shocker. One of those sneaky curveballs life zings a guy's way now and then, to make sure he's awake. Bobby reflected on that thought in the kitchen as he brought out what was available--two Cokes and a Mountain Dew Code Red.

Anything else? He was able to scrounge up some wrapped Swiss cheese wedges that Vince liked to snack on and a sleeve of Ritz crackers, just something to offer Jim and his mother. Now that the initial rockiness of having such news sprung on him had subsided, he viewed the situation with clarity.

His mother, who deserved happiness, was no longer alone. His mother, who'd deserved better than a man who deserted her and their two children, had found someone who loved her, a widower who had loved before, who'd been a family man. Bobby could almost feel his heart swell with joy for his mom, as well as for himself.

But there was still something not all complete in his own life. Something that still made him ached. Like a house with no furnishings and too much room for echoes....

Chapter Ten

Christmas Eve spent at the Stone Fireplace wasn't quite as easy as Kylie had hoped it would be.

For one thing, the weather wasn't cooperating. The weather forecaster had predicted that it wouldn't be a white Christmas. But then at about seven o'clock, that Virginia sky had opened up and sprinkled Berrentine Cove with flakes of the white stuff, making it look like powdered sugar falling from the clouds.

Snow on December twenty-fourth had a powerful effect on the heart. It was emotional, difficult to ignore. Another problem was that the restaurant wasn't as busy as usual. And that made sense.

Most folks were home tonight, Kylie thought as she brought one table their order for desserts of warm slices of apple pie topped with vanilla ice cream and dollops of whipped cream. People were in their own houses or apartments, having dinner or just clearing the table, and parents were busy ushering the little ones to bed before Santa's arrival. Their homes were decorated for the holidays, unlike Kylie's little house, which she hadn't bothered to dress up for the occasion. Why go through all that fuss, when no one was coming?

That's right. Feel sorry for yourself. Merry Christmas, you bah-humbug, she scolded herself, leaving another table their check.

She tried to focus on other things. One--she'd be clocking out in another half hour. After microwaving some leftover chicken, rice and veggies, she'd make herself a cup of Chai tea and crawl under the covers. It had had been a long day anyway; sleep would do her good. Two--she would be opening the store the first week of January. That was both scary and exciting, but well worth the wait.

Except ... she was plenty scared, but excited? She couldn't find excitement tonight. She could hear Christmas music piping through the restaurant's sound system, the sweet voice of Nat King Cole singing about chestnuts roasting over an open hearth, a song which should have been joyous but which only reminded her of how numb she felt.

Not a word, not a call, not even a card. She had heard nothing from Bobby all day long, and not since the day he had passed by for a coffee and a short visit to see her while she worked. That had been a few days after Shaun, Lorelee, and Tremain had all left.

Tonight the booth was empty, the one that Bobby had sat at that afternoon a while back. Kylie felt a tightening in her throat as she walked slowly past it. In her mind she could see him sitting there, lounging comfortably in the booth with his back to the wall, stealing the chance to wink or smile at her each time she passed. Three cups of coffee he'd had while he was there. *Three*. Her coworkers had teased that he would be bouncing off the walls that night, and he'd still have consumed the whole pot--if it bought him the opportunity to sit there and just be a short distance from her.

So why wasn't he there with her tonight? *Because you don't mean as much to him*

as he means to you. He's forgotten all about you.

A moment later, Kylie was thankful for the diversion of a familiar face at table twelve. Mae Clayton, the woman from the grocery store, and a man seated across from her, presumably her husband. Waiting on them and a short chat would keep her mind busy, hopefully busy enough to keep her from slipping into the back and placing a call to Bobby's cell.

But would that really be so bad? A friendly call, no strings attached? Just saying, "Merry Christmas, hope you're happy, wherever you are tonight?"

It wouldn't be so bad, no. And it wouldn't be so good, either. Especially if he sent her the subtle hint that he wasn't interested by never returning her call.

"What brings you two out tonight?" Kylie greeted them, placing two menus down on the table.

"We won't be needing those, sweetie. Your hot cocoa brings us out tonight. The cocoa is so delicious here."

"And getting out of the house for a little spell, right, honey?" her husband asked. He turned and smiled at Kylie. "Our home is a madhouse, with all those people. The Stone Fireplace is as peaceful as a monastery right now."

Kylie laughed and tucked the menus under her arm. "Lots of people in for the festivities, huh?"

"Oh, Lord! Our son and his wife and kids. Our daughter and her boyfriend. My husband's sister and her family," Mae said.

"And *her* mother," her husband lamented with an exaggerated sigh. "That's always a treat."

Kylie watched Mae slap his hand and giggled with them. "I'll get your hot cocoas."

"Before you do, Kylie...." Mae's husband hesitated rather sheepishly. "My wife says you used to be on TV. That right?"

"Yes, that's right. I was on *Daddy's Home*." She nodded and smiled over at Mae. After going in to the store enough times and becoming friendly with Mae, Kylie had finally shared the truth with her one morning while chatting.

"You're the little one--Melissa!" Mr. Clayton chuckled. "That was such a nice show. All the characters were put together so well, you know? You seemed like a real family."

Mae motioned with her hands to get in a word. "One of my favorite episodes was the one where you tried to get that boy's attention. You know, the one where you were vacationing in Hawaii, and you had a crush on that boy you'd just met, but he wouldn't give you the time of day?"

"I remember that one!" her husband exclaimed. "Yes, that was the one where they had you all dolled up, really cute. You drove the boy crazy, made him want to take you out--and then you dropped him like a hot potato!"

Kylie remembered that episode clearly. "That was one of my favorites, as well. Any time they would let me dress up in pretty clothes and act all grown up--versus always being the little sister--became a favorite episode for me." She lightly patted the man's shoulder. "Good to meet you, Mr. Clayton."

“Oh, please. The pleasure is mine. And call me Will.”

“Will. I’ll be right back with your hot cocoas.”

They had gotten out of the house for a few minutes of peace because their house was overrun with people. Grown kids, grandkids, relatives, in-laws. What a problem.

What an *enviable* problem.

Kylie looked back over her shoulder at them. Mae and her husband huddled in close at that table. Like the two lovers they were, talking in intimate tones and sharing conversation and laughter. She felt a pang in her heart as she poured piping hot cocoa into two mugs for them, wondering if that night wasn’t the longest night she’d ever lived.

* * * *

Going home, the roads were slick. With her house right around the bend, Kylie heard the impatient *beep* of her cell phone. That could only mean one thing: *a message!* She hadn’t noticed the phone call; it might have been when the phone was in her purse in her locker at the back of the restaurant’s kitchen.

Carefully, very carefully, she pulled over to the curb. As slowly as she was going, she still felt the pull of the tires, the SUV going into a slide, but fortunately one she could manage. She was glad she didn’t have far to go now before reaching the safety of her little home’s driveway.

Her heart sank slightly at the number on the screen; that wasn’t Bobby’s number. Her mother had left a message.

“Hi, Kylie, honey! I guess you’re busy tonight. Probably at lots of parties, huh? Your dad and I are at Roy and Barbara’s. Everybody says hello and they hope you’re doing fine. Well, I’ll talk to you after New Year’s. Merry Christmas, Kylie! Love you, baby!”

She didn’t wait to delete the call, doing it right there before pulling the car back onto the road.

Probably at lots of parties. Sure thing. She had taken part in other people’s private little parties at the restaurant; her part had been bringing them the refreshments. Kylie shook her head but kept both hands on the steering wheel. She had the windshield wipers going at a lower speed. Too fast, and it seemed the mixture of snowflakes and sleet falling became smeared across the glass, impairing her visibility.

Ordinarily she would have returned the call the first chance she was able to, once she’d gotten through the door to home and settled in. Dutifully, she would have called her parents. This year, she would call them back at her leisure, after New Year’s, which had been her mother’s suggestion, sounded good to Kylie. She wasn’t angry about it, either. She was just tired of being an afterthought to them. And after so many years of first being what her parents had wanted her to be, letting her dad live his own dreams vicariously through her, then so many years of being an afterthought, she had come to accept the status of their relationship as little more than coolly friendly acquaintances who happened to share her bloodline.

Carefully, she turned the last corner for home and passed the three houses before her own. Through the swirl of white across her windshield she saw something in her driveway. Through that same swirl, she made out another vehicle, a truck with lettering on its side. Her heart beat a little harder against her chest.

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In her distraction, Kylie almost didn't stop her SUV in time and tapped his truck in the rear. But she managed to stop and cut the engine. The truck's lights were off but there was a puff of white exhaust coming out from the back, which meant that Bobby was probably in the cab with the heater on, keeping warm. She saw the white smoke disappear then, and the driver's side door opened.

She blinked while the reality registered. He *had* come to see her that night after all. Wasn't he supposed to have been out of town? Had his plans fallen apart for some reason?

Or had he just changed his mind? Had he wanted to be with her instead?

Her first thought after the lonesome sort of evening she'd had was to erupt out of her own car and hurry into his arms. Yet instinctively, almost defensively, Kylie tapped into that part of her that had been dormant for some years, the part of her that was an actress. That could give the impression of being calm and cool and just aloof enough, even if she *did* want to run into his arms more than anything.

Just until she could figure out what was going on here. Because there was no way under that blue sky that she would ever be an afterthought to Bobby Harrison. Not to him.

"Merry Christmas!" he shouted over the blustery gusts of winter wind.

"Merry Christmas." Kylie made sure to keep her own voice level, subdued. "What a sur...."

Instantly, he caught her in an embrace that literally swept her off her feet. An easy enough thing to do on dry ground, but with a coating of slippery snow and sleet beneath their boots, he set her down quickly, only to do a funky little jig with her, both trying not to fall.

"I promise, I'm just glad to see you," he explained once they'd regained their balance. "Not t-t-trying to land us both in the hospital."

She bit her lip, holding back the urge to laugh.

"How long have you been waiting out here?" she asked.

"Not that long. F-f-feels like hours, though. I had the heater on but I sh-shut it off after a while. I th-think I lost all f-f-feeling in--in--everywhere."

Looking at him, she didn't doubt that. He was bundled up well in a heavy jacket, boots, corduroys, gloves, scarves, and a hat. But his face was red and his lips were turning purple.

And yet, Bobby *still* looked scrumptious to her.

"Come on in," she ordered briskly. "Let's get you warmed up."

"Okay. J-j-just a minute."

She would have tried to usher him toward the porch steps, but he was bigger and stronger. Besides, he was already trudging back toward his truck. He must have left something behind.

As fast as she could without slipping, Kylie negotiated the four steps, slicked over by slush and ice, onto the porch and fished her keys from her coat pocket. In the time it took to hang her purse and coat on hooks in the little closet next to the front door, she thought about Bobby sitting out in his truck, waiting for her to come home from work in that weather. She had also stayed a half hour later than usual at the restaurant to lend a

hand, since they were shorthanded that night.

Would most guys have waited in that frigid cold? She tended not to think so, unless, of course, the woman meant something to them.

But he told me flat out he wouldn't be with me for the holiday, she reminded herself. You can't accept the mixed signals. You have to get the message across that....

Kylie turned to look out the door. In one arm Bobby held a small Christmas tree, no more than two feet tall or so, with a bag in the other arm and one that dangled by handles around his wrist. Kylie's insides melted, and the back of her throat suddenly felt constricted. She licked her lips and smiled, opening the door wider to let him in.

"Here, I'll take that," she offered, taking one of the bags from him. "Is that for me?"

"Sure it is! P-p-pitiful little thing, isn't it? I'm sorry, Kylie, k-kinda late in the season. The b-b-big ones left weren't as nice."

"I don't have one at all, so a little one is more than fine," she said.

Bobby shook the chill out of him as he shrugged out of his coat.

"I didn't think you had one. I remember not seeing one last time I was here," he told her. "Guess you didn't have time. But that's something you should have, on your first Christmas in your new home."

"You're right."

"Where would you like me to set it up?"

"In the living room, anywhere you think it'll look nice. That's so sweet of you, Bobby." Kylie put aside her reservations, tossed caution right into the wind, slammed the door in the face of her inner actress. As he was taking hold of the small tree, she cupped his face in her hands and planted a kiss on his lips. "Oh. Your face is so cold."

"It's okay. I'll warm up in here. The house is like toast."

The softness in his eyes made it hard for her to withdraw her hands, though she managed to, somehow.

"I'm making some coffee," she said, heading into the kitchen. "You hungry? Want me to fix you something?"

"I grabbed some dinner while I was out. Coffee's good for me. But if you haven't had dinner...."

"I grab a bite at the restaurant sometimes. One of the cooks there makes a mean meatloaf."

Bobby chuckled. "Yeah? I'll have to try it next time I'm there. They kept you later tonight than usual, didn't they? Because of Christmas Eve, right?"

"Just half hour. It would've been an hour, but the bigger crowd they expected never came. I guess most people would rather be at home tonight."

From one bag Bobby brought out a tree stand for a small tree. He rubbed his hands together, grateful to get the blood flowing again, before setting up the tree in a corner, far enough away from the fireplace, yet close enough to an outlet.

Out of the same bag he took out a small string of mini multicolored lights, a box of petite ornaments of gold, and a box of candy canes.

"You're not too tired, are you?" he asked. "And ... I'm not keeping you from anything. Am I?"

With her acting abilities chucked out of the way, making room for honesty, Kylie stepped into the room after leaving the coffeemaker on in the kitchen. She smiled but wanted to look Bobby in the eye.

"You're not keeping me from anything. I'd hoped we'd be together sometime for this holiday," she said. "Oh, let's warm this place up some more. I'll get the fire going."

When she was done with the fireplace, Kylie turned and gave him a little smile. "Gonna decorate that all by yourself?" she teased. "Or you want some help?"

"That was the idea." Smiling, he handed her the ornaments but hesitated with the candy canes. "My mom used to like to put these on our tree. She thought they were a fun touch."

"They *are*."

"Not enough room for garland and tinsel and all that. It might dwarf the tree. It's small enough."

Kylie laughed. "Speaking of your mom, weren't you going to visit her?"

"That was the plan, yes. But before I could make it to the airport, she showed up at my door. Or--well, the Manor's door, anyway."

Her eyes widened in amusement. "She got a flight here?"

"No, no flight. Mom drove here."

"From upstate New York? By herself? That's a long drive for her, isn't it?"

"Not by herself, no. With her brand-new husband. My new stepfather. My first-time-ever stepdad."

She started to laugh then stopped. "You okay with that?"

"Me? Fine. Oh, at first, I'm wondering why she didn't mention anything about a gentleman friend to me. She tells me *everything*." He laughed softly. "But when all is said and done, I got to talk to him a bit. He seems like a wonderful guy. And I've never seen my mom so happy."

"Sounds like her happiness is long overdue and much deserved." She adjusted one of the lights on a branch of the small tree.

"She'll be here for a few days. I'd like to introduce you two."

She turned to check his expression and frowned. Bobby was intent on placing another log on the fire from the pile on the side of the fireplace, purposely avoiding her eyes.

"I'd like that very much," she said. "I wasn't sure if ... I think the coffee must be ready by now."

Bobby glanced at her. "You weren't sure if what?"

Either Kylie hadn't heard him as she walked from the room ... or she'd chosen not to reply. He sighed, resolving to kick himself, if it were physically possible.

Some things had to be faced--he was terrible at this. A date here and there with a woman was one thing; that, he could handle as well as the next guy. There were things he wanted to say to Kylie, if putting his feelings into words wasn't on a par with pulling teeth.

Truthfully, pulling teeth would have been a lot easier, probably less painful for him, as well.

"I have some presents for you, too, Kylie," he said, loud enough for her to hear

him in the kitchen.

He thought he heard her drop something in that room, something that sounded like silverware. She poked her head in through the door.

"You have some what?" She squinted at him.

"A couple gifts for you, nothing big, just little things for Christmas."

"Oh. I didn't think ... I thought you'd be...."

"I don't need a present, Kylie. Being here with you is present enough for me. And one way or another, I should've made sure we'd be together tonight or tomorrow, one of the two, both, if you wanted to be with me, that is."

He sighed again and turned to the tree. Well, he'd said the words that he should said right off the bat, the minute he saw her, even before setting foot in her house that night. Was that enough said, or were the cards not fully on the table? Because if she was going to reject him, this was her chance.

And she's not responding to what you said. Bobby rose to his feet and took a few steps back to observe the tree. He was also giving himself a moment to understand her silence, hoping it wasn't her answer.

Behind him, he heard her stepping lightly on the living room carpet. He watched her set two mugs on the table.

"Nice hot coffee," she said, seating herself on the edge of the coffee table to continue decorating the tree.

That was it? No response? He could feel something cold running through his veins. He didn't feel that often, but he recognized it for what it was. Bobby had been afraid of specifically that, of feeling something for a woman, expressing his feelings--or coming close to it--and the response would be that silence.

If he'd misread Kylie's feelings, then this was going to hurt. More than the end of any other relationship he'd had. Yet maybe it was for the best. Maybe he wasn't meant to be with anyone. He might not have been meant for anyone, especially a man who called no specific place his home. Home for him seemed to be the road ... and any building that needed new life breathed into it.

Either way, the need for him to know gnawed at him.

"You might not have heard me, Kylie," he said hoarsely. "I said that I should have realized we should be together this holiday. You and me."

"Yes, Bobby, I heard you. I had thought that, too, but then ... you said you had other plans."

Times like that, he wished he was as good with words as he was with tools in his hands. What good was eloquence, though? He sat beside her on the couch and took the mug of coffee she had brought for him, not tasting it yet, just holding it in both hands.

"I do some foolish things sometimes," he admitted. "Right after I said that, I regretted it. But I would have left town anyway, because, well ... I was afraid you wouldn't want to share this holiday with me."

Kylie swallowed hard. "I was really happy to see you outside. You were the one person I most wanted to be with tonight. The tree, the presents--that was nice. But you being here was present enough for me, too."

Stunned, he turned his head, meeting her eyes. "You know, this night--it's

interesting. It's like, when you're a kid, it's pure magic. No other night of the year is like it. Then the years pass and you start to grow up."

"And the magic dies a little more with each year. Until, finally, it's a big holiday with lots to do and lots of fun, but the magic is all gone." Kylie nodded, smiling. "I know. My parents, as dysfunctional as they were, knew enough to do that much for me, when I was little, at least."

"I don't remember my dad ever being a part of it, but my mom made sure it was special for my brother and me, too."

"*Hmmm.*" She shrugged. "Maybe it's true. Maybe this holiday does belong to kids."

Bobby took a deep breath, rubbed his hand against his leg. "Tonight, though. For me, tonight. It's not like the Christmas Eves of the past few years."

"For me, too. There's magic also for me. The day didn't start out that way. It was like any other day. But then I came home--and I saw you there."

His gaze dropped from her eyes, deep and soulful and penetrating, to her mouth. He started to close in the space between them, almost forgetting the mug in his hands. He set it on the table, cleared his throat and reached for the other bag.

"So, hey, open your gifts," he said as he retrieved them from the bag. "Like I said, they're not a lot. I didn't think we'd see each other tonight, and I took a gamble that you'd be here at all. You might have been out of town, too."

"Not likely. I'm opening the shop next week. And my parents, it seems, are out celebrating without me." Laughter bubbled from her throat. "How many gifts did you get me?"

"Five. They're all small." He suddenly felt shy. "I wasn't sure what to get you. I haven't bought a lot of gifts for women. Whatever made me think of you, I thought maybe you'd like, that's what I looked for."

She looked down at the gifts, three on her lap, two occupying the small space on the couch between them. The night had indeed taken a joyful turn, but he wondered if she'd felt as alone and lost as he'd felt. He hadn't minded being alone in Berrentine Cove, except on this night.

Now there she sat, like a little kid with not just one but five gifts. Bobby had wrapped them himself, and it came as no surprise to him to find he was more talented with wallpaper than wrapping paper. Nevertheless, he had put lots of effort into dressing up the gifts for her, even if the paper and the ribbons and the bows hadn't been easy for his callused carpenter's hands to work with.

"This is fun!" she exclaimed. "And there's five of them. So many."

"I didn't think one was enough. If I had more than one, there'd be a chance something in the bunch of them would be something you'd like. And I still didn't find anything that said ... that said..."

She had begun to tear open one of the gifts but stopped. "That said what?"

He licked his lips. "That you mean something to me, Kylie. Maybe I sent the opposite message when I first said I wouldn't be in town for Christmas, and if I did, I wanted to clear that up. I wanted you to know that ... that.... I'm not good at this at all, you know?"

Kylie didn't hesitate to set the presents on her lap against the cushion with the others and moved in closer to him.

"And I'm good at this, Bobby? Me, the one who didn't even have a normal childhood?"

"I didn't, either, Kylie."

"But I had to work when everybody else got to be a kid."

"So did I. Everybody else was playing sports or hanging out. I was stuck in a hardware store all day. Or I was in some neighbor's front yard, sweating over a lawn mower. And I had to do that, because if I didn't there'd be none of those little extras that a family should have. Some of that went to paying for--something a kid shouldn't have to see that early in his life."

Her hands moved from his forearms, curling around his neck. Bobby didn't have to elaborate; he sensed that Kylie understood what he was talking about, the loss of his brother.

"Doesn't matter. All of those things," he went on, "that dealt with work. I know about work. It's this that..."

"*Shhh*, baby." She helped herself to a kiss from his lips, a fast, sweet taste of a kiss that left him wanting more.

"I'm always, you know ... I never stop," he said.

"Uh-huh."

"Never in one place for very long. Not much of a life, doing some...."

Another kiss, she took her time with that one, he noted. It was easier to kiss her than to keep struggling with what he had to say.

And what he was trying to convey was overshadowed by the hunger in him that responded to her kisses, to her arms around him, the passion that Bobby put into kissing her.

In the moment. That was what someone had once called that. He couldn't recall where he'd heard that term, whether he'd read it or seen it in a movie, but one thing was for certain--he was in That Moment. And so was she.

No, that moment was *composed* of both of them.

Even after the kiss had ended, he continued to hold her. He had to think back a few moments ago to regain his train of thought.

"If I was to stay, it would be with you," he breathed out the words. "Here. Someplace else. Doesn't matter. But I never stay in...."

"How long before you finish the Penny Manor?"

Bobby frowned at the question. "I--we have a few more months left. Not too long. By the spring."

"And when it's done? When it's finished, will you go once it's sold?"

"Before it's sold, usually. The lawyers handle the sale of the properties. One of us is there for any problems that come up, the closing."

Kylie sat up. He was bemused by her, the little kid way she tucked her legs under her and bit her lower lip.

"What I'm asking, Bobby, is ... once this project is done and sold," she paused, her voice shaking, "are you and me--are we over and done with, too? Along with this

place and your work here, would you forget me?"

"No. No, I wouldn't forget you." His tone sounded defensive, even to his own ears. Softening his voice, he said, "I could never forget you, Kylie."

Closing the space between them, he coaxed another kiss from her. He *loved* kissing her, loved it with a capital "L". Besides which, he didn't want to talk, especially not about things that were difficult for him to talk about. And where their relationship was going after that old mansion was ready to hit the real estate market again wasn't just difficult for him, it was painful, slicing right through him.

And there was also the matter of how to explain that, even at his age, he had never been in love before? Before Kylie, there had been others. Women he'd taken out and let into his life, who'd been a diversion, women he'd cared for. Yet none had ever felt that way in his arms, like they belonged there, like she did.

I couldn't forget you because you're the first woman I've ever loved. Oh, those words, they'd never make it past his lips. They were too dangerous to feel, let alone say out loud. Bobby knew, once they were out, they would change everything.

Why couldn't tonight just be simple? The way he had planned it, if flying by the seat of his pants to get everything together--the tree, the presents, everything--could be called a plan. He wanted Kylie to open her gifts, to enjoy the evening with him, to share the warmth from the hearth with him, to wait for the sun to come up over Berrentine Cove. He didn't want to put himself in the vulnerable position of admitting that he had never been in love before, that love hadn't happened to him until she walked into her life.

Most of all, that wouldn't be fair to Kylie. She'd interpret those words as a promise of a thousand tomorrows to be shared. And that was a promise Bobby just couldn't make.

Abruptly, she pushed her hands against his chest, breaking the kiss.

"But you're not telling me," she said, her tone firm. "After the place is finished--and I would think you and Vince might already have another place picked out to tackle--will you and I still be ... together?"

Bobby reined in his patience. "Kylie, I want to be with you. I really do. I just think--I guess that I'm--I'm not what you need."

"You're not what I need?" She scrambled to her feet. "What does that mean?"

He also rose to his feet, barely catching one of the wrapped gifts before it tumbled to the floor.

"It means what it means," he said, scowling. "There's no hidden meaning there, Kylie."

And this wasn't working out the way he'd hoped. This wasn't how he'd pictured that evening when he'd run around preparing, filled with anticipation and excitement.

"So why would there be a problem?" she demanded. "What? Is there something you haven't told me, Bobby? Is there someone in your life already?"

"No. No, of course not. Why would I do that?"

"You *wouldn't*. You aren't the type of man to do that. I know that."

He looked wounded. "Then why ask the question?"

"Because I had to. Were you in prison? Is that it?"

"No. Never."

"Did you steal a car and you weren't caught? White-collar crime? You were a pirate on the high seas?"

"None of the above. I don't steal. I don't rip people off. I don't like that stuff done to me; I don't do it to anyone else."

"I know. I know. I *know*."

Trying to calm her down, he wrapped his arms around his waist and drew her close to himself, speaking softly, soothingly. "I'm none of those things." His Adam's apple rose and fell as he swallowed hard. "Kylie, let's not do this. I want you to open your presents. I'm so happy just to be here with you. I don't want us to have words with each other like this tonight."

Was she giving in? She looked like she was coming *very* close to doing that, to faltering, surrendering to his embrace, his touch, the kiss that waited for her on his mouth. Then, with a sinking heart, he visibly saw the steel in her eyes."

"We're not kids," she reminded him. "This is not the first time either of us has been involved with someone."

"I know," he mumbled, for lack of something better to say. What was the point in not admitting the truth? It would mean swallowing his pride and shifting into vulnerable territory, but he saw no other way. "I've been involved, I've had other relationships. But none were like this."

"*Like this*. Define 'like this.'"

She wanted to know where they stood. Bobby accepted that, though he rebelled inwardly against it. He could feel his pulse coursing faster, as violently as his heart pounded.

"'Like this' would be serious," he said evenly. "I wasn't serious before about any of them in the past. Kylie, your presents...."

"They can wait. That was a lovely thing to do, and I really appreciate it. But right now, Bobby...." She closed in the space between them, drawing her lips to his ear as her fingers caressed the hair at the nape of his neck. "I want to know what I mean to you, Bobby Harrison, why you keep giving me this story about your gypsy life, going from one place to another, like you're trying to discourage me. You tell me you won't be anywhere near me on this night, then you show up--by surprise, no less--and you shower me with gifts. Why do that, Bobby?"

Her scent was dizzying him, whatever cologne she wore. She must have dabbed it lightly on her neck, just beneath each ear, spritzed a little on her the tender skin of her throat. *She* was dizzying him.

"Because I never wanted to be apart from you tonight in the first place," he murmured. "I'm not trying to mess with your head, Kylie. This--us--that's what's been messing with *mine*."

She had begun dotting his chin and neck with kisses but stopped. "I'm not messing with your head, either, Bobby. This is serious for me, too."

He rested his head against hers, closing his eyes tightly. He'd made a mistake in coming here tonight. He should have listened to his instincts and played it safe.

He should have kept his distance from Kylie, especially when she had that talent for turning his world upside down, just by being so close to him. He summoned the will

to push away from her.

"I'd really like you to open your presents." He ran a hand through his hair. "I could say what I feel for you that way. We can have tonight together--"

"We can have tonight. But then, when the mansion is finished, what? It's over, Bobby?" Her voice cracked slightly. "You're onto the next town? The next project?"

"What do you want me to tell you?" His voice raised an octave with emotion. "That's my job. It's what I do. I raise houses, businesses, buildings up from the ashes. That's what I've been trying to say. If you're looking for forever with a guy, then maybe that guy isn't me."

He had said those words before in the past, not very often, but at least twice. Whenever a woman became too attached, whenever he felt himself getting in too deep, he would hear himself say them. And that would be that. He would make his position known before anyone was hurt, and that chapter would be closed with no entanglements, no complications.

This time he wasn't getting off that easy. He saw it in Kylie's expression, how she closed her eyes and then opened them again, looking at him in a way that he knew just the precise moment, right down to the second, when his heart started to be torn apart.

"I'm sorry then, Bobby," she said. "Because that *is* what I was looking for with you. I was looking for forever."

"Kylie...."

Right then, slowly and mechanically, she took the presents from the couch. One by one, she carefully replaced them in the bag Bobby had brought them in. Unopened, untouched, not an ounce of curiosity as to what was in them.

And Christmas Eve was over.

"Thank you for the tree. But I won't take these." She handed the bag back to him.

"Kylie, I wish you would take...."

"I want more than that. And you were honest with me, at least," she said, pausing. She looked him in the eye. "We could have worked things out somehow. But you're telling me there's no chance of that happening. I guess your feelings for me aren't as strong as mine for you."

Bobby's own actions were mechanical, unreal. It felt as if his legs were carrying him, of their own power, to the door. He wouldn't even remember how he'd gotten his jacket and scarf on in the foyer once he reached the car. He would still be trying to figure out how a night that should have been memorable and breathtaking had been ruined. And he had been the one to destroy it.

He turned to her in the doorway. "I wish ... maybe I shouldn't have come here tonight. I won't bother you anymore, Kylie."

She wiped her face hastily with her hand. Yet she wasn't quick enough; he had seen the tears that had begun to stream down her cheek.

"You're not a bother to me, Bobby. But I'd rather we not see each other anymore. It's not good for me. The more I see you, the deeper I fall in love with you. Good night, Merry Christmas."

Bobby saw her shake her head as she closed the door. He was fairly certain she hadn't heard him return the greeting. He had barely heard it himself, over the noise the

wind and his heart were making.

Chapter Eleven

What a difference a couple of hours on a plane made. There it was, the second week of January, and Florida was entrenched in a sultry heat more fitting to summer.

It should have been a welcomed reprieve for Bobby, particularly with Berrentine Cove fluctuating those past two weeks between an exasperating mix of Indian summer and the throes of a blustery winter. In the past he would have enjoyed those minutes alone, standing on that outdoor deck and staring out at the view. In mid-afternoon, the sun was scorching and potent in the azure sky above the tranquil lake, the scene disturbed only by the teenagers on the opposite shore casting their hooks and lines for fresh-water fish.

Part of him felt like borrowing one of their rods and reels and joining them. Another part of him, the grownup part, reminded him dully that he wasn't there for a lazy afternoon of fishing or to luxuriate in the absence of a heavy jacket and the sensation of a light cotton shirt against his skin.

He was there, specifically, because of work, something that he had to remind himself that he loved. Lately, he had to be consistent with that reminder. For the past week or so, he'd had trouble remembering that.

"The place isn't all that old," he heard the property's owner saying behind him, and he whirled around on his heel. "My folks kept up on it the best thing they could, you know?"

Vince stood beside him, nodding and smiling that professional-style smile he reserved for such times.

"Well, once you start getting up in years, yeah," he agreed, "upkeep on a place is tough."

"Sure is. The place has its good points, though." The man, Walter Knauer, sniffed and looked warily from Vince to Bobby. He was trying to maintain a composed air while attempting to read their expressions. "That yard below, for one. The weeds have overrun it now, but once, some years ago, my mother tended to quite an impressive garden."

"I'm sure." Bobby jerked his head in the direction of the lake. "It's got a great view out here, too. And fishing. If that's not a draw, I don't know what is."

He saw the man's smile deepen easily, with more sincerity. He had seen that before, how people would size up both him and Vince, trying to decide if they were men to be trusted or sharks that would eat prospective sellers raw.

Funny. Bobby was usually more into it, but he could tell that day that he was off his game. It was like he was moving by rote, like he might as well have conducted that meeting in his sleep. He was grateful to hear Vince sounding like he had both his feet planted on solid ground.

"We like the location, too," he told Knauer.

"Oh, the location's somethin' else, believe me. In a few years, the property will be

going up even more.”

“Great,” Bobby said, just to contribute to the conversation.

We won't be holding on to it long enough to benefit from that, though, he mused. This isn't a home to either of us. It's an investment and a project. They're all projects.

Walter Knauer tugged at his belt, adjusting his waistband to accommodate the overlap of his belly, probably the beginning of middle-aged spread. Glumly, Bobby guessed he wasn't seven or eight years older than either him or Vince.

And that was something else--maybe later on in the day, if he had the chance, Bobby wanted to carve out some time for a good, brisk run. He hadn't run in some time, but he knew he could sure use the exercise. Most of the time he counted himself lucky if he could fit in three meals every day, typically skipping either breakfast or lunch. Yet he hadn't missed any meals since around the end of December, and in between driving nails, slinging a hammer, and operating power tools, he'd been snacking more often.

Really have to snap out of that silliness, he ordered himself impatiently.

“This was my home once, too,” Walter said, interrupting Bobby's train of thought. “I grew up in this house.”

Vince seemed to sense where he was going with that. “We need to talk about it, my partner and me. But we'll make you a fair offer, Walter.”

“Okay, well, I appreciate that. I love this place. To me, it's not an investment. I don't want to look at it as unloading it, but I just can't afford to keep it and my own home. And I'm anxious to sell.”

“We'll move on it early this week,” Vince said. “Paul Casanova, your guy at the real estate agency, should have our offer in his office in a day or so.”

“Good. I'll look forward to seeing it. And I'll get back to you promptly, too.”

Bobby mused to himself that it was a good thing Vince was a champ at making small talk, because if he felt anything that day through his numbness, one thing for certain he didn't feel was talkative. But his associate was able to chat up the man all through the stroll from the deck at the rear of the house to the gravel driveway out front, where Vince's car waited beneath the shade of a Japanese fern. From the gist of the conversation, the snippets of it that Bobby caught between his own thoughts, he gathered Walter was a big Marlins fan.

Talking about sports ended the meeting on a high note, then Vince got behind the wheel and Bobby slid beside him in the passenger seat. No one spoke until they reached the Palmetto Expressway, other than the Spanish-speaking disc jockey on a local salsa/merengue radio station.

Vince finally said, “How badly do you think Mr. Knauer will freak when he drives past his childhood home someday and it looks nothing like he remembered, once we get our gritty paws on it?”

“If he likes our offer, maybe he won't care.” Bobby hoped he seemed interested in the matter.

What he really wanted at that moment, where he really wanted to be was ... actually, he didn't know. He felt out of place, uncomfortable. As if his clothes didn't fit right, which they did; like he didn't know what to do with himself on what seemed like the longest afternoon of all time.

"You okay, Bobby? You seem kinda gloomy."

He realized he was slouching in his seat and forced himself to sit up. "Yeah. Just tired."

"You sure? You've been like this, all mopey, for a few days now."

Like this. Define 'like this.'

Vexed, Bobby puffed out a breath of air. He had answered that question like a fool. For declaring his feelings openly, he had found himself back in an empty mansion under construction, alone on Christmas Eve. So much for honesty.

"Fine, I'm fine," he insisted. "Probably just working too hard."

"Okay. I don't mean to be a pest." But Vince didn't leave it at that. He kept one hand on the steering wheel, his eighteen-karat gold bracelet with his full name, VINCENTE, in Oriental-style lettering catching the light and shimmering. "We didn't both need to come down here and see Knauer's place. I figured you just wanted a break from the Manor and the cold up there in Virginia."

"Uh-huh. Yeah. I needed a break."

"You know, me and Mireya are taking advantage of the chance to hang out with family while we're here. All those Cuban kinfolk of ours, you know."

That amused Bobby, though he was still noncommittal. "That's good. You should."

"But you know what? And I know you'll think we're nuts." Vince reached to lower the volume on a lively Willie Chirino song before going on. "I kinda miss Berrentine Cove."

"Do you?"

"Yep. And Miri feels the same way."

"What's crazy about that? You fall in love with a place. Happens."

Vince's voice rose with enthusiasm. "Just seems like such a great little town. In the beginning I wasn't so impressed and neither was Mireya, but now that we've gotten a chance to be there for awhile, it seems like a real nice place to raise kids. And it's beautiful, so close to the mountains."

It took a second for the reality of that to hit Bobby. The Montenegros selling their home, the one that Mireya had supposedly wanted the minute she'd laid eyes on it, pulling up stakes to live in that little Virginia town. The reality of that? As Vince's business partner, he would have to set foot in Berrentine Cove again. Maybe not often, but it was bound to happen.

That wasn't going to work too well for him--especially when he had vowed, once the Penny Manor was done, never to return to Berrentine Cove ever again.

As in, for the rest of his natural life.

"That's nice," he muttered. "You'd have to give that a lot of thought, you and the lovely Mrs. Montenegro."

"Well, sure. We're just flirting with the idea right now. Hey, you hungry?"

"A little."

"Tell you what. We're not far from my Aunt Nena's. Why don't I give Mireya a buzz, tell her to meet us there with my little man Beau, we have ourselves a feast that's better than anything you'll get in a restaurant?"

Bobby chuckled. "You're gonna impose on your aunt to fix us dinner?"

"Impose? What, impose? You tell my aunt you wanna have some of her cooking, and she'll treat you like you're about to be sainted. Not to mention the stuff made with plantains and condensed milk she'll shower you with, too. You game?"

Even with such a tempting offer, Bobby couldn't shake his blue mood. And he wasn't about to bring it with him, like a bottle of cheap wine, to the home of his friend's hospitable relatives.

"Next time, Vince," he begged off. "I'm just going back to the hotel. See if I can get a flight back up there."

"Aw. Party pooper. Hey, there'll be rum. One of my uncle's margaritas will have you under the table."

Again, Bobby laughed. "Next time. Sorry, man."

"It's cool. You probably want to get back to Kylie, right?"

He didn't mean to hesitate as long as he did. Enough to make Vince glance at him suspiciously.

"Yes," he fibbed. "I want to get back to Kylie. Real bad."

It was Vince who chuckled then. "Ah! See? I knew it. I know you like we grew up fighting over the breakfast cereal in the same house, dude."

How light-hearted his friend sounded. Bobby couldn't help noticing that, no matter how hard he tried to sound cheerful, he still sounded plain miserable.

"I want to get back to Kylie." It wasn't a fib now; he was being honest. "I want it so bad, it hurts. I mean, it hurts something wicked."

"Okay, Romeo. I get it. Don't get all ooey-goey on me."

"But she won't have me. She ended it the last time we were together."

Bobby leaned back against the seat's headrest. The truth hadn't been as hard to confess as he'd thought it would be. Still, saying it out loud did nothing to alleviate his pain.

A moment passed before Vince frowned at him. "What? What happened? Why did she do that?"

"My fault. Long story. I wouldn't want to bring you down with it."

"I got time. When did this happen?"

"On Christmas Eve."

"Aw, man. That's cold."

"My fault," Bobby repeated. "I surprised her with some presents. A little Christmas tree, since I knew she hadn't gotten one. I thought we'd celebrate together. Except somehow we ended up talking about...."

When he didn't go on, Vince coaxed him. "About?"

"I basically told her how I felt about her, but that I couldn't make any promises I'd be around after the Manor was done. That I move around, that she probably needs someone who's more stable, that'll be there for her."

His friend's eyebrows arched. "And she tossed you out?"

"It wasn't *that* dramatic. But she said ... she told me it was over and she asked me to leave." His voice shook a bit on those last few words.

"Bobby, you wanna talk about this?"

"Not really."

"Sure? Let me call Mireya, tell her I won't be home for a while. You and me can stop off somewhere for some dinner and some drinks."

"Oh, Vince. You're a good buddy. But I really don't think I'd be much company tonight. I'm just gonna stop at my place before I catch a flight for home."

"Your place? You mean your apartment?"

"Yeah. Where else?"

"And home? You mean Berrentine Falls ... where Kylie lives?"

He saw the grin, a somewhat doleful one, curving the half of Vince's mouth that he saw in profile.

"All right. I guess that's what you'd call Freudian," Bobby murmured.

"Ya think?" It was a light tease from Vince, intended to cheer him. Then he said, half-teasing and half-seriously, "You know, it probably wouldn't hurt if you went back there and swallowed your pride, just admitted how miserable you've been without her. And it'd even be a bit nuanced if you did all that down on your knees. Works for me with Mireya."

Bobby shook his head, staring at his hands, folded loosely on his lap.

"It wouldn't work for me," he said. "I saw the way she looked before I left that night. I hurt her, Vince. I didn't mean to. I really didn't. But I knew right there ... I messed up. Bad."

* * * *

Rosemary, the woman who came in regularly from the housekeeping service that Bobby used, had to be commended. That lady really went above and beyond the call of duty, as far as he was concerned. Although he, the man of that house--or in that case, that third-floor apartment--wasn't there for long stretches of time, she would come in once every two weeks religiously, leaving the place sparkling clean and inviting.

Bobby had noticed that before, though he was more observant that morning when he walked in. It had been a long day, mostly of driving along Florida's highways. If Rosemary had used cleaning disinfectant, which would have made the place feel cold and hospital-like, he couldn't tell. The scent in the air, perhaps clinging lightly to the rugs and curtains, was a masculine fragrance, woodsy. In the living room, everything was in its place, surfaces dusted and shining. The couch, with the throw pillows arranged and an afghan his mother had crocheted for him draped over the cushions, invited him to sit and rest.

And yet ... the apartment was still uncomfortable to him.

He tossed his bag into a corner near the door and plopped his jacket, which he hadn't needed in that summery state, right on top. For a moment he stood, disoriented, looking around the room.

Now why did I waste gasoline just to stop here again? he asked himself.

Until that morning, he had never noticed how sparsely decorated the place was. Why should he have bothered? He was hardly ever there. The furniture was all right. Functional. A coffee table in the center, a couch, one big arm chair. A TV set--a regular twenty-seven inch model, not one of those mega-giant-screen-you're-right-in-the-football-stadium jobs. The walls were a creamy off-white, the curtains on the windows

sort of matched the rest of the décor.

The shelves on the wall, installed by him, three in total, held his favorite books, some movies on DVD he'd loved enough to buy, and framed pictures that he could never part with of him as a kid, his brother Luke, and Skippy, a border collie he and his mom had owned some years before he'd graduated school and left home.

Man, he had *loved* that dog. It had been so long since he'd last owned one.

He heard his stomach growl and vaguely remembered he hadn't eaten much in the past few hours. Rather than taking Vince up on that delicious, homemade Latino feast, he had grabbed a coffee and some McDonald's fries along the highway. If he was catching a plane that night, the best he could hope for was a small bag of smoked almonds and a ginger ale. The airlines were pretty chintzy these days, he'd thought, when it came to snacks and meals.

But his own kitchen made the airlines look like the perfect hosts by comparison. The cupboards were bare except for a half empty can of coffee, aluminum foil and plastic containers, some individual packets of soy sauce and duck sauce from a Chinese restaurant, and a box of cereal that by now had to be pretty inedible.

Lacking enthusiasm, he checked the refrigerator, kept fresh by an open box of baking soda that Rosemary had placed in there. Aside from the opened bottles of condiments in the door, a couple bottles of Bud, and a few cans of his guilty pleasure, Mountain Dew Code Red, the fridge had nothing to offer. It was clean; it smelled good. But there was nothing there to eat.

Bobby slammed the refrigerator door a bit harder than necessary. He was irritated, more uptight than he'd been the day before.

That apartment wasn't a home. That wasn't news; he knew that. It was just that now it bothered him.

Kylie opened her shop that week. You weren't even there to celebrate with her.

That random thought saddened rather than irritated him. It had crossed his mind before, and he'd had to remind himself that she wouldn't have wanted him there anyway. She had sent him away.

A nap. A good, long, relaxing nap. A few hours of deep slumber. That was what he really needed, or he'd never be able to get to work on the mansion when he returned to Virginia. He was to be on a plane that night, so he'd be exhausted in the morning unless he caught up on much-needed rest.

In his bedroom, the same depressing atmosphere greeted him. The rug was clean, the bed was made, the dresser neat as a pin. Rosemary did her job well.

Bobby sat on the edge of the bed. Tired, he looked around the room and spotted some things that were uniquely his, that he would bring with him wherever he went. Mostly, though, that could have been anyone's room. He had to admit to himself that he felt more at home in a mansion that was still under construction, sawdust and bare walls and all.

Virginia. Berrentine Cove. Paradise Road. Most of all, Kylie Donovan's house. For that matter, the Stone Fireplace Restaurant.

Wherever Kylie was, that was what the only place that truly felt like home to him. That was where he had to be.

If there was still any chance of that left.

The bedroom had a couple of great features--its saving graces, what had prompted him to rent the apartment in the first place. The first was the enormous size of the room, which allowed ample space for a small table and one chair, where he worked on his laptop. Bobby made a mental note to himself--*You'll need the computer*. He didn't need it often, but he kept track of expenses and notes after a job, plus he used it for research. Email, he'd never had use for. When he wanted to reach someone, he gave them a buzz. If he couldn't hear the person's voice, he didn't consider it actually communicating with them, as old-fashioned a quirk as that was.

The second cool thing about his bedroom was the closet. It wasn't one of those walk-ins, but it was big enough. He sprang from the bed and threw open the double doors. There was one thing in particular he was searching for. Bobby spotted it easily, since he didn't have that many clothes to speak of.

That black suitcase with the wheels and the handle, stored away in a corner of the closet. He had bought it a few years ago but rarely used it, since he was partial to the bag with the shoulder strap. Usually, too, he liked to travel light.

But a spare suitcase now would come in handy.

He threw it onto the bed and unzipped it, then turned back to the closet. His clothes. They weren't much, but they were necessities. He could come back for the rest later, but for now all he wanted was a couple spare jeans, his hiking boots that were still in good shape, a favorite old sweater, and his brown leather jacket.

No more, because he needed the room. With his hands on his waist, he looked around the room.

A small toy plane on the dresser that had belonged to Luke. That was Bobby's to keep. Gently, tenderly, he stored it in the suitcase, cushioning it within the folds of the wool sweater. There was a guitar in the corner of the bedroom, too, propped up against the wall. That had been a gift from a high school friend, just an old acoustic guitar picked up in a pawn shop. The idea back then, for him and his teenaged friends, like most red-blooded American boys, to start up a rock band.

That hadn't come to pass, although it had been fun dreaming. From that experience he'd learned to play a few chords on that guitar. Maybe it would come in handy someday. If nothing else, the guitar would be a nice touch to dress up a room.

I'll come back for that, too, he decided.

The fishing rod and reel in the closet? That was another story. Those *would* be coming with him.

He carried the suitcase to the living room. In went the photos, still in their frames, cushioned by the leather jacket. In went some of the CDs, three of the movies--the ones he loved best. The rest, like the guitar and the clothes, he would come back for.

He took one last look at his collection of treasures. Well, treasures to him, if to no one else. The only things in that place that were pieces of a home, and yet not the whole thing. He had made do with the fragments, precious as they were.

But why make do, when what he needed was to reach for what he really wanted? And he knew he wouldn't be completely satisfied if Kylie wasn't a part of that life.

Maybe it wasn't too late. Every inch of his heart shouted out for him to try.

Bobby slipped back into his jacket, slung one bag onto his shoulder and pulled up the handle on the wheeled bag. If he got lucky, he could catch an earlier flight to Virginia that evening. If not, another few hours whiled away at an airport wouldn't kill him. It would give him a chance to have a real meal at a restaurant in the airport, then he could catch some sleep on the plane. Once there, he could call his landlord and give him the head's up, returning the apartment key when he picked up the rest of his things.

He was on his way home. Finally. Maybe.

Chapter Twelve

"You look very familiar. I don't suppose you went to Eisenhower Elementary School by any chance, did you?"

Kylie paused while counting out the change from the cash register to smile at her customer. The woman had just purchased the hunter-green skirt and sweater ensemble, the one Kylie had admired while placing them on hangers. She was around the same age, maybe a couple years younger. It wasn't the first time someone had mistaken her for a long-forgotten classmate from their formative years.

"No, I didn't grow up around here," she replied. "I used to be on a television show as a kid. Maybe you remember it? *Daddy's Home*."

"*Daddy's Home*?" the woman's voice squeaked in disbelief. Then a joyful, wonderful smile spread across her face. "Yes! You were Melissa, right? You're Kylie Donovan?"

"I sure am."

"Well, *wow*! Imagine that. That has to be the coolest. A TV star, right here in Berrentine Cove. You live here now?"

Kylie handed her both her change and the bag filled with her purchases. "I'm happy to say that I do. I visited once a long time ago, fell in love with the place, and I knew where I'd want to set up my home and shop."

"So this is your shop?"

Once more, Kylie smiled. It was a quiet smile, one of contentment. Her gaze drifted over the bag, one of a supply--every one of them a flirty shade of pink--she'd had made by a local printer, bearing the shop's name, PRETTY THINGS.

"This is my own little shop." Hearing herself say those words felt so good, she giggled at the end.

"Well, good luck with it. And ... uh ... I don't suppose...." Hesitantly, the customer shifted the bag from one hand to the other, then adjusted her purse's strap on her shoulder. "I could have an autograph. Would you mind?"

"Oh, not at all! I'm flattered that you'd ask. What's your name?"

"This is great! Just make it out to Daphne. D-A-P-H-N-E."

The closest piece of paper available was a sheet torn from a small spiral notebook, which Kylie used to jot down notes throughout the day. How many times had she done that, she wondered? Scribbled her name and a brief personal note to someone she never knew and would probably never see again? As a kid, she had never known what to say, keeping it to a typically kid-like *To So-and-So, From Kylie Donovan*. In her teen years, that uncertain era in a young girl's life, she'd added upbeat messages like *Keep smiling!* Or *Never stop dreaming!*

There had been times when people had been anything but polite in their request for an autograph, and a zany few who'd complained that she hadn't signed her *real* name-

-as in, Melissa Colton! And then there was that long stretch of time, after the show had been taken off the air, when it seemed no one had wanted her autograph anymore.

Kylie wrote '*Daphne, you'll look fabulous in your new outfit! Kylie Donovan*' and handed the woman the slip of paper. Daphne laughed in delight as she read the message on her way out the door. Kylie felt at peace with her former fame. Now, finally having accepted that she was a private person who had once been famous, who was no longer in the career chosen for her by her parents but doing the work she had chosen for herself, she could revel in those times when people did recognize her.

"Small business owner? No--*entrepreneur!*" she whispered to herself as she moved around the shop, straightening up.

She did that at the end of the day, leaving the store as well-tended as possible, so that in the morning she could come in with her coffee and hit the floor running, ready to work.

It had been a great week. Her first week had been better, but that had been Pretty Things' grand opening. Most of her former managers from the Stone Fireplace, the wait staff and the cooks, had dropped in to cheer her on and give their support with a purchase or two. Word of mouth was still traveling, because women were still trickling in, friends of her former coworkers. Then there were people like Daphne, who'd just been strolling through town and had been drawn in by the displays in the window.

Kylie was realistic. She knew that any fledgling business would take time before being profitable. Dale Fenty, the woman who had owned her own business in that same location before her, had made it work for over fifty years. That was Kylie's inspiration now. It was a walk in the park, and then again it wasn't. Maybe it would become less difficult once she was able to hire a part-timer or two. For now, she was arriving and setting up at nine-thirty in order to open up at ten and closing up at nine o'clock.

And she was doing that by herself. For now, at least.

After cleaning out the register and making her final tally for the night, she stored the money in the safe in the little office at the rear of the shop. She was tired but in good spirits. That night she would have a light dinner and unwind with a book while soaking in the tub before going to bed.

She was at the door to the shop, ready to leave, when she saw the white workhorse of a truck, parked in the golden glow of a streetlamp. She read the wording on the side door: HARRISON AND MONTENEGRO ENTERPRISES. Her heart gave one big excited thump against her chest, and she froze with her hand on the doorknob.

A sudden case of the jitters took over, and she moved away from the doorknob in a flash, as if it was on fire.

It took a moment but common sense took over. Yes, that was Bobby's truck--but he wasn't there to see her. There were other businesses on that same block; he could have been there dropping in on any one of them.

Nice try, but you don't really believe that far-fetched excuse, she told herself.

With her back leaning against the door, she contemplated taking a peek to see if Bobby was in the truck. It was night, dark out, hard to see. If he *was* in the truck, then he had to be waiting for her.

Sighing, she tapped her gloves against her side, giving herself a moment to think.

Maybe he was just stopping by to say hello. If Bobby had made a conscious effort to avoid her since Christmas, she didn't know. But she hadn't seen him either on the doorsteps to her home or shop or in passing anywhere in town.

Although she *hadn't* avoided him, she hadn't tried to reach him, either. Discreetly, without lingering long enough to be seen, she had driven past the manor. She had pulled up along the curb and heard the sounds of construction within the building, knowing that Bobby and Vince were in there working. With her heart in pieces, she had sat in her car, looking from his truck to the door, hoping it would open. Hoping he would step out and see her. And maybe, if he missed her as much as she had missed him, he wouldn't let her leave there without telling her his life just wasn't the same without her.

Yet he didn't emerge through that huge door. She had driven away, disappointed.

Kylie leaned her head back against the door and closed her eyes. *Why* had he come back? The holidays had been painful for her. She kept wondering if she had done the wrong thing in sending him away, and came close to calling him a few times.

She had managed not to do that, of course, convincing herself that it was better. Kylie had already fallen in love with Bobby. What would have been the point in them remaining together? For her to grow more attached to him, for her love for him to strengthen--only for him to disappear from her life once his work there in town was done?

One thing's for sure, you can't stay in here all night. She had to walk out of there and walk out of there strong, not falling apart. The wisdom behind that thought made her turn partway around for another glance through the glass door.

The truck was still there. Now Kylie watched the driver's side door open. Bobby stepped out and walked around the vehicle. It was mild out that night, warmer than January had a right to be. He wore his jacket open and rubbed his bare hands together, looking straight in the direction of the shop.

Now there was no doubt about it. He *was* there to see her.

And Kylie told herself that that was fine. Wasn't she the same woman who had spent so much time soul-searching after her unusual childhood? The same woman who picked up stakes and headed to a strange town to live and start her own business, the woman who had worked tables before she was able to make that transition was strong enough to take anything.

Certainly, she had to be strong enough to hold her head high and resist the man who hadn't loved her enough to end his gypsy life, as he called it, and commit to a relationship with her.

Nothing in life was easy. She had found that out time and again through the years. But coming out of the shelter of Pretty Things, locking the door and turning to face Bobby Harrison proved harder than she had imagined. Every part of her wanted to run to him, to throw her arms around him, to convince him to stay--this once, forever. With her own coat open, she secured the straps of her tote to her shoulder and hid her hands in her pockets, right in the nick of time, before he could see them shaking.

"Hi," she called to him.

Good, she complimented herself. A one-word greeting. That was pretty aloof, even though she offered him a smile.

"Hi, Kylie." He smiled, too. Except, in spite of his smile, his voice was soft, hoarse. Sad.

And she had seen that expression before--in her own eyes. It was the look of someone trying to prepare himself to have his heart broken.

"I haven't seen you in a while." She stepped closer, yet kept a distance.

"Oh, I've been around." Bobby licked his lips. Kylie tried to tear her gaze away, but his eyes bore into hers.

She almost couldn't do this. The look that he gave her, it was as if he would devour her in one kiss, the same one that she had been yearning for all those days that had passed. With all her will, Kylie managed to stand her ground.

The sound of a dog's bark caught her attention. Her mouth dropped open with surprise when she turned to see where the barking had come from.

Bobby had a dog? Since when? Probably Vince Montenegro's family pet. That had to be the explanation. He was a handsome little guy, a golden Lab. Not a puppy but still a young dog. He pressed his snout against the crack in the window, pushed away and barked again, as if saying hello to her.

"What...." Kylie turned back to Bobby and laughed nervously.

"Ah, I picked him up in a shelter over in Kendall," he explained. "The last owners couldn't keep him after their baby turned out to be allergic. He's housebroken. Good thing, too, since he keeps me busy at the Manor."

"He's beautiful."

"Yeah. He's friendly, too. I figured I'd keep the name the owners gave him--Jackie. He's used to it and all."

She stepped closer to the truck and reached to touch the dog's snout with her fingertip. Jackie responded with a lick of her finger, his own offer of friendship.

"You like him, Kylie?"

Bobby had asked that question as if it mattered whether she liked the dog or not. He moved closer to her. A wayward breeze tossed his hair, and she stopped herself combing it out with her fingers.

"He looks like a great dog," she said.

"I haven't had one in a long time."

"Sure that's a good idea, though? Dogs get lonely if they're left alone a lot. You have someone who'll watch him for you?"

"Well, you're right. That wouldn't be fair to him. I wouldn't have gotten him if I wasn't planning to be around. A lot."

Kylie swallowed hard. She needed a moment. She was afraid she would break into pieces right there.

Then Bobby made it even harder to keep her resolve. Drawing closer to her, he looked like he was about to kiss her. He stopped just short of it, respectfully, reluctantly.

"Have you forgotten all about me?" he rasped. "Tell me. Because I don't think I'll ever be able to forget you, Kylie. I've tried in these days. And I can't."

She blinked hard, upset with herself. She recognized that sting in her eyes, of tears that were being kept at bay.

"I can't forget you, either, Bobby," she admitted. With her resolve melting, she

added, "Maybe I shouldn't have done that. Sent you away--"

"No, that was the right thing to do. You had a right to know where you stood with me. And it's not that I didn't want to be with you or that I would have walked away from you, Kylie. It's not that at all."

His voice broke. That seemed to be the sign that his own resolve had melted, because Bobby's hands drew to her arms. He brought her in tight against him, embracing her. She could feel his breath rising and falling, so close against his chest. Lifting her face with his hands, he took the kiss that had been waiting for him.

"I came here to fix up a mansion, Kylie," Bobby told her, his voice husky. "That's all it was supposed to be. Just another job. I was supposed to leave right after that. Like I've done for years. Fix it. Sell it. Forget it. Go on to the next big job. Now--even that's changed."

She frowned. "What do you mean? You're not selling the Penny Manor after it's done?"

"Not yet. Maybe not ever. I don't know. I want to talk to Vince." Bobby chuckled. "He and his wife love it here. The man's a nut. I know he'd probably go for the idea."

"What idea?" She laughed with him.

"Well, it's going to be a bed and breakfast, right? Who's to say *we* can't run it? We could name it, oh, something really touristy, like Paradise Manor or something. Crazy idea, you think?"

"No. Not crazy. It's a *terrific* idea. Would you be happy doing that, though?"

"Yes. I would." Bobby replied readily. Kylie felt a delicious, electric-hot shiver go through her as he closed the space between them and added huskily, "The only thing that would make me happier would be if you told me you loved me as much as I love you, Kylie Donovan. I love you with all my heart."

She laughed again, this time through a rush of tears. "Oh, I do. I love you, Bobby Harrison. I love you with all my heart, too."

"And I haven't had a home in a long time, baby. Tell me we can make a home together. You and me. Tell me you'll marry me."

"I'll--" She stopped, gazing up at him. That was no mistake, no confusion caused by a whirl of excitement. She'd heard him correctly.

Bobby looked at her intently, waiting for his answer. Kylie could tell he was holding his breath, and she didn't make him wait any longer.

"Say the word and I'll marry you tomorrow," she said.

"Tomorrow, it is."

With a surge of excitement sweeping through her, Kylie wrapped her arms around his neck and drew him closer, kissing him again and again. Right there, under the streetlamp, a few short steps away from Pretty Things. At that hour, other shop owners on Main Street were closing up for the night. Out of the corner of her eye she saw onlookers, as they locked doors and pulled closed gates, smiling at her and Bobby.

That was the only time she noticed anyone else, because they all seemed to melt into the background, and it was only she and Bobby and the array of stars swept across the sky above them. And Jackie, naturally, beckoning them with his barks to join him in

the truck.

Kylie held Bobby tight against herself, savoring the feel of his arms around her again. And she whispered, "Welcome home, baby. Welcome home."

THE END