

MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE
Special Edition

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

by

Sherry Derr-Wille

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CHAPTER 1

Sunlight shimmered across the lake. It glistened as though it had been scattered with diamonds. As she stood there in awe, taking in the view from the cottage, the dock invited her into the picture of beauty. Taking her sketchpad and pencil with her, Katelyn Devereaux walked across the lawn and sandy beach until she reached the pier. Settling into the deck chair, she gazed out across the water.

It was such a lovely morning. She was so glad she'd taken the advice of her friends and accompanied Suzie Branch to this beautiful Wisconsin lake. Katelyn had met Suzie while they were in college. They had become instant friends and now Katelyn didn't know what she would do without her. It had been at Suzie's insistence that Katelyn came with her to this secluded lake just outside of Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. She certainly needed a vacation and could think of no place more relaxing than this quaint cottage hidden away in a different world.

In the distance, a loon called to its mate, waited for a few moments for a reply and called again. This kind of peaceful exchange soothed her and drew her attention to the fact that she hadn't taken the time to listen to it for months. She knew nature was all around her back home, but there never seemed to be time to sit and listen. In Denver, she was nothing more than a machine, pumping out sketches for her clients and on occasion playing the gracious hostess for Martin.

No, I don't want to think of the daily grind of running the Devereaux Agency, nor Martin Collier's marriage proposal. I need this time to figure out just who Katelyn Devereaux really is.

Katelyn turned away from the peaceful scene before her. *Why can't my life be this peaceful?*

You know why, Katie. The sound of her father's voice rumbled through her mind causing a tear to escape the corner of her eyes. She'd lost both of her parents at Thanksgiving and never really gotten over

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their deaths. The only thing that kept her from going completely over the edge was work, work and more work.

I don't think I can do this, Daddy. I don't love Martin. I haven't even given him an answer concerning his proposal. Maybe I'm not cut out for the wife thing. Even if I did marry Martin, I wouldn't be a wife, not in the conventional way. With him gone so much, life as his wife would be no different from life by myself.

Katelyn's thoughts came as a shock. Never before had she admitted her true feelings for Martin. More than anything else in the world, she wanted to be a little girl again without all the problems of being a responsible adult. Considering Martin was old enough to be her father, marriage to him would be a pretense.

Back home in Denver, her life had become too complicated to allow her to rest. For the past eight months she'd been running the Devereaux Advertising Agency and then there was Martin Collier's marriage proposal—which was further complicated when she discovered that she was adopted. Perhaps if her parents had told her the truth the shock wouldn't have been so profound but they hadn't. She'd learned of her adoption only days after their funeral.

A mallard duck swooped down and landed on the lake, leaving ripples in his wake. He made a perfect model for her to sketch. Opening her pad, she began to draw the duck's features.

"Genean? What are you doing here?"

The sound of a man's voice sent the duck away in frightened flight. Silently she cursed the intrusion on her perfect scene. "I beg your pardon," she said, getting to her feet. "I'm afraid you've mistaken me for someone else." Quickly she wiped the last of the tears from her eyes. Had he seen her crying? The last thing she wanted was to have some stranger feeling sorry for her. Besides, he did wreck the perfect setting the duck had created for her sketch.

Although he was less than twenty feet away from her, the sun at his back made it hard to distinguish anything about him. As she stood up, she shaded her eyes to get a better look at the face behind the voice. He stood well over six foot tall and could only be described as a blonde Adonis. He reminded her of one of the body builders she sketched while in college.

"I'm sorry. I can't believe the uncanny resemblance between you and my friend, Genean Karsten."

She watched him as he stepped onto the pier in order to get a better look at her.

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"I'm Seth Miller. I live up around the point. Are you staying with the Branch's, Miss..."

"It's Devereaux, Katelyn Devereaux."

"Katelyn Devereaux," he repeated her name. She liked the way it sounded when he spoke it. "You don't look much like a Katelyn to me. Do you mind if I call you Kaye?"

Hearing him call her Kaye made her blood boil.

Don't get mad. He has no idea why the name of Kaye would upset you. Besides he is handsome and you did come on this vacation to make up your mind about a lot of things. He's certainly more interesting than stuffy old Martin.

"Yes, I do mind. I mind very much. Katelyn or Katie will do quite well. Anything but Kaye."

Without saying more, she sat back down on the deck chair and tried to concentrate on her drawing. Instead she couldn't help but stare at the man at the end of the dock.

"Wait. I didn't mean to offend you. What do you say we start over again?"

"I think not," she said, hoping her tone sounded as though she was teasing. "You scared away *my duck*." Even to her ears, the last words sounded tart, not at all the way she intended. They sounded angry. Inwardly she cursed herself for getting upset just because her model flew away.

"*Your duck?* I didn't know they belonged to anyone in particular."

She couldn't help but smile at his statement. At least he hadn't misinterpreted her meaning. For that she was grateful. She knew getting used to this vacation thing would take her longer than a few hours of sitting staring out at the water. Her sketch of the duck had been more for business than for pleasure, even though she promised not to think about any of her clients while she was in Wisconsin.

"They don't. I mean they don't belong to anybody. I was doing a sketch of him. I certainly didn't expect someone to come up and scare him away."

"That's better. I do like the way you look when you smile. I know how it is when you get distracted. I should be getting back to work before I get behind."

"Behind in what?" She couldn't imagine him doing anything but enjoying the sun. It had turned his skin a golden brown and gave him the look of a sun worshiper from Hawaii or California rather than Suzie's neighbor in Wisconsin of all places. "You look like a beach bum to me."

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She was beginning to enjoy this game of cat and mouse. If the truth were known, she would enjoy getting to know this man.

“A beach bum?”

“Well, you certainly didn’t get that tan being cooped up in an office all day.”

“Hardly,” he punctuated the word with hearty laughter. “I do wood-working in my home. When I have a beautiful day, like today, I enjoy taking my projects outside.”

“Well, don’t let me keep you.” Katelyn realized she didn’t mean the words. She wanted to continue talking to him longer.

“I hope I’ll be seeing you again before you leave. I come this way every morning.” With a wave of his hand, he turned around and began to run back toward where he indicated he lived.

Katelyn closed her eyes and tried to get back her inspiration for the picture of the mallard. To her surprise, the only vision to fill her mind was of Seth Miller. Opening her eyes again, she flipped to a clean sheet on her sketchpad and started drawing the strong lines of his face.

If he came this way everyday, she would definitely see him again. She wanted to get to know this man and decide once and for all if she wanted to live her life as a woman with a husband who traveled three hundred days out of the year or if she deserved more out of life. Suzie and Uncle Jack, her father’s lawyer and the closest thing she had to any real family, both thought so and told her she was making a bad mistake on more than one occasion. Maybe they were right.

* * * *

Seth finished his run and entered the house. While he prepared for his shower, he pondered this morning’s encounter with Katelyn Devereaux.

If it hadn’t been for what Brad told you on the phone last night you wouldn’t have made the mistake. Okay so there’s a slight resemblance, but haven’t you looked for Genean in every girl you ever dated. You had it bad for her, old man. You want everyone to be like your first love and it just doesn’t happen.

He’d first met Brad and Genean while he was in college. At the time he and Brad had been assigned as college roommates, but they had become so much more. They were well suited to each other and soon became the best of friends. They were in their senior year when Genean entered their lives. He had been assigned as Genean’s tutor for a math class she was having problems with. It didn’t take long for the three of them to

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become close friends. Although he never said anything outright about his feelings, he knew he was falling in love with Genean.

With graduation, he stayed in touch with her and even went to Green Bay to take her out on several occasions. His first and only teaching job had been in his hometown, two hours away from Genean, but close enough to keep in touch with her.

When Brad landed a job with Genean's brother, Randy Mallard, everything changed. It didn't take long for the two of them to fall in love. The hardest thing he ever had to do was act as Brad's best man at their wedding. Yet he did what was expected of him.

Over the years they had all remained close. Last night's phone conversation had taken him completely by surprise. Instead of the usual yadda-yadda of their weekly phone calls, this one had a different tone from the moment Brad said hello.

Seth had made the call to wish them a happy anniversary. Instead he could hear Genean in the background crying.

"What's up? Is something wrong with Genean?"

"You could say that. Hell, you're our best friend, Seth. At this point you might as well know what's going on in our lives."

Seth had always known that when Genean turned twenty-five she intended to look for her twin sister who had been given up for adoption after the death of their mother as a complication of childbirth. He'd often wondered why she had been willing to wait until her twenty-fifth birthday as her grandfather's will had dictated. With the old man gone, she could have looked at any time. Of course, she had been busy with school, marriage and a baby. To complicate matters her aunt and uncle had not told her until her twenty-first birthday and then the adoption agency had said their records were sealed for another four years. He should have expected to hear that she had contacted the adoption agency again at the first possible date. What he didn't expect was that the sister didn't want to be found. Seth wished he could have been there for Brad and Genean. They were closer than most siblings. When he had a problem, he knew he could talk about it to Brad and visa versa. Seth had promised to come up on the weekend and spend some time with them at Mallard's Nest, the cottage Genean and her brother, Randy, owned in Door County. He needed to get away for a while and being able to spend time with his friends would serve a dual purpose. He would be able to comfort them and at the same time convince himself that Katelyn in no way resembled Genean.

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He turned off the water and stepped from the shower. He wished he could shut down his mind as easily as turning off a knob. Unfortunately, thoughts of Genean and Katelyn kept running through his head.

“Wouldn’t it be something if Katelyn turned out to be Genean’s sister?” he asked himself, aloud.

The thought of anything so absurd amused him. *You’re letting your imagination work overtime. Katelyn is nothing more than Suzie’s friend. Once you get to know her, you’ll see just how warped your first impression of her was.*

Do I want to get to know her?

The answer came as a resounding yes. He’d put his life on hold far too long. It was time he started enjoying life. Sure he’d dated, but he was always looking for Genean’s replacement. From here on in he would begin to have fun and get to know the women he took out without comparing them to Genean. He’d start with calling Katelyn Devereaux and asking her out to dinner.

Who knows, it could prove to be a lot of fun. It’s not like you’re going to hop in the sack with her. She’s only here on vacation. Why not get to know her?

* * * *

“You’ll look like a lobster if you stay out in the sun any longer,” Suzie called from the porch of the cottage.

Katelyn looked up from her sketch of Seth, amazed at how time had gotten away from her so quickly. The sun was straight overhead, indicating it was past noon. “I’ll be right in.” She gathered up her drawing materials and prepared to go back to the house.

Once inside, she laid her sketchpad on the table and went to the kitchen sink to wash her hands. “Do you need some help with lunch?”

“No. I picked up a pizza in town. It should still be hot enough to eat. Did you have a relaxing morning?”

“I’m not sure I know how to relax. I did some sketching. I found a wonderful model while I was out there.”

“So I see. It looks like you met Mr. Wonderful.”

“If you mean Seth Miller, yes I did. Of course, he wasn’t the model I was referring to. Is he for real?”

Suzie began to laugh. “Seth is for real all right. During the winter, he teaches math at the high school in town. In the summer, he spends his days making furniture. I have to admit he’s good at it, too. He made the table in the dining room.”

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Katelyn thought about the craftsmanship of the table she so admired earlier. For some reason, she hadn't believed Seth when he told her he made furniture.

Before Katelyn could say more, the phone rang. "Branch residence," Suzie answered. "Oh, hi Seth—I hear you met my friend Katie—yes, she's here. Just a minute."

Suzie held out the phone and mouthed *he wants to talk to you*.

"Why, Mr. Miller, what a surprise," Katelyn said, trying to sound nonchalant. Within her chest her heart beat so loudly, she wondered if he could hear it over the phone. Just the thought of hearing his voice excited her. Confusion set in, as the feeling was alien to anything she could ever remember.

"I'd like to make a better impression on you than I did earlier. Would you have dinner with me?"

"Dinner?" Katelyn questioned. From the corner of her eye, she saw Suzie nod and give her the thumbs up sign. Even without prompting, she knew she would agree to the meeting. The thought of having the chance to see the man who so easily captured her imagination thrilled her. "Yes, I'd enjoy having dinner with you."

"Good. I'll pick you up at six. See you then."

"Maybe I am getting the hang of this vacation thing. I just accepted an invitation to go out to dinner with a perfect stranger. Wouldn't Uncle Jack be proud of me? He's been after me to start dating for months. He's not at all excited about the attention Martin has been paying me. When I told him about the ring Martin insisted on giving me, he went off like a roman candle. He thinks Martin is just looking for a hostess for his parties and not a wife."

In her heart she knew Uncle Jack was right. Martin was much older than she but...

"Well, if it makes you feel any better," Suzie interrupted the wanderings of Katelyn's mind, "that's what I think as well. I've been trying to tell you that Martin is not the guy for you. He's old enough to be your father and you don't love him. I know at least a dozen men back in Denver who would give anything if you looked their way. There's no need to rush into a marriage that will bring you nothing but heartache. Besides, you haven't given him an answer and if you ask me you shouldn't. Give him back that damn rock he gave you and tell him thanks but no thanks."

Katelyn nodded. She didn't love Martin but at the same time, she didn't want was to hurt his feelings. He'd been kind to her at the time of

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her parents' deaths and he was the type of man her father would have approved of.

You don't have to please your father any more, Katelyn. You're a grown woman. It's time to think about pleasing yourself.

"I'm beginning to agree with you. Maybe a date with a perfect stranger will help me be more comfortable with all those men you say are just waiting for me back home."

"You only accepted an invitation for dinner from Seth. He's far from perfect and he's certainly no stranger. I've known him most of my life."

"Big deal. Maybe you know him, but I don't. I could be letting myself in for more than I can handle."

Suzie put her arm around Katelyn's shoulders. "Look, if Seth is interested, go for it. Why not try a little vacation fling?"

"A fling? Who said anything about a fling? I'm going out to dinner with him and nothing more."

"No. I only want you to take a long hard look at yourself and make certain you know what you want."

"All right, already. I'm going out to dinner with Seth tonight. What about you? It's rude of me to leave you on our first night here."

"Not really. I promised to meet my brother, Jeff, at the mall. You know how it is. I have to fill him in on what I've been doing with my life since I came home last Christmas. He's not much on letter writing and neither am I. We only get to talk when I come home. If we called each other our phone bills would resemble the national debt."

Katelyn laughed. "No, Suzie, I don't know how it is. I'm an only child, or have you forgotten? I can certainly imagine it, though. I know how long you and I talk on the phone and we see each other on a weekly basis."

* * * *

Seth hung up the phone. Katelyn's acceptance of his invitation to dinner pleased him. Could it have only been a few hours since he first saw her? It seemed as though she dominated his thoughts forever. *Good God, she's no different from any of the women I've dated over the past four years, or is she?*

For the first time, he allowed himself to think about the women in his life. Although he had a reputation of being a ladies man, he certainly didn't deserve it. No one he dated in the past turned out to be what he wanted. One date, two at the most and he knew they weren't for him. Unfortunately, it would be the same with Katelyn, or would it?

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Why am I even bothering to ask her out?

The answer sounded loud and clear in his mind: *Katelyn is different. She is beautiful, intriguing and a bit mysterious. She reminds you of your first love, but there is something more than just her resemblance to Genean that attracts you to Katelyn.*

In college, he wore his heart on his sleeve. He thought it was clear to Genean Mallard he wanted to marry her. It came as quite a shock when Genean told him she didn't love him. Reluctantly, he stepped aside and let her go. He remembered the pain of watching her marry his best friend, Brad Karsten. Now, four years later, he knew he made the right decision. If he hadn't allowed the hurt to heal, he would have never been ready to let someone like Katelyn excite him the way she did.

He ran his fingers through his hair and went back to his workshop. As he sanded down the rough wood of the table he was working on, he decided to enjoy tonight. Katelyn, or Katie, as Suzie had called her, presented a mental challenge. She certainly wasn't like the women he dated recently. It would be fun getting to know her, having a good time with no strings attached. Before he knew it she would be gone and he would have the memory of a pretty girl who came to the lake for a vacation.

Maybe, he told himself, more would happen than just having a good time with her. For the first time, in years, he longed to make love to a woman, to make love to Katelyn.

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CHAPTER 2

Katelyn looked at her reflection in the full-length mirror. The white halter-top sundress suited her well. With it, she wore black shoes and earrings. She picked up the black lace shawl she found in a small shop back home and put it around her shoulders, wincing in pain from her sunburn.

“How could you have been so foolish?” she asked the reflection. “You haven’t been sunburned since...”

She couldn’t finish the sentence. Now, two and a half years after she and Ken had spent a delightful afternoon at a secluded lake in the mountains, the scene was vivid in her mind. She could hardly believe she had ever thought she could be in love with him.

He joined the firm and swept her off her feet in less than a month. For the next six weeks, he wined and dined her, convincing her they were meant for each other. It ended the day she stopped by the office unexpectedly and overheard Ken’s conversation with several of the other employees.

“So, are you and Miss Devereaux getting married?” she’d heard one of the secretaries ask.

She remembered feeling the warmth of hearing something so special. Apparently, Ken had every intention of proposing.

“You bet we are,” Ken’s deep voice replied.

“How do you know if you love her?” another secretary asked. “You don’t really know her.”

“What does love have to do with anything? Kaye’s got just what I want, plenty of money and this firm. All I have to do is hang on until dear old daddy dies and I can ditch her. By rights, fifty percent of everything she owns will belong to me. I think the Davis/Devereaux Advertising Agency has a nice ring to it.”

His bragging turned Katelyn’s stomach. How could he say such a thing to one of his fellow employees? As she stood there in shock, she

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realized exactly what kind of a man he was. He didn't love her, only what she represented.

"A nice ring to it!" Katelyn remembered shouting. "You're fired has a better ring to it, Ken Davis If you want Daddy to make it official, I can arrange it."

"I'm ready to go Katie," Suzie called from downstairs.

Katelyn jumped at the intrusion into her thoughts and stammered "Are you leaving so soon? I thought you'd stay until Seth got here."

"I can't believe you're nervous about tonight. Seth isn't a monster. He doesn't have any idea who Katelyn Devereaux really is. He asked you out to dinner. It's just an innocent date. If you're worried about Martin finding out, don't be. He'll never hear a word about it from me. Besides, maybe Seth will show you how to be a woman again."

"And just when did I stop being a woman?" Katelyn snapped.

"You know what I mean, Katie. Ken hurt you and seeing you hide from the world these past months hurts me. As for Martin, he's nice, don't get me wrong, but he certainly doesn't add any spice to your life. How much older is he than you anyway?"

"Not that much older."

"Look, I didn't even have to ask the question. I know he's a lot older than you are, fifty-eight to be exact. All he's looking for is window dressing. I'll bet he hasn't even made love to you. For once in your life do something impulsive. Do something for the fun of it."

For the fun of it? I don't think I even know what fun is anymore. After Ken... She could see Suzie tapping her foot, as though annoyed with her for taking so long to answer.

"I don't know if I can go through with this. I went on an innocent date with Ken and look what happened. Besides, I'd be betraying Martin."

"To hell with Martin. The two of you aren't engaged, not officially at least. For once think about yourself. With Ken, you were taken in by a very convincing con man. Believe me, Seth isn't like Ken. I know him. He'll show you a good time. He doesn't want to marry you, for god's sake. He's a confirmed bachelor."

Katelyn smiled weakly at Suzie's comment. She couldn't help but compare Seth with Ken. Seth, like Ken, was a handsome man who caught her attention. Ken had swept her off her feet, then planned to dump her once he got his hands on everything she owned. Would Seth do the same thing once he realized just who she was?

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With Martin, she at least knew where she stood. He didn't want her money or her business. He only wanted her to be his wife and to give him an heir. It would be quite like a business deal. Business she understood. It was attraction she couldn't comprehend.

"Why is it so hard for you to understand my jitters?"

"It's not hard. You're my friend and I love you like a sister. I just want you to have a good time. An evening out with a handsome man might be just what you need."

Katelyn opened her arms to Suzie and embraced her. "What did I do to deserve such a good friend? I promise, I'll have a good time tonight. Who knows, maybe I'll even ask him for a date before we come back home." She wished she were as convinced as she sounded.

"Good for you," Suzie replied before she grabbed her sweater and hurried out the door.

Katelyn watched her friend leave and thought about their conversation. She had every right to be nervous. After her disastrous relationship with Ken, she went into a deep depression. She'd started seeing Martin at her father's insistence, and agreed to consider his proposal of marriage, because she knew it would have made her parents happy.

What about me? Am I happy about the thought of spending my life with Martin?

Before she could formulate an answer, she heard a knock at the door. For this evening, she would have to set aside her thoughts about Martin, as well as her fears about being with a strange man and allow herself to relax.

* * * *

Seth pulled his jeep into the Branch cottage driveway just as Suzie came out the door.

"Hi, Seth," she said, coming over to the jeep once he got out. "You made some kind of an impression on my friend, Katie."

"She made some kind of impression on me, too Suz." He allowed his mind to focus on his memory of Katelyn. He could easily envision her eyes and facial features. What surprised him the most was the way she made his head spin with the very thought of her. "I'd ask you to join us, but it looks like you have plans."

"I do. I'm already late. I'm supposed to meet Jeff at the mall in town in ten minutes. Oh well, he knows I'm always late. Guess it won't bother him. He's used to me. Gotta run—have fun."

Although he liked Suzie, he was glad she made other plans. He wanted to be alone with Katelyn. He needed to get to know her.

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Suzie said something he didn't catch, as she got into the car and sped out of the driveway.

Katelyn answered his knock and he couldn't help but stare. Her hair, the color of highly polished maple, hung loose around her shoulders and her dark eyes reminded him of a perfect piece of walnut.

The curse of being a woodworker. I see a beautiful woman and I can't help but compare her to fine wood grains.

"You look lovely tonight," he finally said.

"Thanks, come on in, I just have to get my purse."

She went into the living room and his gaze fell on the sketchpad lying on the table. On an impulse, he picked it up. It startled him to see his own likeness on the sheet.

"I'm sorry, it's not very good," she said, re-entering the room.

He put the pad back on the table, feeling embarrassed by being caught snooping.

"I don't mind you looking at it. Like I say, it isn't very good. I did it in a hurry this morning. I really didn't have time to study you."

Seth smiled. He expected her to be upset by his intrusion into her private world. "I think it's extremely good. I remember you saying you're an artist. Do you do this for a living? If you don't, you should."

"Thank you. I'm a commercial artist."

"I hope your boss appreciates your talent."

Katelyn laughed and he enjoyed the sound of it. "I don't have a boss."

He didn't ask any further questions. *She must be a free-lance artist.*

"Are you ready to go?" he finally asked.

An affirmative nod gave him his answer. Without saying more, he held open the door for her. As she passed in front of him, he resisted the urge to take her in his arms and kiss her. He certainly didn't want to scare her off so early in the evening.

"If you like the picture you can have it, but only if you let me do a better one later."

He smiled at her offer. "I'd like to have it and we can talk about you doing another one over dinner."

The thought of posing for Katelyn excited him. He wondered if she really meant what she said or if she was just making polite conversation.

Outside, the late afternoon sun cast a soft shadow across her face. Again, he resisted the urge to take her in his arms.

"It's been a beautiful day," she said.

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Seth wondered if he only imagined it or if he heard a nervous edge in her voice. “It certainly has. It’s a nice change from all the rain we had last week. Guess you’re lucky you weren’t here then. Since Suzie says you’re from Denver, I wouldn’t want you to get a bad impression of the Badger State.”

Katelyn turned and gave him a smile that could only be described as beautiful. “I don’t know much about the Badger State, as you call it, other than you have a lot of milk cows and beer. At least the natives are friendly.”

He enjoyed her comment as well as the smell of her perfume. For some reason it seemed familiar, but he couldn’t remember where he encountered it before.

“I guess the slogan *‘Wisconsin—You’re Among Friends’* is more than just promotional hype,” she commented.

After closing her door, he went around to the driver’s side. “I hope you like prime rib,” he said, as he turned the key, bringing the engine to life.

“Sounds wonderful. Suzie keeps telling me I haven’t had prime rib until I’ve had it in Wisconsin.”

Seth wished she hadn’t mentioned Suzie. He was enjoying the closeness of her, the way she’d started to relax.

Leaving the lake behind, they drove toward the restaurant, which at one time, had been a mansion perched high on a bluff. Ahead of him, he saw a flash of color and slammed on the brakes. The unexpected stop caused Katelyn to look at him with questions filling her eyes.

“Ahead of us,” he said, pointing at the doe that now walked calmly across the road, as though the oncoming traffic posed no threat to her whatsoever. Behind her, two fawns followed.

“They’re magnificent. How did you notice them? I didn’t see anything.”

“At this time of day I usually watch for deer. I certainly wouldn’t want to hit them. Aside from the damage to my vehicle, it would be a shame to kill them.”

“From what I’ve read, the deer population is on the rise. At least it is in Colorado. I know the hunters keep asking for a larger limit, but I hate to think of killing any living thing.”

Seth reached across the seat and touched her hand. In at least this one area they shared the same opinion. He remembered going hunting with his uncle when he’d been sixteen. He also could still see the buck they shot and continued to ache at the sight of the dead animal. “It’s the

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same here. I understand the need, but I don't enjoy the hunt. I do look forward to catching a glimpse of them, though, like tonight."

Katelyn nodded, then turned her attention back to the deer grazing in the hay field across the road from the wooded area where they'd emerged.

Assured the animals were safely away from him, Seth pulled the car back onto the road.

"So, where are you taking me?" Katelyn asked.

"It's called Burke's Mansion. A millionaire named Burke built it as a retreat for his wife at the turn of the century. He wanted some place where she could go in the summer to get out of Chicago. The story is, after spending several summers here, they left Chicago and moved to the mansion on a permanent basis. They died shortly before the stock market crashed in 1929. When I was a kid, my friends told me it was haunted."

Katelyn looked at him, a smile crossing her delicate lips. "Are you telling me you're taking me to a haunted house for dinner?"

He liked the sound of her voice, the teasing manner of her tone. Most women he dated would have been horrified if he told them the story, but Katelyn seemed to enjoy it.

"I guess I am. A few people have actually seen the Burkes. In the late eighties, Gina and Paul Martin bought the place and converted it into a restaurant. They say they've actually seen the ghosts of Jack and Audrey Burke and that they are extremely friendly."

"Is that the truth, or do you always tell your dates that story so they cling to you?"

"The story is true, but you don't have a bad idea. I'm sorry I didn't think of it myself."

Evening started to fall when he pulled into the parking lot. A light breeze ruffled Katelyn's hair when she got out of the Jeep. Seth smiled as he watched her take in the scenery.

Before going into the restaurant, she walked over to the stone retaining wall at the edge of the bluff and stared at the trees silhouetted in the twilight. He followed her and rested his hand lightly on her shoulder. "It's beautiful isn't it?" Beneath his hand, he could feel her wince. In the waning light of evening, he noticed the red of her sunburn and carefully withdrew his hand.

"It certainly is. I was trying to imagine it in the fall when the trees turn color."

She turned to him, so close he could easily pull her into his arms and kiss her. It was all he could do to refrain from acting on his impulse. *It's*

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only a date. I want no commitment, no strings. I won't risk wearing my heart on my sleeve for a second time.

To his surprise, she turned away from him, as if she too became uneasy at their closeness. For a moment, he ached to hold her, but he let the feeling pass. He didn't need to complicate things with emotions.

Once inside the main dining room, he couldn't keep his eyes off her. In the dim light, she enchanted him. It had been a long time since anyone excited him the way she did. He wondered if there really was such a thing as love at first sight.

"I wish you wouldn't stare at me. It makes me nervous."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to stare. So, just who is Katelyn Devereaux? Do you enjoy free-lancing?"

She laughed, making him wonder if he said something wrong or if she enjoyed watching him chafe.

"I'm not a free-lancer. I do my work for the Devereaux Advertising Agency in Denver. Just where did you ever get the idea I did free-lance work?"

"I made a mistake. I assumed since you didn't have a boss you were a free-lancer, sort of like me."

"I see. That's why people should never assume anything. My dad founded the agency. Since his death I've had to work very hard to keep it going while maintaining the standards he set."

"Don't you know that all work and no play makes Katelyn a dull girl?"

"Do you always ask so many questions on the first date?" Her voice sounded light, not annoyed as he thought it would.

"I'm sorry. I guess I'm not doing any better than I did this morning."

"Maybe we should talk about something else. The table at the cottage is beautiful, I'd really like to see your workshop. I could hardly believe Suzie when she said you made it."

Talking about his passion, his woodworking, relaxed him. He found himself rambling on about wood grains and finishes, about tables and chairs and cedar chests.

By the time they finished eating he found he'd inadvertently monopolized the conversation. He'd spent over two hours talking to Katelyn and still knew next to nothing about her.

"I'd like to see you again," he said, once he stopped the jeep in front of the cottage.

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“I don’t understand it, but I’d like to see you again, too. I usually don’t do things like this, but I’m on vacation. Maybe tomorrow I can walk up the beach and find your workshop.”

He nodded. “I’d like that. Can you come for coffee?”

“I think it could be arranged.”

Seth got out of the jeep and went around to the other side to open her door. Her hand in his sent silent shock waves through his body. Without hesitation, he pulled her into his arms. When he kissed her, she relaxed, returning his tentative kiss with one of her own. She wasn’t overly bold in her actions either. It seemed as though she wanted him to hold her. He knew instinctively she needed to be kissed. Her actions made him want more than he knew he was entitled to.

“I had a wonderful evening, Seth. Thank you for everything. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

After one more kiss, she went into the cottage, leaving him with unanswered questions and unfulfilled desires.

* * * *

“Well?” Suzie questioned once Katelyn closed the door.

“Well, what?”

“Stop it, Katie. Did you have a good time?”

Katelyn nodded. “I had a great time. Unfortunately, I don’t know very much about him. We talked all evening and I only know about his woodworking. I guess we were both nervous.”

“Seth nervous? I doubt it. So, are you going to see him again?”

“Yes, tomorrow, if I can find his place. We’re going to have coffee together.”

Katelyn stretched and faked a yawn. “Guess I’ll be going to bed.”

“You can’t go to bed. You haven’t told me anything.”

“I’ve told you everything there is to tell. Night, Suzie.”

“Good night,” Suzie threw a couch pillow in Katelyn’s direction, but she didn’t look back

Once in her bedroom, Katelyn opened the doors to the balcony. Above her, the stars twinkled brightly. Looking up at them, she wondered if Seth were watching the same stars from around the point.

Thoughts of Seth unexpectedly brought warmth to her body, and a pleasant memory. His hands weren’t soft, the way Martin’s were. They were the hands of a man familiar with hard work.

She thought about the way he described his woodworking. He talked about it the way another man would talk about his lover. Remembering his kiss, she wrapped her arms around herself in an attempt to etch the

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memory permanently in her mind. Ken's kisses were rough and demanding, Martin's almost sterile. Neither compared to what she experienced tonight. It seemed as though Seth wanted to lead her down a different road, one of mystery and excitement.

Am I ready for something like this? Can I allow him to touch my emotions so deeply?

For a moment, she dwelled on the feelings Seth awakened in her body, they overshadowed the protests of her mind.

Katelyn's experience with Ken pushed her into a protective shell, made her afraid to allow a member of the opposite sex to touch her emotional center. Martin told her she didn't need physical love as much as she needed emotional support. These past few weeks, the papers she found in her father's desk caused her to doubt even who she was.

She stepped back into the room and confronted her reflection in the mirror. The same Katelyn Devereaux she saw every morning stared back at her. Although the image looked familiar, she wondered who she would have been if her parents hadn't paid ten thousand dollars for the privilege of raising her as their own.

Seth will show you how to be a woman again, Suzie's voice echoed in her mind.

The mirror showed the soft curves of a woman. What it didn't show were the warm feelings this stranger had awakened within her.

CHAPTER 3

Coffee brewed in the pot Seth kept in the workshop. He inhaled deeply, enjoying the aroma of the gourmet blend he'd chosen.

He hardly slept last night, unable to get Katelyn out of his mind. Love at first sight, a silly notion, but he'd spent a lot of last night considering it. *It doesn't happen, attraction maybe, but not love. Dear Lord, I'm beginning to sound like the women at school who read those sappy romance novels.*

As he worked on the piece he planned to finish today, he allowed his mind to wander to kissing Katelyn last night. The memory warmed him inside and to his surprise he hardened at the very thought of her. *What's the harm in a summer affair? Once she goes back to Denver, it will be over and I'll have a great memory of her.*

He looked up and saw Katelyn coming down the beach. She looked exactly the way he thought an artist should look. A long gauzy skirt in a bright print swirled around her ankles and she wore a red blouse knotted at the waist, over a white tank top. To complete the outfit, a large hat with a scarf of the same print as the skirt rested on her head.

"Do I have the right place?" she called.

Seth quickly shot up from his workbench and went to greet her. "You certainly have. I wondered if you'd actually come."

Katelyn giggled. "Don't know why you'd think such a thing. I said I'd come and I even brought along some muffins. Do you have coffee ready?"

"It's been ready for the past ten minutes and since you've brought muffins that's all the better. How do I rate? You're beautiful and you cook."

"Oh, no, I don't. I found a bakery in a little town down the road. Do you know they open at seven in the morning?"

"Yes, I actually stop there on my way to school. You wouldn't by any chance be a morning person, would you?"

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“Guilty as charged. You must be a lark, too. I hope you like chocolate chip muffins, they’re irresistible.”

Once inside the workshop, she brushed aside the sawdust from the workbench and placed the bakery bag in the cleared spot. Seth watched the way she carefully opened the bag. For a fleeting moment he thought about the first time he tasted chocolate chip muffins. Genean brought them to his dorm room on a Saturday morning. There was one for each of them as well as one for Brad. The memory that brought her name to mind and thoughts of what they had shared in college brought back fond memories of the girl he once thought he loved.

He cursed himself for allowing the old memory to invade his thoughts. He shook his head and returned his attention to Katelyn.

“Do I smell flavored coffee?” she asked, giving him a valid reason to abandon his unwanted thoughts.

“Yes, it’s called Death By Chocolate, to be exact. It’s sold at a little shop in town. I picked up the habit of drinking the stuff while in college. Do you like it?”

“I adore gourmet coffee. It’s funny I started drinking flavored coffees in college, too. Seems we have a lot in common.”

Seth watched as she poured the dark liquid into the two clean mugs he’d set on the bench. “I take it you don’t use cream or sugar,” she said, when she handed him his cup.

“Sorry, I didn’t get any out. I can go in the house and get some if you need it.”

“You don’t have to get any for me, I drink mine black.”

Seth accepted the steaming mug, then picked up a muffin and split it in half. He watched intently as Katelyn sipped her coffee and nibbled on her muffin. As she did so, she ran her hand over the highly polished table he’d been working on the past week.

“It’s beautiful. Your talent and craftsmanship is some of the best I’ve ever seen. Suzie says you’re a teacher. Are you as passionate about your career as you are about woodworking?”

“I do enjoy the kids and seeing them grasp a new concept is as rewarding as when I see a piece of wood become a work of art. Of course, teaching pays the bills and keeps food on my table.”

“You can’t be serious. Do you know what this would sell for in Denver?”

Seth nodded. “You see, I love teaching and I love doing this too. If I did it to support myself, it would become work.” He’d voiced the same

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opinion often, especially to his parents, and wondered if he actually meant it.

“Good for you. I made the mistake of letting my art rule my life. I love it, but rarely sketch anything for my own pleasure.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, puzzled by her statement.

“Like I told you last night, my dad founded the Devereaux Agency. When I showed an interest in art, he encouraged me. Now I own the agency, but with my new status, I’m trying to decide just how hard I want to work, especially since I don’t have to.”

The look on her face made Seth wonder if she meant to reveal so much about herself. He’d gotten the same impression last night at dinner. Why was she so open when her expression told him she regretted the words as soon as she spoke them?

“What about brothers and sisters?” he asked, hoping to lighten the tone of their conversation. He wanted to know more about her. Hell, he wanted to know everything about her.

“I’m an only child. I inherited everything when my folks were killed in a plane crash nine months ago.” She wiped the back of her hand across her eyes. “I’m sorry, I still have a hard time talking about losing my folks. I don’t even know why I brought it up. Do you mind if we change the subject?”

Seth shook his head. He wanted no part in talking about something that obviously upset her. He suddenly realized he could easily fall in love with Katelyn. She was one of the most exciting women he’d ever met. He smiled at the thought that had just crossed his mind. He didn’t know her, not really. Maybe exciting wasn’t the right word for what he was experiencing. Perhaps it was because she was different from the women he had dated in the past. Only Genean could be compared to her.

* * * *

Katelyn chewed thoughtfully on her muffin. Other than to Suzie, she’d never said a word about her recent distaste for her job. *Why, did I say so much to this man? What kind of spell did he cast on me, anyway?*

“So, who is Genean?” she asked. The name still puzzled her, but the reason for her bewilderment escaped her. Other than Randy Mallard, she knew no one in Wisconsin. It wasn’t as though the name Genean was a popular one. If she heard it before she would have remembered. It had to be the name Karsten she knew, but how? She had no acquaintances by that name back home. Perhaps she heard it in passing on TV.

“Someone I knew in college. She’s married to a friend of mine, Brad Karsten,” he replied.

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His tone told her she caught him off guard. Genean Karsten had to be more than a casual acquaintance.

“Why do you ask?”

“Yesterday you mistook me for her. I just wondered why. Of course, I’m certain if you got the two of us together we wouldn’t look a thing alike.”

“I guess you’re right. So, how long are you and Suzie staying here?”

“Somehow she talked me into two weeks of rest. Of course, I’m planning to visit some clients in Green Bay, but don’t you dare breathe a word of it to Suzie.”

“Sounds like Suzie’s playing mother hen. Just how do you plan to get to Green Bay without her knowing about it? Do you have any idea where it is or how long it takes to get there?”

“I haven’t figured it out yet, but I will. This is a good account. I can’t be in the same state and not see them. Besides, it will make my accountant happy to think she can write this vacation off as a business expense.”

As soon as she realized she was staring into his incredible deep blue eyes. They were the kind of eyes that she could easily find her self lost in. To break the sensations that seemed to be overtaking her, she looked down at her muffin and then to the table that he was working on. It wouldn’t do for him to think that she was too interested in him.

“I have friends in Green Bay. I wouldn’t mind visiting them. Would you go up with me tomorrow?”

She looked up again by Seth’s offer. Did he want something from her? “Oh, I didn’t mean...”

“I know you didn’t, but I certainly couldn’t turn you loose in a strange state. I wouldn’t have offered if I hadn’t wanted to do it. Just tell Suzie I’m taking you sightseeing.”

She smiled at him and said “Then I accept your offer.”

“Good. Now let me show you around the workshop.”

He took her hand and her heart jolted at his touch making her wish that he would take her in his arms the way he did last night. With an almost alien feeling, she wanted him to make love to her.

She shook her head, realizing how foolish her thoughts sounded. She was supposed to decide about Martin’s marriage proposal. He had played the perfect gentleman, telling her he would honor her by not having sex with her until the wedding. He knew about the only man she’d ever been with and he understood her misgivings since Ken’s betrayal.

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She knew nothing about Seth Miller and yet, she could visualize herself in bed with him.

“I’m fairly familiar with Green Bay. What’s the name of your clients?”

Seth’s question caught her off guard and banished the unwanted thoughts from her mind.

“It’s Mallard’s. Guess it’s the reason why I got so mad at you yesterday when you scared away my duck. I wanted him for their new ad.” She couldn’t help but notice the surprised expression on Seth’s face.

“If I scared away your model maybe you want more time to finish your presentation.”

“There’s no need. He came back and I finished my project yesterday afternoon.”

“You’re a hard lady to understand. For someone who is trying to decide how much she wants to work, you certainly aren’t doing much relaxing. Why not take some time for yourself?”

“I’m a bit rusty on this relaxing thing.” She laughed then looked at him quizzically saying, “In light of this conversation, does your offer still stand or are you planning to tattle on me to Suzie?”

“Scout’s honor, I won’t say a word to Suzie. As a matter of fact, I’m rather looking forward to spending an entire day with you.”

As though Seth read her earlier thoughts, he took her in his arms and covered her mouth with his and she sank into his kiss. If his hand wandered to her breasts, she knew she wouldn’t protest.

Suddenly, Seth pulled back. “I don’t know what came over me. “You must have cast some spell on me because I couldn’t resist you.” He continued to hold her at arm’s length, as though studying her every feature.

“Hey, I’ve been accusing you of the same thing. I certainly don’t let men hold my hand on the first date, to say nothing of allowing them to kiss me. I don’t understand this.”

Seth silenced her with another kiss. Somewhere, from within the house, she heard a clock chime. She tried to ignore it, to lose herself in the pleasure of his kisses, but she couldn’t.

He moved his lips from her and she asked, “What time is it?”

“Noon, I guess. Can I fix you some lunch?”

“I’d like to say yes, but I have to meet Suzie and her mother in town at one. I should have left long before this because if I’m late, Mrs. Branch will think I’m as bad as Suzie.”

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Seth laughed heartily. “It doesn’t sound like Suzie has changed much over the years. I certainly wouldn’t want you picking up any of her bad habits. I won’t keep you any longer, even though I want to. I’ll pick you up at seven-thirty tomorrow morning.”

He kissed her lightly on the lips one last time. Turning from him she rushed down the beach, then turned to wave. Seeing him leaning against the doorway of the workshop made her anxious for tomorrow to come.

* * * *

Seth watched until Katelyn rounded the point and disappeared from sight. If she was a witch, he’d never seen a more beautiful one. He hardly knew her and yet she intrigued him, excited him in a way no woman, not even Genean, had excited him before.

He turned back to the workshop and noticed the two mugs, now both empty. He picked up the one with the lipstick around the rim and tried to calm the nagging thoughts at the back of his mind. In no way did he want Katelyn to resemble Genean, but she did. He needed to call Brad and warn him about tomorrow. By taking her to Green Bay to meet with Brad and Randy unannounced, he could be setting them up for an unpleasant shock. If they noticed the resemblance to Genean, they might jump to unnecessary conclusions. As far as he was concerned they were only his friends and her clients, nothing more. He certainly didn’t want anything to happen to change that status. It was bad enough he let his imagination run away with him when he first saw her.

When he finished his lunch, he placed a call to Brad.

“Seth?” Brad answered, making his name sound like a question. “Just what is going on? You never call me in the middle of the day. Is anything wrong? Has something happened to your folks?”

“Rest assured nothing is wrong and my folks are fine. I’ve got something to tell you, but I think you’d better get Randy in on this call.”

“Randy? What are you talking about? I don’t understand you at all.”

“I’m sure you don’t, but I need to talk to both of you.”

Seth waited for Brad to set up the conference call. Randy Mallard and his sister, Genean, owned Mallard’s. When Brad and Genean got married, Brad became a full partner.

“Hi, Seth,” Randy greeted him. “Brad says you need to talk to both of us. What’s going on?”

“I’m coming up to Green Bay tomorrow.”

“Great!” Brad said. “Maybe we can persuade you to stay at Mallard’s Nest for a few days and do some relaxing. I could use some time away from the office to do some fishing.”

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“Let me finish. I’m not coming up alone. I’m bringing you a visitor.”

“Oh yeah?” Randy asked, his words ringing with questions.

“I met a woman yesterday. She has a strong resemblance to Genean, but that’s as far as it goes. I mean they’re as different as day and night.”

“Different? How?” Randy questioned.

Seth closed his eyes as he envisioned Katelyn. “She has long hair and I think it’s darker than Genean’s. As for her eyes, they’re brown like Genean’s, but they have gold flecks in them. Of course, you know how dependent Genean is, but this woman is self-sufficient, she can’t possibly be...”

“Slow down, Seth,” Brad said. “Do you think she’s Genean’s twin sister?”

“No. Listen. I’m trying to prepare you. I mean, she asked me to bring her to Green Bay to meet with her clients, how the hell was I supposed to know she meant you?”

“What are you talking about?” both men on the other end of the line asked in unison.

What am I trying to tell them? “I just don’t want you jumping to any conclusions about her. I mean there’s only a slight resemblance, but with you looking for Genean’s twin and all, you might think...”

“Genean and her sister aren’t identical twins, they’re fraternal,” Brad said, interrupting him once again.

Seth felt his heart sink. If they weren’t identical, Katelyn could very well be Genean’s missing sister.

“Are you all through ranting? Just where did you find this woman and who is she?” Randy asked.

“She’s a house guest at my neighbor’s cottage. She’s a friend of their daughter. They met in Colorado.”

“Are you certain?” Brad asked, tentatively.

“Certain about what?”

“About her being Genean’s twin,” Brad said, his tone denoting his exasperation.

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you. She looks a bit like Genean, but she’s certainly not her sister. She just looks...”

“So, what is her name?” Randy asked, cutting him short.

Seth took a deep breath. “Does the name Katelyn Devereaux mean anything to you?” He knew the question was redundant. Of course, her name meant something to them. Hadn’t she said they were a big account for her agency? Seth was beginning to wish he hadn’t placed this call,

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hadn't planted questions in their minds. Maybe he only imagined the resemblance to Genean. Maybe they wouldn't have ever noticed it if he kept his mouth shut.

"Of course, it does," Randy answered. "She's the new owner of our advertising agency in Denver. I got a card from her last week saying she'd be in Wisconsin for two weeks and she planned to visit here. What does she have to do with anything, Seth?"

"She's the woman I'm bringing up to see you tomorrow."

Randy began to laugh. "Thanks for the warning, Seth, but I think you've gone off the deep end on this one. She's Katelyn Devereaux, for god's sake. I've worked with her for a long time. I appreciate your warning, but I doubt we'll see much of a resemblance tomorrow. It should be interesting. We've never actually met Katelyn, since we do all of our business with the agency by phone."

Seth breathed a sigh of relief. "I hope you're right, because the last thing in the world I want is for Katelyn to be Genean's twin sister. He didn't want to share her with anyone else, especially since he intended to get to know her much better. I only called to let you know I'm bringing her to Green Bay tomorrow and to warn you about the resemblance."

A strange silence on the other end of the line made Seth uneasy.

"Thanks for your concern," Brad said.

"Sure, any time. I just want to know one thing. I mentioned the name of Karsten yesterday, but she didn't recognize it. If you guys work so closely with her, why didn't she put two and two together?"

"We work on a first name basis. She knows Randy's last name because of the company. As for mine, I don't know if I've ever mentioned it. Besides, you have to remember, I'm just the accountant here. She probably doesn't even see the checks we send. If that's the case, my last name wouldn't ring any bells with her."

"The more I think about it," Randy interjected, "the more I think maybe you could be right."

"Right about what? I only called you to tell you she looks a bit like Genean. I didn't call to tell you I'd found your sister."

"Look Seth, Katelyn's father approached me after Grandpa's death. He and Grandpa worked together for years. It all makes sense, though. I've always had a feeling Grandpa knew who adopted our sister. Perhaps it was old man Devereaux. If that's the case, he could have known all along, who her birth parents were. When he called to offer his condolences, he told me he wanted his daughter to handle our account. Maybe he hoped she'd find us and he wouldn't have to tell her."

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“And maybe he gave her your account because you were as new in your business as she was in hers. She’s not your sister, Randy. As a matter of fact, I don’t know why I called you in the first place. Forget we ever had this conversation. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He hung up the phone. Regret about making the call ate at him. If Katelyn and Genean were twins, it could explain his feelings. If they formed a strong bond, where would it leave him? On the other hand, if Katelyn weren’t related to Genean, how would he react when she returned to Denver? It wasn’t his style to worry about the future. He hardly knew this woman, so why were all of the questions invading his mind?

CHAPTER 4

Katelyn changed clothes three times before deciding what to wear to Green Bay. As she did, she tried to remember everything her father told her about Mallard's. He had told her it was the perfect account for her to cut her teeth on.

It wasn't hard to hear her father's voice within the confines of her mind. *"I met Bob Mallard in the early seventies. He established Mallard's in 1946, just after the war, but he never did any advertising. I talked him into a local campaign. When he died, he left everything to his grandson, Randy Mallard. Since then Randy has taken on his brother-in-law, Brad Karsten..."*

The name Karsten echoed in her mind, causing Katelyn to cease her musings. Two days ago, Seth mistook her for Genean Karsten. Could the mysterious Genean possibly be related to the same Brad she'd done business with for so long?

"I thought I'd stop by and see if you're ready for Seth," Suzie said, as she stepped into the room.

"Almost," Katelyn replied, as she turned to face her friend.

"So where is Seth taking you?"

"I don't know."

"I think you do. You aren't fooling me. No one dresses like that to go sightseeing in Wisconsin."

Katelyn looked back into the mirror, assessing her pale pink suit with its hot pink lace inset. Even though it had shorts, she realized it looked more professional than causal.

"You're going to Mallard's, aren't you?" Suzie continued, without giving Katelyn a chance to answer.

"Yes, I am. I couldn't be this close and not see them."

"Does Jack know you're doing this? I mean he is your lawyer and he did tell you that this was to be a restful vacation, not a working one."

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“Of course, he doesn’t. If he did, he would have insisted I go anywhere but here. He has this strange obsession about me working so much.”

“Can’t understand why,” Suzie teased. “At least you’ll be with Seth. Maybe he’ll take you sightseeing after you finish at Mallard’s. Jeff says Seth really likes you.”

“When did he say that?” Katelyn asked, as she applied her mascara.

“Last night, when you insisted on helping Mom with the dishes. He said Seth called him and asked a kigillion questions about you.”

“So, what did Jeff tell him? I certainly hope he was kind.”

Suzie laughed. “Of course. If you hadn’t met Seth, Jeff was planning to ask you out while you’re here.”

“At whose request? I can just hear you now. Please take out my poor friend. She works too hard and...”

“And nothing. Jeff was perfectly serious.”

“Then why didn’t he ask me last night? I’m certain you didn’t mention anything about Martin when you were singing my praises.”

“You know better than that. He didn’t ask you because of Seth. We’ve all been friends, forever. Seth’s sister, Michelle, and I always thought I’d marry Seth and she’d marry Jeff. Of course, it didn’t work out like we planned.”

“What does all of this have to do with Jeff not asking me out?”

“When we were kids, we made this silly pact. If someone dated a certain person, no one else could horn in. With Michelle and me, it doesn’t matter anymore. She’s happily married and living with her husband and two kids in Kansas City. It’s different for Seth and Jeff. They still live in the same area and compete for the same single women.”

Katelyn couldn’t help but laugh at how childish the entire situation sounded. “It isn’t like Seth and I are ‘dating’, and I certainly wouldn’t do anything to harm Martin. He told me to have a good time and meet a lot of people. I asked him what would happen if I should go out with someone of the opposite sex and he said he would understand. You make Seth and Jeff sound more like little kids than grown men.”

“What do you expect? They are the males of the species. From what I see, they never grow up. Good grief, look at the time. Mom wants to go rummaging and she insisted we get an early start. Have a good time. I’ll see you later.”

Katelyn turned back to the mirror to assess her appearance one last time. With the sound of Suzie hurrying down the stairs, Katelyn again thought about Brad Karsten. Why hadn’t she remembered Brad’s last

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name was Karsten? When Seth realized whom she wanted to see, why hadn't he told her the reason the name of Karsten might sound familiar to her?

A knock at the door pushed thoughts of Brad and Genean Karsten from her mind. One more look in the mirror assured her she made the right choice.

"I'll be right down," she called. Shoving her feet into pink pumps, she went downstairs, picked up her oversized purse from the kitchen table and hurried out the door.

Seth let out a low wolf whistle. "Do you ever wear anything that doesn't make you look fantastic?"

"All the time. I just left my work clothes back in Denver. I thought I should look my best to impress the locals."

"You certainly have impressed this local. With you looking this good, I'm glad I left the jeep at home."

Katelyn looked past Seth to the late model, cranberry colored Stratus parked in the driveway.

"Yours?" she questioned, unable to perceive him driving anything but the jeep.

"Mine. I love my jeep, but I do need something more practical, especially during the winter."

"Suzie tells me you're a math teacher. I thought all teachers were underpaid and overworked."

"We are. The woodworking paid for this. During the tourist season, I can make enough to pay for my toys."

"Tourists? Here?" She looked around the quiet lake, unable to imagine it swarming with tourists like the mountains back home in the winter.

"No, at Wisconsin Dells. I have a friend who runs a small shop there. She markets my pieces and gets top prices for them. It's one place you have to see to believe. Maybe I'll take you there next week."

Seth held open the passenger's door and Katelyn seated herself after stashing her bag in the back seat.

"I must have sounded like a real idiot yesterday, trying to tell you how much you could make from your work." The last thing she wanted was for Seth to think of her as a fool.

Seth's laughter filled the car. "A bit, but I didn't mind. You must know it's nice to be appreciated for what you do especially when it's something you love doing. Speaking of doing what you enjoy, we never did talk about the sketch you did of me."

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She almost forgot the pencil sketch and her promise to do a better one. “Did you like it?”

Seth nodded. “You said you’d like to do a proper picture. I’ve been wondering if you can work from a photograph?”

“Why should I work from a photo, when you’re right here?” she questioned, finding his proposal a bit strange.

“Because I don’t want a picture of just me. I’d like to pay you to do a family portrait. It’s hard to find anything to give my parents for Christmas. I thought it might be the perfect gift. It would be worth five maybe even six hundred dollars to be able to give them something special. You see, with them living in Phoenix, we don’t get together as often as we’d like. I think it would be great to give them a family portrait.”

From above the visor, Seth produced a color photograph depicting a woman about Suzie’s age, an older couple who bore a striking resemblance to both Seth and the younger woman in the picture.

After studying the picture, Katelyn thought for a moment. “I’ve never considered doing a family portrait, but it might be fun. I can do the preliminary sketch before I go home if you like it, I can expand on it when I get back to my studio.”

The thought of Christmas saddened her. Last year she hadn’t even realized the season came until it was over. She had still been in a state of shock over the loss of her parents.

For a moment, she sat quietly contemplating the holiday she wished she could forget. At the time, Martin hadn’t pushed her into any of the usual preparations, but she knew he wouldn’t understand this year.

“Did I say something wrong?” Seth asked. “You certainly got quiet all of a sudden.”

“No. It’s just—well, I don’t like to think about the holidays.”

“Why not?”

“Because last year, at Thanksgiving, my parents were killed in the accident. It took a long time to recover their bodies and Christmas was a bitter reminder of what I lost. I couldn’t bring myself to put up a tree or to celebrate the day with friends. It was always such a special time for my parents, the thought of celebrating without them, without any family, sickened me.”

“You must have some family. Aren’t there aunts and uncles or cousins you could have been with?”

“No. You see, my mother was an only child, like me, and my father only had one brother who died in World War II. They were in their early forties when they adopted me.” As soon as the words passed her lips, she

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regretted them. Other than Uncle Jack and Suzie, she'd said nothing to anyone. Not even to Martin. Why did she feel comfortable enough with Seth to say something now?

"Adopted?" Seth questioned, an abnormal note of shock in his voice.

Katelyn cringed. She hadn't meant to say anything. It had just slipped out, easily without thought. Being on vacation suddenly took on a new meaning. In one slip of the tongue, she had let down her guard. Perhaps her mind had taken this vacation thing too seriously. "Did I say adopted?"

"You certainly did. How old were you when the proceedings took place?"

"Look, I don't even know why I mentioned it in the first place. Other than Dad's lawyer, Jack Townsend, and Suzie, no one knows and I want to keep it that way."

"You sound like you're ashamed of being adopted. Why?"

"Wouldn't you be? My mother must have really hated me to give me away so easily. Like I told the adoption agency when they tried to put my family in touch with me, my parents were Max and Eileen Devereaux. I certainly don't need my birth family coming back into my life because they know who or what I am."

"Maybe they have no idea who you are. Have you ever stopped to consider that?"

"I honestly haven't thought of much else these past few weeks. I came to Wisconsin to try to put it out of my mind for a few days. I've had several calls from the agency. According to them, my birth family won't know who I am unless I say they can know. I'm just not certain if I can believe them."

"I guess I can see why you'd be hesitant, but you must have expected something like this could happen."

Katelyn wondered if she could possibly make Seth understand her position. "Maybe I should have, but I didn't. You see, my folks never told me I'd been adopted, to say nothing of agreeing to let the agency contact me after my twenty-fifth birthday."

"They never told you? How did you find out?"

She wanted to end the conversation and yet the words overpowered her. Without control, they tumbled out before she could stop them.

"After my folks died, I put their house on the market. When I finally sold it, I had to sort out their things. One of the pieces I kept for myself was my dad's desk. When I started going through the contents, I found

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my adoption papers. He paid ten thousand dollars to adopt me. I loved my dad dearly, but he bought me, the way he'd buy a house or a car. I also found a letter Daddy wrote to me right after the adoption."

"What did it say?"

Without thinking, she continued. Surprisingly, a sense of relief began to flood her being. "In the letter, he asked me not to judge them too harshly. My mother wasn't well and dad didn't know how she'd react if I rebelled and tried to find my birth family. My mother had suffered several miscarriages. Two years before they got me, she carried a baby to term, only he was stillborn. She hemorrhaged so badly they did a hysterectomy before she even left the hospital. I didn't know about that either, until I found the papers. After I finished reading them, I called Dad's lawyer. He told me Mom had a nervous breakdown when the doctors told her what they had to do. I was her last chance to have a child."

"You've had a lot to digest in the past weeks. I can certainly understand your reluctance, but aren't you at all curious about your birth family?"

"I've been trying not to think about it. I don't even know why I told you as much as I did," she said, punctuating her statement with a nervous laugh. "Let's change the subject. This morning I was thinking about going to Mallards and the name Brad Karsten crossed my mind. You said Genean's last name was Karsten. Is Brad her brother?"

"No. He's her husband. Brad and I were roommates in college."

"What a strange coincidence. You mistake me for Genean Karsten and her husband turns out to be accountant and part owner of my biggest client. I suppose you're going to tell me you know Randy Mallard as well."

"As a matter of fact, I do. Randy is Genean's brother. The two of them inherited Mallard's. Of course, that's another very long story."

"If I read this map correctly, we have about another hour before we get to Green Bay. It should give us time for a couple of long stories." She leaned back in the seat to get more comfortable in anticipation of Seth telling her about the people she would soon be meeting. It would be good to hear about a family who didn't belong to her.

"Joe Mallard, Randy and Genean's dad, died in a car accident three months before Genean was born. Their mom, Virginia died within hours of giving birth. Grandpa Mallard wanted to take both of the kids, but he knew he was too old to handle an active four-year-old and a new baby. Instead, he financially helped Virginia's sister, Elizabeth and her husband, to raise them."

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Katelyn could feel a lump in her throat. She had more in common with Randy and Genean than her working relationship with Randy, and her uncanny resemblance to Genean. They, like her, had been adopted. The difference, of course, was they had always known and remained surrounded by their birth family.

“Don’t look so sad,” Seth’s voice cut into her thoughts.

“I’m not sad, just thinking about how much I have in common with them. I suppose Brad got involved after they got married.”

“Not exactly. Randy hired Brad right after we graduated, five years ago. Brad and Genean hadn’t started dating yet. Once he got involved with the company, they seemed to find each other and a year later they were married. Genean was still in her senior year at the University. Adam Seth came along about five months after graduation.”

“Adam Seth?” Katelyn questioned.

“He’s my godson.”

“You must be really close to them.”

“I am. For a while I thought I would be the one who ended up with Genean.”

“Then you aren’t bitter about Brad marrying your girl?”

“At first I didn’t want to accept losing her, but when I realized how much they loved each other, I knew it was for the best.” Seth knew it still hurt to talk about the life he had planned with Genean, but he couldn’t allow Katelyn to see how much it bothered him.

He paused for a moment and she wondered if he wanted her to think about what he had just said.

From the windshield of the car she noticed Lake Winnebago coming into view. The sight of this magnificent body of water took her breath away. She had noticed it on the map and wondered when they would actually see it.

“You were saying?” she prompted when he didn’t begin speaking again.

“Oh yes, I guess I got a bit distracted. Brad is so much in love with Genean she practically glows when he looks at her. He loves Mallard’s as much as he does Genean. Between Brad and Randy, they’ve brought the business out of the 1940’s. They’ve computerized and started advertising, nationwide. In the past five years their profits have tripled. Genean does most of the correspondence at home.”

Katelyn contemplated all that Seth had told her. “What are they like? Randy and Brad, I mean.”

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“You know you just asked a loaded question. How do you describe your best friends? I think you should form your own opinions.”

“You’re right, of course. I’d hate to have to describe Suzie.”

“Speaking of Suzie. Where did the two of you meet?”

“In college. We were roommates, sort of like you and Brad. I have to admit, it surprised me when she didn’t come back to Wisconsin after graduation. I’m certainly glad she didn’t, though. I don’t know what I would do without her.”

Katelyn fell silent, as the countryside changed repeatedly from small towns to rich farmland and back again.

“This is beautiful country. It makes me wish I didn’t have to go back to the lake tonight. I’d like to be able to explore it a bit.”

“Why do you have to go back to the lake?”

Seth’s question surprised her. “I’m not at all prepared to do anything else.”

“More the shame. I’d like to act as your tour guide. I’d enjoy showing you Door County.”

“Door County? What’s that?”

Seth laughed at what she knew he thought of as her ignorance.

“The peninsula of land jutting out into the bay, Green Bay. See, it’s right here on the map.” Without taking his eyes from the road, he pointed out the peninsula on the map. “It’s almost like entering a different country. I think you’d like it.”

“You make it sound like I’ve already agreed to accompany you. Even if I did say yes, this is summer. We’d probably never be able to get rooms.”

For a moment, she could envision herself spending the night in a private hide-a-way with Seth. *What am I thinking about? I have an understanding, of sorts, with Martin. Can I be seriously considering spending the night with a stranger?*

A smile crossed her lips at the thought of what people would think. Proper Katelyn Devereaux, owner of the Devereaux Advertising Agency, possibly the future wife of Martin Collier, would never do anything like this. Of course, Martin would never need to know. Just remembering the effect of Seth’s kisses on her, convinced her she wouldn’t regret doing something spontaneous, having one last fling before she decided what do about the future Martin promised her.

“Somehow I get the idea you might be persuaded to say yes if I asked you,” Seth teased.

“It might be fun. I’m on vacation. Why not?”

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“Do you make a practice of allowing men to talk you into spending a couple of days with them?”

Katelyn avoided his eyes and studied the map. “No. Let’s face it right now you know more about me than almost anyone else in the world. I certainly never meant to tell you the things I did. What more damage can I do to my self-esteem by saying yes to you? My friends have always been my friends because of my dad’s money. When I met Suzie, she had no idea that I had money and she liked me anyway. I guess real friend don’t care rather you’re rich or poor. It was the same with you. I doubt that you had any idea of who or what I was. You and Suzie are the only people who have ever liked me because I’m me.” *I thought that was the way I wanted it, now I’m not so certain anymore. What has come over me?*

“Well, Katelyn Devereaux, I can honestly say I don’t care about your father’s money or the Devereaux Agency. If you agree to spend a couple of days with me and let me show you my part of the world, I promise to be a perfect gentleman. Nothing will happen unless you want it. So, what do you say?”

Say? He wants me to say something? Haven’t I said enough already? “I guess I’d have to say yes. But, of course, that’s out of the question, since I don’t have anything to wear. I didn’t even bring along a toothbrush. Besides, where would we ever find a place to stay, where you can be a perfect gentleman, on such short notice?”

“I have my connections. You see I happen to know of a lovely cottage, called Mallard’s Nest, just outside of Egg Harbour. I don’t think I’ll have any problem persuading the owners to let us use it for a couple of days. As for the necessities of life, believe it or not, we do have shopping malls here in the sticks.”

Katelyn mulled the name in her mind. “Mallard’s Nest. It wouldn’t happen to belong to Randy Mallard, would it?”

“It belongs to both of the families. You know, another part of their inheritance.”

“It sounds pretty coincidental to me. Are you sure you didn’t plan this whole thing?”

“What if I did? Would you take back your acceptance of my invitation?”

“I don’t think so. Isn’t this what a vacation is all about? I mean, doing something different. Maybe you’ll be able to do what Suzie can’t.”

“What’s that?”

“Teach me how to relax and enjoy myself.”

CHAPTER 5

Seth parked the car in Mallard's parking lot. He smiled as he watched Katelyn dig in her purse for lipstick, then reapply it using the vanity mirror on the visor.

The dress shorts of her suit had ridden up a bit to show him more of her shapely leg, driving him crazy in the process. At this point, he wished he hadn't promised to be a gentleman when she agreed to go to Door County with him.

"Are you ready to meet your clients, Miss Devereaux?" he asked. As he did, he looked at the building that housed Mallard's. It was, at one time, a big warehouse. Now the warehouse was still on the first floor, but the second floor housed the corporate offices and the third floor was vacant. It had been Brad who suggested painting the building, last year. Since he hadn't actually been to the offices sooner, he hadn't seen the finished product until now. Now a huge mural of a lake loaded with Mallard ducks stood in front of him. He thought it was a bit much but his friends told him it made them unique.

"I guess so. You know, this is the first face-to-face meeting I've ever had. Dad always made the personal visits. I'm not too proud to say I'm scared."

"You don't look scared. You'll do just fine. Remember, Randy and Brad aren't the enemy. They need you. I'm certain you'll knock 'em dead. By the way, what do you think of the paint job?" Seth reached across the seat and squeezed her hand reassuringly.

"It doesn't come as a surprise. They sent me a picture of it right after it was finished. I think it's great. At least people have something other than a drab building to look at."

Seth couldn't help but chuckle at her description of what he considered over the top. Before he could go around to open her door, Katelyn got out of the car. "You certainly don't make it easy to be a gentleman," he said, closing the car door.

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“Sorry. I’m not used to men playing Sir Walter Raleigh. I’ve always been very self-sufficient.”

“You may be self-sufficient, but I bet you would never have found this place alone.”

“Oh, I think I would have found it. We women know something you men don’t. We use our handy dandy little maps, get into town and then stop at the first gas station and ask directions. Men drive around until they’re hopelessly lost. Your gender just hasn’t figured it out yet.”

Seth shook his head. As much as he didn’t want to admit it, she even sounded like Genean. Sometimes he pitied Brad, having to put up with her constant teasing.

“I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt. Maybe you would have found it, but let me enjoy playing tour guide a while longer. Shall we go in?”

Terri Mallard sat at the reception desk. If Katelyn’s appearance shocked her, she gave no indication. For the first time since Katelyn admitted to being adopted, Seth relaxed. His imagination had run away with him. If Terri saw no resemblance, he knew he’d jumped to the wrong conclusion.

“Terri Mallard, this is Katelyn Devereaux.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Terri said holding out her hand.

Seth tensed when he noticed the questions in Terri’s green eyes and shook his head silently.

“Randy and Brad are expecting you. It’s the first office up the stairs on your right,” Terri said, once Katelyn accepted her gesture of greeting.

“Expecting me?”

“Didn’t you tell her you called up here yesterday?” Terri asked.

“I guess that little piece of information slipped my mind.” Seth was relieved when he saw her smile at his confession.

“Are you coming in with me?” she asked.

“No. You’ll be talking business, boring stuff. I’m certain Randy will be taking you to lunch. I’ll find out where and meet you later because I have some errands to run.”

Seth watched Katelyn walk down the hall and knock on Randy’s door, before entering his office. Seth wished he could attend the meeting, but he knew his presence would only aggravate an explosive situation. His jumping to conclusions would naturally spark questions about Katelyn’s identity.

“The resemblance is uncanny,” Terri said.

Terry’s words certainly weren’t the ones he wanted to hear. He’d tried to warn them. Didn’t they listen to anything he had said? “That’s all

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it is, a resemblance. I'm positive my first impression was wrong. I should have never called yesterday."

"Of course you should have. To let her walk in there without them having the slightest idea of who she might be would be unfair to all of them."

"She's not Randy's sister." *Or is she? Hell, she even looks a bit like Randy. I wish I could make the resemblance go away. I don't want her to be anything more than a beautiful stranger who could easily seduce me—oops where did that come from?*

"Isn't she? I can see it as easily as you did. It's in her eyes, the shape of her face, even the way she carries herself. We'll never find the words to thank you enough for bringing her to us."

"There are no words, Terri, because she isn't Randy and Genean's long lost sister. Subject closed."

"Whatever you say, but don't be surprised when Randy and Genean reopen it."

Terri's statement disturbed him more than he wanted to admit. Did she see the resemblance or had the seed he planted yesterday taken root and grown? If Katelyn were indeed a Mallard, could he afford to cultivate a relationship with her? He'd been hurt once. Getting hurt a second time, by another member of this family, did not rank high on his list of priorities.

"We're planning on you meeting us for lunch," Terri said.

"Sounds good to me. Just tell me when and where."

"O'Connor's. Randy has reservations for twelve-thirty."

"Will you be there?"

"This is one luncheon I wouldn't miss for anything in the world. It's a shame Genean can't come with us. Of course, as Randy said, she'd be a dead give away. It's best she's home with Adam today."

"I know what you mean. This whole thing has affected Genean. Seeing Katelyn, even though I'm convinced she isn't whom you all want her to be, would really set her off. I'm going out to see her now. I'll meet you at O'Connor's."

Seth made his way back to the car thinking about Terri's concerns. The Mallards and the Karstens were his best friends. More than anything else, he wanted them to find Genean's twin sister. He just didn't want it to be Katelyn.

The car still smelled of her perfume. He pulled from the lot and headed out of town, enjoying the lingering scent of her.

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At last Seth turned onto the country road leading to the Karsten farmette. In the front yard, he saw Adam playing. Seth couldn't help but think about how different life in the country was from that of people who lived in town. With the yard fenced in, Genean and Brad had no qualms about letting their son play in the yard unsupervised.

As soon as Seth unlocked the gate and stepped onto the lawn, Adam came running toward him.

"Uncle Seth! Uncle Seth! What did you bring me?"

Seth swung the child into his arms. "What did I *bring* you?"

Before Adam could answer, Genean appeared on the porch. "Adam Seth Karsten, you know better. You don't ask company questions like that."

Seth smiled at her concerns. "It's all right, Genean, he can ask me anything any time he wants."

"Did you bring me a pony?" Adam whispered.

Seth looked from the tow headed child to the woman who stood on the porch. It was evident that Adam resembled Brad who still sported a shock of blonde hair, rather than Genean, whose features were much darker. Within her gold-flecked brown eyes, he could easily see the resemblance to Katelyn.

Seth couldn't help but laugh, not only at the situation he had put them all in, but also at Adam's question. "No. You're a little too small for a pony, but I did bring you a horse."

Putting the child back down on the ground, Seth opened the trunk and produced a finely carved horse, one he'd been working on since Christmas.

Adam squealed with delight, and then hugged him tightly before running off to play.

Seth got to his feet and saw Genean standing in front of him. The hurt in her eyes pained him. This whole thing about her search for her twin sister, one who didn't want to be found, had taken a toll on her. He took her in his arms and kissed her cheek. For a moment, he wondered if she could kindle the same feelings as Katelyn, but to his surprise, he realized he held Genean, his friend, his best friend's wife. She might look a bit like Katelyn, but she represented an entirely different person. The woman he wanted in his arms came from Denver and had no ties to the woman who stood in front of him.

"I expected to see you at the office this morning."

"Under the circumstances, Brad and Randy convinced me it was best if I stayed home with Adam."

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

“There are no circumstances. Katelyn Devereaux is...”

“Is my twin sister. Didn’t Randy tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“After he talked to you yesterday, he called the agency in Chicago. They confirmed your suspicions.”

Seth felt as though his world had suddenly collapsed. “Damn. This is the last thing I wanted. Why couldn’t she be related to someone else, anyone else?” *I know they’re right. I knew it the first time I saw her. I just hope I’m not too transparent about my feelings for her.*

“I’m sorry, Seth. Don’t tell me you have feelings for her.”

Damn, I keep forgetting that Genean can usually read my mind. It’s my eyes they’re too expressive. I’ve always known that, and so has Genean. “All right, I won’t tell you. I asked her to spend a few days with me at your cottage and she agreed.”

Genean’s expression became one of concern. “You didn’t ask her because of what happened between the two of us, did you?”

Seth looked away from Genean. In the past he had upfront with all of them about the fact that Genean has been his girl first. How many times had he told them that she’d spoiled him for any other woman on the planet?

“Of course not. I asked her because she’s Katelyn, not because she has a slight resemblance to you. I got over being in love with you a long time ago. As I look back on it, I know we didn’t have the kind of love you and Brad share. I want to get to know her and I can’t do that at the lake with her friend Suzie hanging around.”

“You aren’t fooling me, Seth Miller. You asked her because you think you’re very taken with her. I want you to be careful about showing your feelings too quickly, but I couldn’t be happier. I’ve been worried about you. If Katelyn will make you happy, maybe it will be easier for her to accept us as her family. From everything we’ve been told, she is anything but receptive to the idea of finding us.”

“I know she isn’t. On the way here, she told me she only found out about being adopted after her parents were killed and then it was accidental.”

“Do you mean to tell me they never had the decency to tell her she was adopted? How cruel.”

It was all he could do to keep from laughing at her stance. She stood her hands planted firmly on her hips and tears ready to spill from her dark eyes.

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“I agree, but maybe knowing about her will make her inability to come to grips with the situation easier for you to understand.”

“Of course, it does. You said she found out by accident. What did you mean?”

“Her parents were killed in a plane crash last year. She didn’t have the heart to go through their personal files until recently. When she did, she found her adoption papers. She’d just made the discovery when the agency contacted her. It’s one of the reasons she came here. She said she needed to get away from everything; the calls from the agency, the decision she knew she needed to make about her family, the whole ball of wax.”

“How do you know all of this?”

“On the way up here, she let it slip she’d been adopted. It’s funny I think it relieved her to tell someone, even if the ‘someone’ was me. I guess I’m a safe outlet.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I don’t ask questions or expect answers. She thinks once she goes back to Denver, she’ll never see me again. Maybe she’s right. I don’t like to think about it.” He looked out the window to watch Adam for a moment before continuing. He certainly didn’t like the idea of never seeing Katelyn again after this vacation. “If I do, I have to face the fact I could lose her. I lost you, but not really. I can see you whenever I want. I know you’re happy. If she goes back to Colorado, I won’t know if she’s happy or sad. I’ll never see her again.”

Genean put her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. “I’m sorry,” she said, her voice barely louder than a whisper.

“Sorry about what?” he questioned, pulling away from her embrace.

“About all of this craziness. If it weren’t for me, you would see her only as a woman you want to get to know. This business of birth family and twin sisters confuses everything.”

* * * *

Sketches and proposals littered the top of Randy Mallard’s desk. Katelyn sighed, a bit relieved at how well the meeting had gone. The only problem she could see was the tension she felt in the air. She’d never noticed it during their phone conversations. She’s always been able to easily joke and tease with both Randy and Brad. More than anything else, she wanted to talk to her dad, wanted to ask him if this tension was normal? *Is this because Mallard’s was Dad’s account before it was mine? Wouldn’t I have had this much trouble with some of the new accounts I’ve taken on since his death?*

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She watched as Randy glanced at the clock that hung over the doorway. “Look at the time, it’s almost noon. We should be wrapping this up. I’m sorry, I haven’t even offered you a second cup of coffee.”

Katelyn picked up her cup and took a drink of the now cold liquid. “It doesn’t matter much. I’m so used to cold coffee, I keep a pitcher of iced coffee in the refrigerator during the summer months.”

“Now you sound like...” Brad stopped, mid-sentence.

“Like what?” she questioned.

“Oh, nothing. It’s just my wife likes iced coffee. She says it’s easier to keep it in the refrigerator than to let it go cold in her cup.”

“It seems like we have a lot in common. It’s a shame she couldn’t be here today I’d have liked to meet her.”

A strange look passed Brad’s face and Randy again commented about getting her coffee. The tension in the room felt thick and heavy.

Brad continued the conversation. “I know she’d like to meet you as well. Of course, with an active three year old, she has her hands full.”

Katelyn sighed, thinking of the dreams she experienced for so long. First they were of a baby and then a little boy. She hadn’t thought about the dreams in ages and thinking of them now felt strange...what could this mean?

The phone rang, jarring thoughts of dreams and little boys from her mind.

“I know, honey. I just checked the time,” Randy said, before hanging up the phone. Turning back to Katelyn, he continued. “Terri reminded me we’re to meet Seth at O’Connor’s at twelve-thirty.”

Brad began to laugh. “Knowing Seth, he’ll be late. I’m certain he’s over at my house. At least Genean and Adam always like it when he stops by.”

The mention of Genean and Seth together caused her to again wonder about Seth’s feelings for the woman who was married to the man he called his best friend. *Is he still carrying a torch for her? If so, why did he just ask me to spend a couple of days with him in Door County?*

Get real, Katelyn, her inner voice cautioned, Martin told you to sort out your feelings. He also said that if you had a fling on your vacation he would understand.

The problem is, I don’t understand. I’ve never done anything like this before. Oh well, maybe its time to do something out of character for a change.

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“If Genean doesn’t talk Seth’s ear off, Adam will drag him all over the house to show him toys.” Brad’s voice returned her thought to the present.

“He seems fond of your son,” Katelyn said, trying to push thoughts of Seth and Genean together from her mind.

“They’re good buddies. Of course, Seth spoils Adam terribly. If I don’t miss my guess, Seth had a present in the car for him. He never comes empty handed.”

“I didn’t see anything, but of course, it could have been in the trunk. If you gentlemen will excuse me, I think I need to use the ladies room, before we leave.”

She picked up her papers, left Randy’s office and entered the rest room across the hall. The break would give her the opportunity to be alone for a few moments to sort out her thoughts.

Alone in the room, she braced her hands on the edge of the sink. Carefully, she studied her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes, that’s where she’d seen Randy’s eyes before. His were the same color as her own, right down to the gold flecks, and his hair was the same as hers as well. *It’s a strange coincidence. It doesn’t mean a thing, but it could explain his uneasiness. Maybe the similarities made him ill at ease.*

She removed the barrettes from her hair and allowed it to fall loosely around her shoulders. After brushing the strands back into place, she adjusted the scrunchi that held it in place.

She glanced down at her shorts and wondered if she’d dressed too causally. Perhaps her attire had prompted the tension. She shook her head deciding neither her clothes, nor her eyes had anything to do with this morning’s experience.

Exiting the restroom, she hesitated to walk back into the wall of tension. She was relieved to see that Randy and Brad waited for her at Terri’s desk. “I hope these guys didn’t bore you. All they ever want to talk about is business. Of course, I guess that’s why you came all the way up here.”

Katelyn laughed, relieved for the break in the tension Terri’s comment brought. “I guess you’re right, business is what I came here to talk about.”

“Show Terri the sketch of the mallard, the one we decided to use,” Brad prompted.

Katelyn reached into her bag and pulled out the portfolio, opening it to the sketch they’d chosen earlier.

“Oh, a mallard in flight. Isn’t he magnificent? I’ve always admired your work, but you’ve outdone yourself.”

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Katelyn smiled at the compliment. Before she could voice her thanks, Terri continued. "If we don't get going, Seth will think we stood him up."

Again Brad began to laugh, making Katelyn feel uncomfortable talking about Seth and Genean in the same breath. "Like I told Katelyn don't be surprised if he's late. I'm certain my wife and son have kept him occupied."

"Yes, and if I know Seth, he's enjoyed every minute of it," Terri replied.

Katelyn followed them out to the parking lot. She couldn't believe how easily the mention of Seth made her stomach fill with butterflies.

"We'll take my van. If we had to depend on Randy and Terri to get us there, we'd have to take two vehicles. Randy drives a regular cab pick-up truck and Terri has a two passenger sports car."

"Don't you have children?" Katelyn asked Terri, once they were seated behind the two men.

"Not yet. I don't think we'll have kids, unless we adopt."

The word adopt hit Katelyn like a slap in the face. "Just a word of advice, if you do adopt, don't keep it a secret."

At Katelyn's statement, Randy turned to face her. "Oh, really, you sound like you know what you're talking about. Any reason for your knowledge?"

His words told her she'd said too much. She would have to smooth things over, somehow. "A friend of mine just found out she'd been adopted. Her folks never told her. She's very upset about the whole thing and she doesn't want her family to find her."

Randy smiled at the comment. "We'll keep your advice in mind. What is your friend planning to do?"

"I don't know. Making a decision is pretty hard, I guess. She told me part of her wants to find her birth family and part of her doesn't. Only time will tell."

"I guess that's the way it is with everything," Brad remarked.

She couldn't help but wonder why her ability to talk about adoption came so easily, not once, but twice in one day. Did it mean she was finally coming to grips with the whole thing? Could she possibly want her birth family to find her?

CHAPTER 6

The parking lot at O'Connor's was already jammed for the noon hour rush when Seth parked his car. He looked around in the hopes of seeing a familiar vehicle. Not recognizing any of the cars, he opened his door and headed toward the restaurant. A check of his watch told him he arrived a few minutes early. He wanted to be here before this, but there were too many things to talk to Genean about.

Before pocketing his keys, he focused on the blue, color-coded key on the ring. It promised to be an interesting few days. This key, to the cottage at Egg Harbour, could easily open the door to unknown delights. Shoving the keys into his pants pocket, he entered the restaurant.

"One for luncheon, Sir?" the hostess greeted him.

"No. Randy Mallard has reservations. I'm to meet him here."

"Of course, a party of five. Won't you follow me?"

She led him a corner table in the solarium, overlooking the bay. He chose a seat facing the door because he wanted to see them when they entered the room.

He didn't have a long wait. Regretfully, both Randy and Brad looked strained as they entered. He hoped Katelyn hadn't noticed. Of course, he knew she wouldn't, not knowing either of them the way he did.

All of them looked strained and considering her morning meeting with Randy, it wasn't surprising. Randy lived and breathed business where Mallard's was concerned.

"We certainly didn't expect to find you here already," Brad greeted him.

Seth got to his feet and shook hands with both Randy and Brad. "Since when have I ever been known to be late, especially when I have the promise of a free lunch?" Seth asked, hoping to lighten the tension between his friends.

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“Never, but I know my family. I figured Adam would still be dragging you all over the house showing you his toys and Genean would be talking your ear off.”

“I kept Adam occupied. As for Genean, we had our time to talk.”

Randy looked surprised at Seth’s comment “So, how did you manage to occupy my nephew?”

“Easy. You know how horse crazy he is. I carved him a horse. The first thing he asked me was if I’d brought him a pony, as if I could get a pony in the trunk of my car. I think he liked it. At least he kept busy playing with it all morning.”

Brad shook his head at Seth’s statement. “You shouldn’t let him play with something so special.”

“Come on, Brad, don’t you like to play with your new toys when you get them?”

Randy laughed. “Yeah, like your new van. You like to play with it, don’t you?”

“You’re driving a van?” Seth questioned, wrinkling his nose.

“Well, you know how it is when you’ve got a kid. There’s lots of stuff to carry. I usually leave it for Genean to use, but I thought we could use the extra room today.”

Seth couldn’t resist the opportunity to tease his friend. “No Brad, I don’t know how it is. You’re the only one of us who is lucky enough to have experience with kids.” Everyone laughed at this comment.

“You should see Katelyn’s ideas, Seth. They’re brilliant. Did she show them to you on the way up?”

Seth knew Randy was trying to draw Katelyn into the conversation. “No, we talked about other things. The lovely Miss Devereaux has agreed to allow me to show her Door County and Genean gave me the keys to Mallard’s Nest.” He reached into his pocket and dangled his keys to emphasize his point.

A blush crept into Katelyn’s face, but Seth knew he’d been the only one to see it.

Randy nodded his agreement. “I couldn’t think of a better tour guide. Seth knows this area like the back of his hand.”

“You do?” Katelyn asked.

Seth heard the apprehension in her voice and hoped he could put her at ease. “I did my student teaching in Sturgeon Bay. If you remember from the map, it’s located in the middle of the peninsula.”

“I guess I have to take you at your word when you say you know the area. We’ll see if you deserve an ‘A’ for your efforts.”

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“I do hope you enjoy Mallard’s Nest. It belonged to Genean’s grandparents. You see I got quite a deal when we got married. I became involved in a business I love, found a great friend, inherited half a cottage, and ended up with a beautiful wife. What more could I ask for?” Seth knew Brad was trying to lighten the conversation.

Katelyn smiled. “You must love her very much. I think I’m jealous of her.”

“Everyone loves Genean. Isn’t that right, Seth?” Brad asked.

“You’re right. You can’t help but love her,” Seth commented.

He watched Katelyn’s expression and wondered if he saw a hint of the jealousy in her eyes. “Of course, I’m certain after this morning’s meeting Katelyn realizes there’s nothing about the Mallard family to dislike.”

Randy held up his hands. “I think it’s time to get off this subject. As much as I enjoy hearing you say good things about me, I’m afraid we’re boring Katelyn.”

The restaurant had always been one of Seth’s favorites. The solarium was filled with plants of every size, shape and color and the brightly colored table clothes only added to the beauty of the room. From the windows that lined the three outside walls, the view of the city as well as the bay that separated the peninsula from the mainland was exquisite.

“I’m definitely not bored. I’ve always known how easy it is to like both of you. As I told Seth this morning, this is the first account I’ve visited face to face. The prospect of this meeting has been a bit intimidating to me. It’s hard to get a handle on people when you only deal with them over the phone and not able to look them in the eye.” She smiled gently then offered, “I’m sorry to ramble, but you were my first account. I doubt if you even knew I was still in college when we started working together. I’ve always enjoyed our relationship. Of all the accounts I handle, yours is the one I wanted to visit first.”

“Can I ask you why?” Randy questioned.

“Because we’ve always maintained a good working relationship. We’ve been able to joke and tease each other. We’ve worked well together these past years. I wanted to get to know you. How strange that the one account I wanted to see in Wisconsin turned out to be friends with Seth. Like Seth said, I probably wouldn’t have found the office by myself.”

“Whatever happened to the little secret women have?” Seth questioned.

“It got you going, didn’t it?” Katelyn teased.

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“Okay, you two, what’s going on here? Did we miss something in the translation?” Randy asked.

“Not much,” Seth replied, leaning back in his chair but not taking his eyes off Katelyn’s face.

“I can see you’re not going to tell us anything, Seth. What is this about the two of you going to Mallard’s Nest, Katelyn?” Terri questioned.

“Seth promised to show me the countryside, allow me to relax and to be a gentleman.”

Randy began to smile. “Watch out for the gentleman, Katelyn, he has a tendency to bite.”

“Oh really, does he bite hard?” Katelyn questioned, her expression turning teasing.

Randy laughed. “I don’t know. How intent are you on being a gentleman, Seth?”

“Very. I’m always a gentleman when the lady is special.” He watched as Katelyn lowered her head in an attempt to hide the smile, which crossed her lips.

Once their orders were taken, Terri suggested she and Katelyn use the ladies room. Seth watched them leave the solarium before he said anything. “So, how did your meeting go this morning?”

Randy was the one to reply. “It was the hardest damn meeting I’ve ever sat through. Do you have any idea how hard it was not to blurt out the truth?”

Seth nodded. “Genean told me about your call to the adoption agency. What are you planning to do now?” He’d asked the question out of courtesy. He certainly hadn’t asked it because he wanted to know the answer.

“Before we do anything, we’ll all have to sit down and talk it out.”

“Who is the *all* you’re referring to?”

“The six of us, Brad and Genean, you and Katelyn, and Terri and me.”

“Don’t include me in this. It’s not my problem,” Seth said, surprised by Randy’s statement.

Brad looked Seth straight in the eye. “Isn’t it? Don’t forget who we are. You’re falling in love with Katelyn. It’s nothing you can hide. Sooner or later she’ll have to meet Genean. When she does, who knows what will happen?”

* * * *

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Katelyn stood in front of the sink and let the warm water flow over her hands.

“Am I crazy? Are Randy and Brad unusually uptight today?” she asked, as Terri joined her at the sink.

“A little maybe. It’s always hard meeting someone who you’ve only talked to by phone. I think they’re a little nervous.”

“If anyone has the right to be nervous, it’s me. Basically, you’re my employers. If my work isn’t perfect, you don’t have to buy it.”

“I guess that’s so. I hadn’t thought about it that way. So, how do you like Seth?”

“Whoa, what a change of subject.” Katelyn paused a moment to contemplate how she should answer Terri’s question. “He confuses me. Did he love Genean?”

The look on Terri’s face told Katelyn the question came as a surprise. “Yes, he did. I think he had every intention of asking her to marry him.”

“Does he still love her?” She realized she had no right to ask such a question and wished she could take back the words.

“Like we said at the table, everyone loves Genean. It’s hard not to love her. By the time she married Brad, Seth said he’d accepted it. He even came to realize she didn’t love him. It’s taken four years, but I think he’s finally ready to open up.”

Katelyn stood mutely, trying to think of a proper response. Before she could speak, Terri continued. “How do you feel about him?”

“I think he must be some sort of a male witch. I usually don’t let people get close and I never open up to strangers. With him, it seems so natural. Maybe I should be asking you what he’s like?”

“Maybe you should. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen him as at ease as he is with you. I met him when he dated Genean and again at her wedding. Since then he’s become almost a permanent fixture. As far as we’re concerned, he’s like another brother.”

Katelyn reapplied her lipstick and thought of the twists and turns the day had taken. In a couple of hours, she would be alone with Seth, a stranger, a man she hardly knew, yet wanted to know. The excitement she felt was a completely new experience. She could never remember feeling this way with Martin. Even when she fancied herself in love with Ken, she didn’t get goose pimples at the mention of his name.

“We’d better get back to the table before they bring our food and the guys devour it,” Terri said.

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The look in Terri's blue eyes told Katelyn that something was definitely wrong between her and the people at Mallards, but she didn't know what. Considering Terri had just denied them being dissatisfied with her work, it had to be more. As soon as the look appeared it was gone, replaced by one of 'I've got a secret and you don't know it.' Unable to decipher its meaning, Katelyn nodded and dropped her lipstick back into her purse.

The men were deep in conversation as they approached, but when they saw her, they became strangely quiet.

"Did you miss us?" Terri asked.

"You know we always miss you," Randy said, squeezing her hand.

Katelyn focused on Randy. The interest he had in her showed in his eyes. Again the feeling of everyone knowing something she didn't filled her with apprehension about the success of the meeting. She wished she could read the thoughts behind his brown eyes.

"How long will you be in Wisconsin, Katelyn?" Brad asked, between bites of his hamburger.

"My ticket to Denver is for a week from Sunday, then it's back to work." For the first time, in too long, she realized she didn't want to go back to work. She wanted to be a tourist forever.

"Will we be seeing you again?" Randy questioned.

The direction the conversation had taken puzzled her. Why would Randy Mallard be interested in her itinerary? "I doubt it. It's quite a drive to get here from the lake. I think this is a once in a lifetime trip."

"Well, there are some of us who have to get back to work," Randy said as he got up from the table. "You two kids have fun and don't do anything I wouldn't do."

The others followed his lead, leaving Katelyn and Seth alone at the table.

"So, how did your meeting go?" he asked.

His question took her completely by surprise. "Didn't Randy and Brad fill you in?"

"They said it went well, but I want to know what your impression of it was."

"Well...I considered it strange. I told you how I enjoyed working with them because of our relaxed relationship, only today it wasn't there."

"What do you mean?"

She thought for a moment before replying. "Everyone seemed very tense. I wish I could talk to my dad. Maybe he'd be able to explain it. He

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used to visit clients all the time. Maybe it's always this way when you first meet. I'm just so confused." She put her hands against her temples and rubbed, hoping to relieve the tension from this morning's meeting. "How could we have enjoyed such a good working relationship these past years and have things be so cold in person? Something is wrong, terribly wrong."

"What makes you say such a thing?"

"I don't know. It could be they're considering a different agency and didn't want to hurt my feelings. I did just pop in out of the blue."

"I can assure you, they aren't considering another agency, so put those thoughts out of your mind. I promise, for the rest of the week, I won't allow you to even think about business."

Since Randy took the check, Katelyn insisted on leaving the tip. She reached into her purse and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill.

"Don't you think you're over tipping?" Seth asked. His surprise showed in his eyes, sounded in his voice.

"Not really. I worked as a waitress in high school and know how rough it can be. Whenever I can, I like to make up for the jerks who stiff the girls because their steak is too tough."

"You're generous to a fault. Just don't cut yourself short on cash before we get to the mall."

Katelyn couldn't help but laugh. She hadn't considered spending money, at least not paper money. Armed with her magic plastic cards, she could buy herself everything she needed and not have to worry about finances until she got home.

"Since you mentioned it, I do hope you're prepared to help me shop. This is your part of the country. I have no idea what the well dressed tourist in Door County wears."

"Don't worry. I'll help you pick out exactly what you need."

At the mall, she purposely ignored the small, expensive shops. When she did wander into them, she went immediately to the sale racks.

"Are you always so frugal?" Seth quipped, as he assessed her purchases.

"I guess I am. I hate spending money on clothes, but I know they're a necessary evil. I just make sure I get the most for my money. I rarely pay full price for anything."

A short time later Katelyn looked at the pile of packages she'd amassed, as she put her purchases down on the counter of the final shop. The sales clerk picked up the sweatshirt with the colorful mallard duck

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on the front and Seth began to laugh. “Are you obsessed with the Mallards?”

Katelyn looked at him intently. She honestly hadn’t made the connection. “Not really. I’m actually obsessed with the duck at the lake. Of course, maybe my meeting at Mallard’s was on my mind when I chose it. The duck is a great study and Mallard’s is my biggest account. I guess the two of them are connected.”

Taking mental inventory, she realized she hadn’t purchased a swimming suit. “Do you swim up here?” she asked.

“Of course, we do.”

“Well then, I guess I should look at the suits on the rack over there. It’s the one thing I forgot to buy.”

After finishing their shopping, Katelyn relaxed in the car. As they pulled out of the parking lot, she wondered if she should say anything about Seth’s visit to Genean. Had it been as innocent as he said earlier? She knew she had no right to be jealous, but all the same, she wondered.

Why, am I jealous of two people I don’t really know?

CHAPTER 7

Katelyn stared at the beautiful house at the end of the driveway. The entire building was made of stone that had been, more than likely, found in the area. Big windows seemed to be everywhere. The one that caught her attention ran from the ground to the roofline of the two-story house. She wondered if its position was across from a staircase. If so, it would be a wonderful way to greet each morning. Toward the lakeside of the house she could see the railing of what must be a deck.

Tucked away at the bottom of a steep hill, overlooking the bay, it reminded her more of the secluded mansion where Seth took her to dinner, than a summer home. “They call this a cottage? I’d hate to see what they consider a house.”

Seth laughed at her comment. “As I heard it, Grandpa Mallard inherited it from his father. It seems the old man built it for a wealthy man from Chicago, who allowed him to use it on occasion. When the man died suddenly, without any heirs, he left it to the Mallard family. It’s said to be one of the first summer cottages in Egg Harbour.”

Katelyn got out of the car and assessed the wooded area behind the house. “This is a beautiful setting. I feel like I’m out in the wilderness, a million miles from civilization.”

“It’s hardly a million miles, but it is secluded. As you can see, the bay is right out there.” Seth pointed to the beautiful body of water in front of them and Katelyn looked in the direction he indicated. “The property runs at an angle and the woods add to the privacy.”

Katelyn stood, awestruck, as Seth opened the door to the cottage. When she entered the house, she smiled at the highly polished hardwood floor and the stone fireplace, which dominated the living room. As she had thought the two-story window was at the base of the staircase. Turning to take in the entire room, she saw the large floor to ceiling windows that looked out onto the deck and the bay beyond it. The view rivaled the mountains she could see from her studio and made the room virtually

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come alive. For a fleeting moment, she had the feeling she'd been here before, as though she knew the room intimately. Shaking off the feeling, she returned her attention to Seth.

"This is your room," he said, opening the door to one of the bedrooms.

She'd hardly noticed that Seth had taken her to the south side of the house.

A large four-poster bed dominated the room, accented by a massive dresser and chest of drawers, as well as a large freestanding full-length mirror. On the wall beside the dresser, a fireplace, which matched the one in the living room, added to the coziness of the bedroom and made Katelyn wish the weather would turn cold enough to warrant a fire. Large windows faced out onto the wooded area.

At the edge of the lawn, Katelyn saw a deer intently looking at the house. "Isn't he beautiful," she whispered.

"You act like you've never seen wildlife before. Don't you have animals in Colorado?"

"Of course, we do. As a matter of fact, I see deer all the time from my studio."

Seth raised his eyebrows questioningly. "Studio? You mentioned a studio earlier, but I guess I didn't pay much attention or I thought it was in your office. You make it sound like it's in the country."

"It is. When I graduated from college, I persuaded my dad to buy me a barn. It was on an abandoned farmstead where the house burned. I had it refurbished into a combination home and studio. I find I can work better there by myself, than I can at the office."

"Here I pictured you living in a luxury penthouse apartment with a staff of household help."

Katelyn smiled. If only Seth could see where and how she lived. No one cleaned her house or cooked her meals. She'd had enough of big houses and servants as a child. With her mother's frail health, they were necessary.

Seth took her in his arms. "Why are you smiling? Do you really live in a barn?"

"Yes, I do. As for the servants, I'm uncomfortable enough with Daddy's lawyer and my financial advisors breathing down my neck. I grew up with a maid, cook, nanny and butler reporting my every move to Daddy. I didn't like it then, I like it less now. I've become very self sufficient, thank you."

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“So I see. I guess I can leave you to get settled. I promised Genean I’d check on the dock as soon as we got here. We’ve had several bad storms lately.”

“While you’re checking things over, I’m going to call Suzie. I don’t want her worrying when I don’t come home tonight.”

To her surprise, Seth gave her a long and loving kiss, promising more than she was ready to accept, before he went out to the dock, leaving her hungry for more.

When she heard the door close, she took her cell phone from her purse and placed a call to Suzie.

“Hi, Suz, it’s me.”

“Katie? Did Seth take you sightseeing after all? I expected you home soon.”

“You might say so. I’m not coming back to the lake for a couple of days. Seth has promised to show me Door County.”

“You’re spending two days with him in Door County? Have you lost your mind?”

“Why would you ask such a thing? I happen to like Seth. Okay maybe I like him a little more than I should, but I’m on vacation.”

“As I recall, Seth used to regard himself as somewhat of a ladies man. Be careful.”

“You know me, I’m always careful. Besides, Seth promised to be a gentleman.”

“Unfortunately, I do know you. As far as I’m concerned, you’ve been too careful since the fiasco with Ken. What’s it been, two years since you’ve gone away with a man?”

“Two and a half, but who’s counting?”

“No one, especially not Martin. Hasn’t it seemed strange to you, he’s never taken you away for the weekend?”

“He respects my need for my space. He understands what I went through with Ken and he’s willing to wait.”

“If you ask me, he’s too willing to wait. Something tells me he’s not as interested in a wife as he is in what you have to offer.”

“Drop the subject, Suz. Martin and I understand each other fully. He’s not pushing me for a physical relationship, because he knows I’m not ready. He’s not some teenager with his hormones going wild. He’s a mature man.”

“He’s mature all right. He could be your father. For that matter, I’ve often wondered if he’s gay.”

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“Gay!” Katelyn shrieked. “Where did you ever get an idea like that?”

“Well he hasn’t made love to you, or has he?”

“You know he hasn’t. He says he respects me too much to cheapen our relationship with premarital sex. Of course, I’ve made it quite clear that’s the way I want it.”

“Okay, okay, on that note, I’ll get off my soapbox. Have a great time. Just remember, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“At least you’ve given me a lot of latitude.”

“So, how did it go at Mallard’s?”

Katelyn reviewed the events of the morning. She knew she should share her feelings about the meeting with Suzie, but for some reason, she couldn’t. She didn’t understand them herself. How could she even begin to explain things to her best friend?

“It went well. They like my sketches. I’m going to use the mallard in flight in their new campaign. The rest of my vacation will be restful, I promise.”

Katelyn hung up the phone and started taking the clothes she purchased from their bags and removing the price tags.

“So did Suzie warn you about me?”

Katelyn jumped. She hadn’t heard Seth come back into the house. She turned, her new swimsuit in her hands.

“She said to be careful, because you’re a ladies man. It seems I heard something along those same lines at lunch today. Am I really safe with you, or are you the Big Bad Wolf in disguise?”

“If you remember, I promised to be a gentleman. Let’s change the subject. How about a swim? The dock is in great shape, the bay is cold but inviting, and I’m certain the suit you’re holding will look better on you than dangling from your hands. You do swim, don’t you?”

“I’ll have you know I worked as a life guard at a resort just outside of Denver one summer.”

“With all of Daddy’s money, why did you work, not only as a life-guard but as a waitress?”

“Those were my rebellious years. You know, show Daddy I can make it on my own. Well, are we going swimming or what?”

“Swimming,” Seth replied, winking broadly before leaving the room.

She closed the door and started to change. Outside, the deer returned and seemed to be watching her intently. She stopped undressing and stared back into his eyes, wishing they belonged to Seth.

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“What are you doing, Katelyn Devereaux? Martin hasn’t even seen you without your clothes. How can you even think of such a thing in regard to Seth?” As soon as she spoke the words she realized she had put voice to her innermost thought. *I must be losing my mind. Now I’m even talking to myself.*

She closed her eyes, anticipating a bolt of lightning to come out of the blue and strike her dead. *I don’t care, I’m on vacation. I need to relax. So what if I’ve never done anything like this before? Maybe it’s time I did something crazy for a change. When I go back to Denver, I’ll have to think about what I’m going to tell Martin. Maybe I should have a fling before I jump into anything with both feet.*

She looked up to see a doe join the buck, and then disappear into the woods together.

“Are you ready?” Seth called.

“Just about,” she replied, pulling on the suit.

She opened the door and saw the look of approval on Seth’s face. She’d seen him bare-chested and in shorts, but she wasn’t prepared for the tight fitting Speedo swimsuit and the effect it had on her.

“I certainly hope you remember your life saving techniques. I’m looking forward to the mouth-to-mouth part.” To punctuate his statement, Seth pulled her into his arms.

He ran his hand up her bare back, sending tingles of desire all the way to her toes. She didn’t resist when his mouth covered hers. Her body burned at his touch, and screamed for more. A red flag went up in her mind as her inner voice screamed, *GO SLOW! Remember what happened with Ken, what you need to consider concerning Martin.*

Unbidden tears sprang to her eyes, causing Seth to break their embrace, as they spilled down her cheeks and made his cheek wet in the process. He looked at her intently, and reached up to wipe away her tears with his thumb.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“No, I was just thinking of the last time a man kissed me the way you just did.” As soon as the words passed her lips, her mind began to spin. Martin never kissed her like this. His kisses were more like the ones a brother gave his sister or a man gave to his good female friend.

“Not a good experience?”

Katelyn swallowed hard. She brought up the subject by mentioning Ken, if not by name, by insinuation. She couldn’t back away from the subject now. “I guess it wasn’t. We were going to be engaged. Only he wanted my dad’s money more than he wanted me.”

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“How sad. What did you do?”

She began to smile. For the first time in two and a half years, the entire situation seemed funny. “I fired him.”

“You what?” Seth exclaimed. His disbelief at her words was evident in the tone of his voice.

“Plain and simple, I fired him. I told him if he wanted confirmation of my actions, he could go to my father.”

“When you break off a relationship, you break off a relationship. It sounds a bit drastic, but whatever works. What happened to him?”

“I don’t know. He certainly didn’t use me as a reference.”

Seth’s laughter filled the room. “At least you kept your sense of humor about the whole thing. Is there someone special in your life now?”

She shook her head, trying for just a few days to forget about the decision that lay ahead of her in Denver. “Only you.” Hearing herself speak the words surprised her. How could she respond with such an outright lie? Did Seth matter to her or had she only said the words she knew he expected to hear?

He again pulled her to him and kissed her until all thoughts of the man who asked her to be his wife, to say nothing of those about swimming, left her mind. His hands caressed her back and then moved around to her breasts. She moaned with pleasure, then found herself swept into his arms. She didn’t protest, even when he took her into the bedroom she knew he planned to occupy.

He gently put her down on the bed and continued to touch her breasts, to tease her nipples until she moaned with pleasure.

“Do you want me to stop?” he whispered in her ear.

Breathless with excitement, she whispered, “No.”

“Good because I don’t want to ever stop loving you.”

Katelyn stiffened at his use of the word love. She didn’t want anything to do with love. She wanted this to be one last fling before she made her decision about becoming Mrs. Martin Collier.

“Is something wrong?” Seth asked, pulling away from her.

“I’m sorry. I don’t think I’m ready for this.”

“I shouldn’t have pushed you. I became so intoxicated by you, I forgot to be a gentleman.”

“Do you really love me, Seth, or are you saying the words you think I want to hear?” She paused to wait for his answer. When none was forthcoming, she continued. “Are you still in love with Genean?” She held her breath, almost afraid to hear the answers to her questions.

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

“I asked myself the same thing when you agreed to come up here with me. I don’t blame you for having doubts. It was the reason I went to see Genean today. I needed to know if there were any feelings left.”

“Were there?”

“No, Genean isn’t the woman I want. I realized that today. I don’t believe in love at first sight. I’d be lying if I said I did, you fascinate me and I want to get to know you.”

“How do you know you want me? You don’t know me. I don’t know you.” Inside, her heart pleaded with her to set aside her fears and allow Seth to physically if not emotionally love her. In reality, she knew what she was doing was wrong, but she didn’t care. Martin had his time to sow his wild oats, he’d told her as much. Didn’t she deserve the same thing?

“I want to know you. I don’t want to miss learning everything I can about you. If anything more than friendship comes of it, so be it. I just pushed things too quickly. We planned to go swimming. If we wait much longer it will be too late.”

Seth held out his hand and pulled her into a sitting position beside him. He then adjusted the straps of her suit.

Obediently, she followed him out to the bay. She’d expected to see a rocky beach like those they’d seen on the way up. Instead, someone had brought in sand, making the beach enjoyable to use.

The chill of the water caused her to shiver. In contrast, Seth seemed to enjoy the refreshing water and she wondered if it affected him like a cold shower.

After two relaxing hours of playing in the bay, they reluctantly went back to the cottage. Refreshed by a hot shower, Katelyn put on her new white slacks and navy blue blouse, along with a pair of white flats.

Seth assessed her appearance when she came out of the bedroom. “I never thought, I should have insisted you buy the matching jacket for those slacks. It gets chilly up here at night.”

Katelyn assessed his attire. Tight white jeans were topped with a long-sleeved cotton knit sweater.

“It looks like you thought of everything. Did you plan to ask me to spend a few days with you?”

“This wasn’t planned. Whatever Brad and Randy have will fit me. I never think much about clothes when I come here. I know they all keep a decent wardrobe here, so they don’t have to pack when they come. You could have worn any of the things in either Terri or Genean’s closets.”

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

“I saw clothes hanging in my room, but I didn’t give them much thought.”

“I’m afraid you’ll need a sweater. There’s one in my room, I’ll get it for you.”

She waited while he went back into the bedroom and returned with a white sweater.

“Whose sweater is this?” Katelyn asked, when he put it around her shoulders.

“Genean’s, I guess. Why?”

“I have one just like it at the lake and the perfume on it is Georgio Red. It’s the same brand I use. Am I reading too much into this?”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing really. It just seems like Genean and I have a lot in common.”

“Well, if it’s a national brand of perfume, I’m certain a lot of women use it. As for the sweater, don’t you think they’re mass produced and shipped all over the country?”

Katelyn nodded. She wanted to accept his explanation, but she had begun to have some unsettling feelings about Genean Karsten. She couldn’t put her finger on anything concrete, but she knew the two of them would have to meet, eventually.

“So Where are you taking me for dinner?” she asked, anxious to change the subject.

“I thought you might enjoy a fish boil.”

“A fish what?”

“A fish boil. This area is famous for them. It’s nothing I can explain. You have to experience it for yourself.”

It took only a few minutes for them to drive the short way to the restaurant. The highway that ran the entire length of Door County, if she could believe the map she had been studying soon replaced the country lane that led to the cottage.

To Katelyn’s surprise, it turned out to be more like a neighborhood bar with a restaurant attached, than a supper club. The sign on the door read *FISH BOIL IN BACK*.

Once they made their way to the backyard, she was amazed to see several picnic tables on the grassy area. To one side, sat a ticket booth along with two galvanized tubs filled with soda, beer, and wine coolers.

The girl at the booth seemed pleased to see them. “Seth, it’s good to see you, I was beginning to think you wouldn’t be here this summer.”

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

“I probably wouldn’t have been up here now if it hadn’t been that my friend here, wanted to come up. Beth, this is Katelyn Devereaux, she’s visiting from Colorado and I thought it would be fun to show her what a real Door County fish boil was all about.”

“It has been busy, but you know how it is in the summer. So, is it two for supper or are there more coming?”

“Just two. I’ll have a beer. What about you, Katelyn?”

“A beer is fine for me, too.”

Seth pulled two beers out of the icy water, and handed one of them to Katelyn.

“Well, you certainly know what to do, Seth. I hope you enjoy it.”

“You know we will. Do you know how long it will be to boil over?”

“You’ll have to ask Charlie. I tend to lose track.”

“What is ‘boil over’?” Katelyn asked, as they walked away from the booth.

Before Seth could answer, a bell clanged and everyone gathered at the edge of the lawn.

In front of her, Katelyn could see two large cast iron pots of boiling water. She watched as one of the men dipped a coffee can into a large barrel, then went to stand in front of one of the pots.

“Five, four, three, two, one,” the crowd chanted.

“Boil over,” the man shouted before throwing the contents of the coffee can onto the fire.

To Katelyn’s amazement, the fire came to life, sending flames and black smoke high into the evening sky. As soon as the flames died down, two men took a metal pole and lifted a basket, which looked like a colander, out of the pot.

“What did they just do?” she questioned. She knew her eyes must be as big as saucers. She had never seen anyone do such a thing before and it completely amazed her.

“They poured fuel oil on the fire to make the pot boil over. That way they boil off the oil from the fish as well as the starch from the potatoes.”

Katelyn wrinkled her nose. “Boiled fish? I don’t know about this.”

“Don’t pass judgment until you give it a try. Didn’t your mother make you try everything at least once?”

“No, she didn’t. I never had to eat anything I thought I wouldn’t like.”

“Well, you have to tonight. There are no spoiled prima donnas here.”

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Katelyn smiled at his perception of her. If only he knew how much she hated being the only child, being spoiled. There had been times when she wished her parents had been less lenient and more like the parents of her friends.

From the boil over, they made their way inside the building, where people were lining up to get their meal. Instead of fine china, she was given a divided plastic tray and some plastic silverware wrapped in a paper napkin.

A long table stretched the entire length of the building. Behind it, women served the food. Katelyn watched in amazement as two pieces of fish, several boiled potatoes, and a large pearl onion were ladled onto her tray. Over the top of it all, a young girl poured melted butter. Further down the line a man handed her a small plastic container of cole slaw and a piece of cherry pie, along with a slice of dark bread.

“Welcome to Door County,” Seth said, once they found a picnic table that was fairly well secluded. “Be careful, this fish has bones in it. That’s why they give you the bread.”

“Huh?”

“If you swallow a fish bone, the bread will dislodge it.”

Tentatively, Katelyn tasted her fish. To her surprise, it was delicious. “You’re right, I did have to taste it to believe it. How did they ever think of such a thing?”

“It started many years ago, up at Gills Rock. The fishermen would get together on Friday night and boil up the fish, potatoes and onions. Their wives would bring down cherry pie and cole slaw as well as homemade bread. Everyone in the vicinity was welcome. This went on for many years, until one night a reporter happened to be at the dock. He went back and wrote a story about having a free fish boil at Gills Rock. The next weekend there were so many people lined up there wasn’t enough food. After that, it stopped until someone decided to revive it for the tourists. Now it’s blossomed into what we have tonight.”

“That’s a fantastic story. It just goes to show you what happens when something that is a tradition catches on.”

When they finished eating, Seth helped Katelyn to her feet then suggested they walk out to the end of the pier.

Once away from the activities of the restaurant, Katelyn stood in awe of the beautiful sunset. The sky was aglow with the orange blaze of the sun going down and it reflected on the water.

“Red sky at night, sailors delight,” she said.

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

“Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning,” Seth replied, finishing the rhyme. “I didn’t think you would know such a thing, living in the mountains all your life.”

“I probably wouldn’t have known it, but my Nanny came from Boston. She told me a lot about the sea and the sayings equated with ancient predictions of the weather.”

They stood watching the sunset, until the sky turned from pink to black and the moon and stars gave off their light to illuminate the water.

Seth had wanted to build a fire and sit staring into it with Katelyn in his arms. Instead they continued to talk until Katelyn stifled a yawn.

* * * *

“This is a lovely place,” Katelyn said, as Seth pulled back into the driveway of the cottage.

“I know. I’ve always enjoyed coming out here. Tomorrow I’ll take you to Washington Island.”

“Where?”

“You’re so fond of the map in the glove compartment, bring it into the house and I’ll show you.”

The dusk to dawn light illuminated the driveway and sidewalk leading to the house. When they got out of the car, night noises greeted them from the woods.

“What was that?” Katelyn asked, clinging to his arm.

“Some outdoors woman you are. Does an old hootie owl frighten you?”

“I said I see wildlife from my barn. I didn’t say I communed with nature. When I was a kid, my folks sent me off to a day camp. We went hiking and I got lost in the woods. I ended up spending the night alone, scared half out of my wits. Since then, I enjoy seeing the animals from afar. Just don’t ask me to go into the woods.”

Seth smiled at her unfounded fear. Although the woods were dense, they certainly weren’t frightening. In fact, he was considering going for a walk in them before they returned to the lake. Her fears made him rethink his intentions.

Once in the house, he unfolded the map and pointed to the small island at the tip of the slender finger of land jutting out into the bay.

“How do we get over there?” Katelyn asked.

“I booked a tour. We’ll take the ferry at ten-thirty, then meet the Cherry Train Tour, have lunch and do some horseback riding. We might even rent a couple of mopeds, if you’d like. The last ferry back is at five. I thought we could make a day of it.”

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

“You amaze me, Seth Miller. When did you find time to book us a tour?”

“I started planning it when you said you would come up here with me. I made the reservations while I was at Brad and Genean’s yesterday. I enjoy going to the island. I thought you might like it as well.”

“It sounds great, but if we have to be at the ferry at ten-thirty, we’d better get to bed. What time do we have to leave?” To give emphasis to her question, she stretched, then yawned broadly.

“I’d like to be out of here by six. I want to take you to a little place I know in Fish Creek for breakfast. You’re going to love cherry pancakes.”

“Egg Harbour, Fish Creek, is this Katelyn in Wonderland? I can’t believe a place like this actually exists. Who in their right mind names towns after food? Are you sure I didn’t fall down the rabbit hole and you aren’t the Mad Hatter?”

Seth took her in his arms and kissed her tenderly. “Does the Mad Hatter kiss like this?” He again kissed her, only this time, his tongue probed the inside of her mouth doing a delightful dance with her tongue to drive her completely past the point of reason.

When he released her, Katelyn leaned back in his arms. “I’ve never been kissed by the Mad Hatter, but somehow I know he’d never measure up.”

Seth hardened with desire, but he knew he had to go slow. The memory of this afternoon’s encounter flooded his mind. The man who hurt Katelyn made her afraid to open up and somehow, he must penetrate her shell and convince her she deserved to be loved.

“Good night, Katelyn,” he whispered in her ear before kissing her one last time.

He released her, then turned toward the bedroom he had wanted to share with her earlier. As he closed the door, he saw her standing in the living room, confusion showing in her eyes.

“Damn, I want her, why did I ever agree to be a gentleman?”

CHAPTER 8

Birds chattered outside the window as Katelyn awakened, then turned over to check the bedside clock. In the semi-darkness, the digital numbers read four forty-five. Reluctantly, she got of bed and pushed the window open all the way.

Allowing her eyes to focus on the birds perched in the tree outside her window, she watched them for a moment, listening to their morning chatter. “What is it with you guys? Do you have any idea what time it is? People want to sleep until the sun is up.”

The birds chirped back, unconcerned with her comments. Instead of going back to bed, she went into the adjoining bathroom for a quick shower.

She found a hair dryer under the sink cupboard and plugged it in. As it began to blow out warm air, she pointed it at the mirror to clear off the steam. Once her hair dried, it took only a few minutes for her to fashion it into a French braid and put on her make-up.

She went through the clothes she’d purchased, finally deciding on a pair of shorts and a tank top, covered up with the mallard sweatshirt and sweat pants. Seth told her the air would be cold. After the way things cooled off last night, she could see no reason to doubt him.

Seth came out of the bedroom and smiled at her attire. “You look perfect. I thought I’d have to wake you.”

The idea of his slipping into her room and kissing her awake made her smile. “Not up here. There’s a natural alarm clock outside my window. Those have to be the most inconsiderate, noisy birds I’ve ever heard.” Katelyn surprised herself by her relaxed tone. After yesterday, she wondered how she would feel waking up in the same house as Seth. Regret at having slept alone rose within her. She wished they weren’t going sightseeing, wished that... She left the remainder of her wishes drift from her mind, knowing they sounded wanton, even to her.

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

“Sorry, I should have warned you. Besides the birds, how did you sleep?”

“I must have been exhausted. I slept like a rock. Now I’m starving. I hope this restaurant of yours has plenty of food.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll get enough to eat.”

His easy manner helped her to relax, but not for long. Pictures of him touching her exploded in her mind and suddenly she knew she wanted him to set her on fire with his touch.

The early morning drive from Egg Harbour to Fish Creek, along Highway 42, fascinated Katelyn. Growing up in the Colorado Rockies left her unprepared for the seacoast appearance of the peninsula.

“You’re right,” she said as they drove into the village of Fish Creek, this place is like nothing else I’ve ever seen. The Rockies are beautiful, but this is fascinating.”

“I thought you’d like it,” Seth said as he parked in front of a rustic looking building on the main street of town.

Katelyn allowed him to hold her hand as they made their way into the restaurant and then to a table set in front of a massive stone fireplace.

The waitress came over to their table to take their order. From the look on her face, she was obviously pleased to see them. “Why Seth, I certainly didn’t expect to see you up here. Why didn’t you tell us you were coming? Tink will be sorry he missed you. He’s out on the boat. Where are you staying?”

“Down at Mallard’s Nest. If I’d planned this, I would have called you, but it just came up.”

“I should have guessed. You look great Genean. How are Brad and Adam?”

Before Katelyn could answer, Seth came to her rescue. “Margaret Tinkley, this is Katelyn Devereaux. Katelyn’s resemblance to Genean is uncanny, isn’t it? She’s visiting here from Denver and I decided to show her a bit of our part of the world.”

The puzzled expression on the waitress’ face put Katelyn on the defensive.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions,” Margaret said, only Katelyn knew the woman wasn’t sorry, just confused.

Katelyn would have given anything to see this Genean. She couldn’t help wondering why people were constantly mistaking her for this stranger she had yet to meet. “It’s all right. I guess everyone has a double somewhere. Of course, I’m sure if you got the two of us together, we wouldn’t so closely resemble each other.”

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Katelyn couldn't miss the look that passed between Seth and Margaret and wondered what it meant. The woman's bewildered expression made Katelyn begin to question Seth's sincerity. She'd endured about as much coincidence as she could stand for one week. Did he bring her here because of her resemblance to Genean, or because he actually wanted to get to know her better? She couldn't stop her mind from dwelling on her mistrust.

Why shouldn't I be skeptical when first Seth mistook her for Genean, then Randy and Brad acted so out of character. Now even our waitress looked at me as if I've grown two heads since I looked in the mirror this morning?

"What will you be having?" Margaret asked.

"My usual, only for two this time," Seth said, without giving Katelyn an opportunity to look at the menu.

"Just what is the usual?" she questioned, once Margaret poured their coffee and returned to the kitchen.

"Cherry pancakes with cherry syrup, cherry juice, hash browns and bacon."

"How do you know I like cherry pancakes? Maybe I break out in big ugly bumps when I eat them," Katelyn teased. She enjoyed sitting across the table from him, allowing him to order for her. Even her uneasiness over the Genean situation seemed to fade from her mind.

"If you were allergic to cherries, I'm certain you would have told me last night when we had cherry pie at the fish boil."

"Does Genean like cherries?"

"I don't see why it would matter, but yes, she does. Living up here, she has to like cherries. You see there are two cardinal sins if you live in this area. The first is not liking cherries and the second is not watching the Packers."

Katelyn wrinkled her nose. "Guess I wouldn't make it here, at least not on the football end of it. I don't understand the game."

"Have you ever watched one?"

Katelyn nodded. "I accepted an invitation to a house party last fall. We ended up watching the Denver Broncos play somebody. After five minutes, I opted to stay in the kitchen and wash the dishes."

"I think you need to give the game a second chance and watch it with someone who can explain it to you."

Margaret arrived with platters piled high with the delicious looking and smelling food, ending their conversation.

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Katelyn took a bite of her pancakes and savored the sweet cherries. “No wonder you like these so much, they’re excellent.”

The look in Seth’s eyes indicated relief at knowing she enjoyed his selection.

“So, what is the real Katelyn Devereaux like?” Seth asked, once they finished breakfast and drove the rest of the way to Gill’s Rock to meet the ferry.

“I guess you’d call me spoiled. My parents catered to my every desire. If I wanted it, they gave it to me. Dance lessons, great clothes, tennis lessons, even a horse when I wanted to learn to ride.”

“Did you miss having a big family?”

Seth’s question caught her off guard. Of course she hadn’t missed having a big family. How could one miss something they never had? “I envied my friends their brothers and sisters, but I never thought about having any of my own. Let’s make a deal. For the rest of the week, let’s not talk about families, adopted or real and let’s omit Genean as well. I don’t like the first subject, and I sense the second is uncomfortable for you.”

* * * *

Seth pondered Katelyn’s statement as they drove the last thirty miles to Gill’s Rock in silence. The two subjects she didn’t want to discuss were really one. He wondered if she had begun to question her resemblance to Genean.

The ferry stood ready to make the trip to Washington Island, when he parked the car and went around to open Katelyn’s door.

“Consider this your magic carpet to fairyland,” he teased.

“You were right. We did enter another country when we drove onto this peninsula. I’ve never seen such beautiful scenery. What is Washington Island like?”

“You’ll see when we get there.”

Together they stepped onto the ferry and waited for the boat to cross between the mainland and the island.

As they began to move, he saw a childlike excitement on Katelyn’s face. For the first time, he saw her wall begin to crumble. He knew she needed Randy and Genean as much as they needed her. Somehow, he would have to get her to accept them and realize just how very much he wanted to allow himself to love her.

The ferry moved at its usual leisurely pace until at last they docked at Washington Island. The Cherry Train Tour was ready to begin as soon as they arrived.

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Seth enjoyed watching Katelyn as she gasped in wonder at the countryside. He'd taken the tour any number of times. Although it was one of his favorite things to do when he came to Door County, seeing Katelyn's excitement made the trip seem like an entirely different experience.

"So what did you think?" he asked, once they returned.

"This is a beautiful place. You mentioned horseback riding. It sounds like the perfect way to explore more of the area."

Seth pointed to his left. "The stables are right over there. I should give you the option of taking mopeds." He knew transportation of the motorized type would be more to his liking. He'd never been keen on horseback riding.

"I much prefer the horses. To be truthful, I don't even know what a moped is."

Seth laughed heartily. As he recalled, she mentioned having a horse as a kid. "You have led a sheltered life. I thought everyone knew what a moped was. It's a small motorized bike."

Katelyn wrinkled her nose. "Maybe later. For now, I think I'd rather be on a horse. At least I can trust it to know where it's going."

* * * *

Katelyn wondered if it was her imagination or if Seth seemed a bit ill at ease around the horses at the stable. Of course he had been the one to suggest riding in the first place. Not having seen anyone on horseback during the train ride, she wouldn't have thought of it by herself.

"Whoa big feller," Seth said, as he tried to mount the horse he'd been assigned.

"You sound like The Lone Ranger," she teased.

"Aren't you too young to remember that show?"

"I'm not much younger than you. Besides, my dad loved old westerns. Every time he heard one of those offers where you could buy tapes of old shows, he'd send off for them."

"I didn't think a rich guy like your dad would have much time for TV."

"It was his passion. He loved watching it whenever he got the chance. As for the rich part, he was a self-made millionaire. When he got back from the war, he saw that TV was just coming into its own. He wanted a part of the action, so he decided to try his hand at advertising. I must say he made the right decision. Since the media was his bread and butter, he liked watching it, especially when he thought he might catch a glimpse of one of his commercials."

"I thought you just did advertising for magazines."

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

“It depends on the account.”

The horse standing next to Katelyn started to fidget. She knew it was the animal’s way of telling her it wanted to get going. It took less effort for her to swing into the saddle than it did not to laugh at Seth’s awkward attempt to do the same.

“You don’t ride horses much, do you?” she asked, once they left the stables behind them.

“It’s not my favorite pastime, but I do know how to ride. It’s the getting on and off that defeats me.”

The horses set an easy pace, giving Katelyn a chance to further study Seth. Instead of flowing easily with the gait of the horse, he sat, stiff as a poker, bouncing with each step the animal took.

“You aren’t in some riding competition where you have to keep good posture,” she remarked.

“What do you mean?”

“For starters, you have to relax. Flow with the movement of the horse. It’s no wonder you don’t enjoy horseback riding. If I was bouncing along like you are I’d be more than willing never to ride again.”

Katelyn reined her horse to a halt and then dismounted. “Get down from there so I can give you a few pointers on how to make this a more enjoyable experience.”

“You want me to get down? I just got up.”

Katelyn suppressed the urge to laugh at his statement. “Of course I want you to get down. How else do you think I’ll be able to teach you the proper way to ride a horse?”

She watched him dismount. As he did, she heard him sigh deeply at the effort.

“Okay, so now that I’m on firm ground what do you want me to do?”

She dropped the reins of her horse and went over to where he stood. “For starters,” she said taking his hand in hers. To her surprise, he reversed the position and brought her hand to his lips, before pulling her into his arms for a more traditional kiss.

“This wasn’t...” she began when he again kissed her lovingly.

“This wasn’t what?” Seth asked, staring into her eyes until she thought she would melt on the spot.

“Ah – this - wasn’t exactly what I had in mind.”

“It sure beats horseback riding.”

Katelyn leaned back in his embrace to look intently at his face. “Considering we’re out here, in the middle of nowhere, horseback riding

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is the only way we're going to get back to the stable. Besides, whatever happened to showing me Washington Island?"

"You drive a hard bargain. As far as I'm concerned, kissing you is much more rewarding than horseback riding. On the other hand, I don't plan to walk back to the stable, even if we haven't gone that far yet."

Katelyn agreed about the kissing part, but she knew she didn't want to get too carried away. She did have Martin to consider.

"The first thing you have to do, is to let the horse know you aren't afraid of her."

"Easy for you to say. Did you say her? I didn't think ladies came in this size."

"How else did you think they matched the stallions? Of course we're off the subject. Let me show you how to enjoy horseback riding, and I'll let you teach me how to ride a moped."

It took several minutes for Katelyn to get Seth to relax enough to begin to be comfortable around the horses. Once he did, she instructed him on the proper way to mount and how to become one with the horse.

"This isn't half bad," Seth confessed, when there were again riding along the well-worn trail.

"It's a shame no one ever took the time to teach you to ride."

"I didn't think it was anything anyone had to teach you. The cowboys on TV always made it look easy. I mean what is there to throwing your leg over the back of a horse and riding off into the sunset?"

This time Katelyn didn't try to hide her laughter. "For one thing the real cowboys grew up in the saddle and knew what they were doing. You city slickers just have to have the right teacher to get you in sync with the entire process."

"We'll see who's the best teacher when I get you on a moped."

Katelyn couldn't help but wonder what she had gotten herself into. Although she liked riding her bike she had doubts about trying a motorized version. She'd never been on a motorcycle and always considered them dangerous. Wouldn't the smaller version be just as frightening?

* * * *

Seth had to admit, he'd never enjoyed horseback riding more than he did today. Katelyn made the entire process more fun than work. He wondered if he could do the same for her when it came to riding mopeds.

With the horses returned to the stable, they made their way to the moped rental station. He couldn't help but smile when Katelyn eyed the small bikes in the same manner he had his horse earlier in the day.

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

“Maybe we should have some lunch before we go out for a ride,” Katelyn suggested.

Seth knew she was working hard to prolong the inevitable. “Then lunch it is,” he replied.

Across the way was a small restaurant. Since his watch read 1:00, he knew the rush would be over and they would be seated immediately.

Once they were at the restaurant, Katelyn leaned across the table, to cover his hand with her own. “I have to admit, those little bikes didn’t look too intimidating. Where do you suggest we go with them?”

“Remember that church they talked about on the Cherry Train Tour?”

Katelyn nodded.

“It’s not that far from here. I thought we would ride over there.”

“Don’t you think we should stay a little closer to town? This is my first experience with one of these things you know.”

“We’ll be fine. It’s a beautiful day. What could go wrong?”

Two hours later Seth regretted the question he’d asked at the restaurant. As they were riding down a slight incline, he lightly touched the brakes only to have them lock up on him. When the bike came to an abrupt stop, he went flying over the handlebars.

Almost as soon as he came to rest on grass, Katelyn was beside him.

“Are you hurt?” she asked, as she knelt at his side.

Seth took mental inventory of his body parts. Other than having the wind knocked out of him, his only injury was to his male pride. “I don’t think so,” he gasped, once the breath returned to his lungs.

He felt rather sheepish when she took his arm and helped him to his feet. After all, he’d been the one who kept telling her how much fun riding mopeds would be as well as how safe it was.

“What happened?” she asked, once they stood beside the downed bike.

“I’m not sure, but I think the brakes locked up.”

“Can you ride it?”

“I doubt it. I have a feeling we’ll be hoofing it back to town.”

“That doesn’t break my heart. I’ll take a horse any day over one of those things. If you get thrown by a horse you can get back on and ride home.”

Seth bent down to retrieve the bike. “It’s just like I thought. We’ll have to leave this thing here.”

“What will they say when we get back to town?”

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“What can they say? They’ll send someone back here for it. We’d better get started. If we don’t we’ll miss the last ferry back to the mainland.”

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I’m fine,” he snapped, his nerves just a bit on edge. It was late enough in the day that they’d have to hurry in order to get back to town in time.

“Well don’t bite my head off.” She bent to pick up her bike from where she’d dropped it earlier.

“Leave it here with mine. Pushing that thing will only slow us down.”

Although Seth wanted to set a brisk pace, the experience of a few minutes earlier left him shaky enough that he walked slower than normal.

“I’m sorry I barked at you,” he finally said after several moments of silence.

“I understand. I just hope you aren’t trying to hide some sort of injury from that spill you took.”

“Bruised pride isn’t life threatening. If I hadn’t insisted on taking out the mopeds in the first place none of this would have happened. I’m just sorry to have spoiled your day.”

“Who said my day is spoiled? The way I see it this is a blessing. I’d much rather see the countryside taking a leisurely walk than riding one of those things.”

The walk back took much longer than Seth had anticipated. Even so, he didn’t regret it. He rather enjoyed seeing this more relaxed side of Katelyn. The worries of Denver, her agency and the family who wanted to find her had magically been left behind once they stepped foot on the ferry that carried them to Washington Island.

A cool breeze blew in from the lake making the heat of the day more tolerable. When at last the rental station was in sight, Seth had to admit the walk hadn’t been half bad.

The attendant eyed them with what could only be called suspicion. “Where are your bikes?”

Seth told the man what had happened. He knew it was getting late and he didn’t have time to stand here talking to this man about the particulars. When he finished he glanced at his watch. To his surprise, it still read 3:00. Apparently, the thing stopped working when wrecked the moped.

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The attendant took forever filling out the necessary paperwork. "I'm really sorry this happened to you, Mr. Miller. There's no need in looking at your watch. The two of you have missed the last ferry back to the mainland for today. It looks like you'll have to spend the night up here."

Katelyn's eyes grew wide with surprise. "Spend the night? But we can't. We aren't prepared."

"It doesn't matter much. You have no other choice. Since it's the fault of our equipment, I'm sure my boss will take care of everything for you. While I look into a place for the two of you to stay, why don't you go over to the restaurant and have a bite to eat, on us, of course."

Seth turned his attention to Katelyn. At this point, there certainly wasn't anything else they could do. "You weren't prepared to come to Door County, but you did. Consider this another of your vacation adventures."

* * * *

It took only a few minutes for the man from the rental station to enter the restaurant and come over to their table.

"I've arranged for a room for you over at Viking Village. It's the last room in town and the only reason I was able to get it was because of a last minute cancellation. When you're done eating come to the shop and I'll take you there. The manager of the Viking Village is a friend of mine. He said he'd make sure you folks got back to the ferry in the morning."

Seth thanked the man, leaving Katelyn to her own thoughts. *If we are getting the last room in town, we'll be spending the night together. Even if the room has two double beds there will be no wall separating us like there was at Mallard's Nest. Will I be content to stay in my own bed when Seth is sleeping only a few feet away? After this afternoon's walk, I doubt it. For some unexplained reason, Seth Miller has become very important to me.*

With supper finished, they found the manager of the moped shop waiting for them. "How much do we owe you for the rental?" Seth asked.

"You don't owe me a thing. I'm just glad you're all right. The rest of your stay on Washington Island is on me."

"We couldn't do that," Katelyn exclaimed.

"Don't even give it a thought. It would be bad advertising if I didn't take care of you, considering what happened this afternoon."

Katelyn watched Seth shake the man's hand, then hold open the car door for her. They made the ride to the hotel in relative silence. She

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couldn't help but smile at the man's mention of advertising. In his position, she certainly would have done the same thing.

Everything about the lobby screamed rustic. She had expected something very modern and instead had been transported into the world of nineteenth century grandeur and opulence. At last, they were alone in the room assigned to them by the hotel. She hadn't expected the presidential suite, but she did expect separate beds. Instead, a queen-sized bed dominated the room.

So much for the privacy of my own bed...

Is going to bed with Seth such a terrible thing? Her inner voice questioned.

"I think I might have a little trouble being a perfect gentleman tonight," he commented, breaking into her thoughts. Gently he took her into his arms and kissed her hungrily. To her surprise, she responded by parting her lips and teasing his lips with her tongue. The area between her legs throbbed with pleasure, begging her not to let him stop.

She leaned back in his arms to savor the sensations his kiss generated. "Who said anything about you being a gentleman? I'm sorry about yesterday. I do want you to make love to me."

If Seth had any reservations, she didn't sense them. He carried her to the bed and expertly removed her clothing. His touch mesmerized her. His kisses enchanted her. She became only vaguely aware of his movements when he took out his wallet and pulled out the condom for the necessary precautions.

He kissed her neck and worked his way down to her breasts teasing her nipples with nips and bites. When at last he parted her legs and entered her, she experienced a flood of excitement. No man had entered her body to give her pleasure in over two and a half years. Even then, she couldn't remember such heights of ecstasy.

Finally spent, lying in each other's arms, Katelyn realized how much she needed to be loved. She didn't want these few days to end, didn't want to lose Seth, didn't want him to ever stop loving her. In the back of her mind Martin's voice penetrated her subconscious. *What about me?*

She wanted to push him away, but she knew she had an obligation. *I don't know anymore. For now, let me experience what love is like. Ours would be a marriage of convenience. I know neither of us loves the other, not like this. If we do get married, we'll make the best of the situation. It's what my father would have wanted.*

* * * *

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Seth woke early and eased himself out of bed so as not to disturb Katelyn. His shorts lay where he dropped them the night before. He picked them up and watched as she moved in her sleep, drifting into a deeper sounder slumber.

The first light of morning illuminated the room as he reached into his pants pocket for his cell phone before going out onto the balcony. He wondered if six o'clock would be too early to call Randy.

Terri answered his call on the second ring. "Where in the world have you been? Randy's been calling the cottage every half hour all night."

"Good morning to you, too. From your greeting I must assume it's not too early to be calling you."

"Too late is more like it."

"Can I talk to Randy?"

"Just a minute, I'll get him."

Seth waited patiently, while Randy came to the phone.

"What's going on up there? Why haven't you been answering the phone?"

"It would be a little hard to answer it since we missed the last ferry back from the Washington Island last night. We spent the night at the Viking Village."

Seth repeated the story of the mishap with the moped. The narrative worked to soften the edge he'd heard in Randy's voice.

"Other than your accident, how are things going?"

"It's going well." Seth couldn't help but smile to himself at the memory of last night.

"How long are you staying?"

"Until tomorrow. We're going antiquing on the way back to Mallard's Nest today."

"When can we come up and talk to her?"

"You can't," Seth said, emphatically.

"What do you mean we can't? I thought the whole point of you taking her to Mallard's Nest was to..."

"Was to what, Randy? To tell her guess what, the Mallards are your birth family? Not hardly. I brought her up here to get to know her, not to play the bad guy. She's not ready for you yet. I never planned to do anything different. If you remember, I didn't even want her to be your sister. This isn't the time for you to talk to her."

"If not now, when?"

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“When she’s more comfortable with the situation. I promised her to avoid two subjects, Genean and her birth family, and I plan to keep my promise.”

“I suppose you should know, I called the agency again and they suggested I talk to the lawyer who represented her father at the time of the adoption. I had a long talk with Jack Townsend yesterday. My initial speculations were right all along. Max Devereaux hired a private investigator to find Katelyn’s birth family right after he met Grandpa. No wonder he pushed so hard to get our account. He meant it as a gift for her. A top account and her birth family all in one neat package. It’s hard knowing she’s so close and not being able to welcome her back to our family.”

“I know it’s hard, but you’ll have to be the ones to approach her, only not here. She has another week at the lake. Of course, it might be best to go to her in Denver, in her own environment.”

Seth finished his conversation with Randy and sat staring at the lake. After last night, his emotions were in knots. Making love to Katelyn was enough for him to want her in his arms forever. She made him do what he swore never to do again, she made him fall in love or at least he thought he had fallen in love with her. *Is my mind playing tricks on me or can I allow her to become special to me?*

“Good morning, Seth.” He looked up to see Katelyn standing in the doorway. She’d wrapped herself in the complimentary terrycloth robe he saw hanging in the closet. The neckline hung loosely on her small frame. Her breasts were clearly visible and teased him to arousal.

“I thought you might sleep later. You were pretty tired last night.”

“I did sleep well and didn’t even hear you get up. Can I convince you to come back to bed and continue where we left off last night?”

Her suggestion coupled with her coy smile that promised him wonderful delights, pleased Seth. Without further conversation, he slipped his hands into the robe, cupping her breasts and softly stroked her nipples.

He held her closer, kissing her until he could restrain himself no longer then carried her to the bed and slipped the robe from her shoulders, enjoying the sight of her naked body. *Go slow*, his inner voice cautioned.

He caressed the entire length of her body, until his hand slipped between her legs and his fingers touched her dampness. From this point, he knew there would be no turning back, no stopping until he made love to her.

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Katelyn moaned softly, prompting him to quench his own fire as he entered her. She arched her back to allow him a deeper penetration and his head spun with the sensation. He held back as long as possible to prolong her pleasure. When at last he climaxed, he knew she also reached a satisfying ending.

For a few delightful moments, they lay in each other's arms, enjoying the bliss of their lovemaking. "Now, wasn't this more fun than sitting out on the balcony alone?" Katelyn teased, tracing the line of Seth's jaw with her finger.

"Much better." To Seth's embarrassment, his stomach growled, reminding him that he'd had nothing to eat since dinner last night.

"I think your stomach is trying to tell you something," Katelyn said. "Come to think of it, I'm hungry, too. Let's get cleaned up and find someplace to eat."

* * * *

Katelyn got out of bed and went to the bathroom for a quick shower. To her delight, Seth followed and joined her in the small enclosure. When they were again dressed in the clothes they'd worn the day before, they went down to the hotel dining room for breakfast.

They were just finishing, when the manager approached their table. "Were you're accommodations adequate, Mr. Miller?"

"Very. We were please that you had a room for us. I don't think either of us would have appreciated sleeping under the stars last night."

The man laughed, but the comment sent a mental picture to Katelyn that she would just as soon forget. Sleeping under the stars would have been a terrifying reminder of the night she spent lost in the woods as a child. Even with Seth to protect her, she doubted if she would be entirely comfortable sleeping in the great outdoors.

As soon as they finished eating the manager arranged transportation to the dock. They arrived just in time as the first ferry of the way was about ready to leave. Once on the deck, she watched as the shoreline slipped further and further away. Soon they would be back on the mainland and Washington Island would be only a memory. How would she remember the day spent in this fairyland in the future? Would she regret the hours she had spent in bed with Seth, delighting in his lovemaking as well as his presence by her side? Somehow she knew the answer was she would never regret something so special. If they hadn't become stranded, she might never have found the pleasure spending the night with him gave her.

* * * *

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Katelyn enjoyed shopping in the small shops Seth found on the way back to Mallard's Nest. The local artists fascinated her and she bought several pieces for her studio.

Their last stop was at a quiet country crossroads. On one corner sat a Christmas shop. Her first instincts told her not to go in, to follow her original plan and boycott Christmas for the rest of her life.

While she was contemplating her options, Seth came around to her side of the car and opened the door. "This shop is one of my favorites." The tone of his voice made refusing to accompany him impossible.

When she stepped inside, the scent of bayberry and pine transported her back to her childhood. The small tree in front of her, trimmed in snowflakes and children's ornaments reminded her of the tree her father always put up in her room.

Every year she and her mother would string popcorn and cranberries placing the garlands on the tree. Every year two new ornaments would appear while she slept on Christmas Eve.

Only weeks ago, she had found the large box marked *Katelyn's Ornaments*. In it were two new ones that her parents bought before their death; two she never intended to put on another tree.

She watched as Seth appeared to be in all his glory among the Santa figurines, elves, nativity scenes and snowflakes, as he roamed the shop.

When he caught her looking at him, he triumphantly held up an ornament shaped like an old fashioned sled. "Do you think a little boy would like this?"

She took the ornament from his hand and ran her fingers over its tiny runners. "I think it's perfect. Is it for Adam?"

Seth nodded. "Now I have to shop for my sister's kids. At least they aren't hard to buy for. I've been getting them each a nativity scene, one piece at a time. This year Mandy gets a wise man and Tommy gets a shepherd. I always try to buy them here, so the set will match."

"What a wonderful idea. I wouldn't have thought of a nativity scene. I grew up with Santa Claus and his elves. I don't ever remember having a nativity in our house, except for the one our cook kept in her room. I should think your niece and nephew would cherish these pieces because they came from you. Contrary to your comment at lunch the other day, you do love kids, don't you?"

"I guess I do. Why else would I teach?"

"You'll make a great Daddy."

Seth squeezed her hand. "Is this a proposal?"

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Katelyn could feel color creeping into her cheeks. She hadn't meant the words the way Seth interpreted them.

"I was only making an observation." As much as she wanted Seth in her life, she knew it would never happen. Soon she would have to come to a decision about giving herself to someone else, someone safe. Martin would never try to push past the wall she'd built around her emotions as well as her heart.

The deep voice of her subconscious seemed intent on teasing her. *Let down your guard, Katie. Get to know Seth, let him get close. You deserve to be happy, to be loved.*

She envisioned herself spending the rest of her life with Seth, living for the pleasure of his lovemaking, having his children.

Her parents would be pleased to know how happy this man made her. The thought quickly brought another answer. Her parents were pleased with Martin when they started dating. They would never have been comfortable with this stranger who so easily stole her heart.

CHAPTER 9

A light rain had begun to fall as they turned off the main road on to the country lane that led to the cottage. As they pulled into the driveway at Mallard's Nest Katelyn saw lights burning. "That's funny, I don't remember leaving any lights on yesterday morning."

"I don't either. We'd better be careful, who knows what's going on." His voice sounded as concerned as she felt.

When they stopped in the driveway, Katelyn smiled. "Oh look, it's Brad's van. Didn't you tell him we'd be staying until tomorrow? I mean, we left things in a terrible mess yesterday."

"I doubt if they came up here to check on your housekeeping." His tone had turned cold, and it was bothering her a bit. "Let's go in and see what's up."

She stepped from the car concerned about the change in Seth's attitude. She purposely left her purchases in the trunk, seeing no need to drag them into the house, only to have to repack them in the morning.

To her surprise, Randy and Brad stood in the living room. The looks on their faces told her they were waiting for them to return.

"I thought I told you..." Seth began.

Katelyn looked at him, the anger she sensed in his voice burned in his eyes.

"You did," Randy interrupted. "We decided it wasn't your decision to make. We came here to see Katelyn."

She moved her eyes from Seth to the other men in the room. She could read nothing in Brad's expression, but sparks of anger and frustration passed between Seth and Randy.

Her heart pounded wildly. "Is something wrong? Did you come up here to tell me you're pulling the account? Have you found another agency?" She purposely tried to keep her voice calm. Being a businesswoman, she needed to preserve her image.

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Randy put his hands on her arms and she shuddered involuntarily, puzzled by his strange expression. “Hardly. We came up here to tell you we’re your birth family. We’ve known about you for a long time. We had to wait until you and Genean turned twenty-five to start looking for you. You may not want to hear it, but please give us a chance.”

The words struck Katelyn like a slap in the face. Her knees became weak as she began to tremble uncontrollably. “You’re my what?” she gasped, all hopes of staying calm gone.

Randy’s eyes told her to be calm, his grip on her arm, although it was loose, felt like a vice. “We’re your birth family. We’ve been looking for you for a couple of months now. I called the agency as soon as Seth told us about you and again after you were at the office. They couldn’t confirm your identity without your permission, but they did suggest I talk to Jack Townsend. He filled in a lot of the gaps.”

“You had no right! They had no right! I told them I didn’t want to be found. My family is dead. Why can’t anyone understand, I don’t need a replacement? I don’t want to be part of a family who threw me away like yesterday’s newspaper. I can’t believe Uncle Jack knew who you were and didn’t tell me!” Anger and sadness rolled through her body.

“We had every right,” Randy shouted, trying to make her listen to what she didn’t want to hear. “We want to make our family complete. As for Jack, he’s known for several years just like Max Devereaux knew after he hired a private investigator to find us. What Jack didn’t know was you were planning to visit Mallard’s during your vacation.”

Katelyn shook her head defiantly. This could not be happening. The people she held in such high esteem for all these years couldn’t be her family, they just couldn’t. “How could you have guessed? What did Seth tell you? When did he have the chance?”

Randy lowered his voice, his tone sounded gentle. “Seth saw a resemblance to Genean and warned us. He didn’t want to believe you could possibly be our sister and he didn’t want us to jump to any conclusions. Even if he hadn’t called, we would have known instantly.”

Katelyn refused to allow him to calm her. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re wrong, you have to be wrong.”

She tore her gaze from Randy and turned to Seth accusingly. “How could you? I thought what I told you was in confidence. Besides me, only Suzie and Uncle Jack knew about me being adopted. I trusted you and you betrayed me. I hate you. I hate you all.”

“I’m sorry, Katelyn,” a woman said from behind her.

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She turned at the sound. In the doorway separating the kitchen from the living room stood a woman that looked remarkably like herself. "I'm Genean...your twin sister."

Katelyn could hardly believe her eyes. Unwilling to accept any of the events going on around her she shook her head vehemently "No. This isn't happening."

"Yes, Katelyn, it is happening," Randy assured her.

He tightened his grip on her arm, and his softly spoken words grated on her nerves.

"Leave me alone. All of you just leave me alone," she said, through clenched teeth. With more strength than she thought possible, she jerked free of Randy's hold and ran toward the bedroom.

Before they could stop her, she slammed the door, locking it securely behind her. Like a frightened animal, she looked around the room, praying for a way to escape. She focused her attention on the window leading to the woods. She contemplated her options. Ahead of her, the woods frightened her; behind her, the members of her birth family terrified her.

"Katelyn, open this door," Seth shouted.

She leaned against the door. She had to make them understand. "Go away. All of you go away and leave me alone," she cried.

"Katelyn, let me in. Let me explain. I didn't mean for it to happen this way."

"Sure you didn't, Seth. You brought me up here, you introduced me to Genean's friends, but you didn't mean for it to happen this way. When were you planning to tell me?"

"I wasn't. Let me in, Katelyn."

"No, Seth. Can't you see? It didn't work. I'm not Genean. I don't belong here. I'm not part of them."

Seth didn't answer. Beyond the door, she could hear muffled voices, but she couldn't make out the words. She didn't care. Silently, she removed the screen from the inside of the window. Once she pushed the glass completely open, she carefully climbed out.

Ahead of her stood the object of her fear. Although the woods appeared to be dense, Seth told her they eventually led to the bay. Once she got there, she could go to a resort, a hotel, or even a restaurant.

One of them would have a phone. If they didn't, she'd find a pay phone. She could call Suzie and she'd come and get her.

If she'd taken her purse with her, she could have used her cell phone, but of course that was out of the question since she'd left it in the

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living room of the house. It didn't matter. She could cancel her credit cards and discontinue her cell number once she got home. If Suzie would advance her the money for an airline ticket, she'd pay her back. She remembered seeing signs for an airport in Green Bay. Maybe she could persuade Suzie to take her there tonight so she could catch the first flight to Denver.

She would change her home phone number and pretend this evening never happened. She would forget all about Wisconsin. The thought of forgetting about Washington Island brought to mind memories of last night and this morning with Seth. She knew forgetting him would be the hardest of all, but he betrayed her and she would never forgive him for doing so.

The Mallard's account crossed her mind and she decided she could turn it over to anyone else in the office, just as long as it wasn't her. For years she jealously guarded Mallard's, now she never wanted to hear about them again.

Tears stung her eyes as she plunged blindly into the woods. Why had she thought she could trust Seth? Why had he betrayed her? He said he loved her. Had it been a ploy, a well thought out plan to get her to accept Randy and Genean?

She'd made a fool of herself by letting her guard down, and allowing Seth to get close enough to hurt her. She didn't want to be hurt anymore.

Above her, the trees towered, their canopy of leaves so thick, even if the moon were out, it would have shed no light here. Suddenly, she again became a little girl. Alone and lost, she pushed her way further into the woods. She fought the urge to huddle beside a tree and wait to be rescued. Unlike the night so many years ago, she didn't want anyone to find her. Then she'd feared bears, coyotes and wolves. Tonight she feared the people at the cottage.

Lions and tigers and bears, oh my! The line from *The Wizard Of Oz* ran through her mind. For the first time, she wondered what kind of animals inhabited these woods. *Are they harmless, or should I be concerned about my safety?*

Her foot caught on a root and pain shot up her ankle as she twisted it, losing her balance. Unable to catch herself, she fell forward, hitting her head on a rock. Her fears and anger came to a crashing stop as black unconsciousness swallowed her.

* * * *

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Seth looked from the closed door to his friends. "I'm going to owe you a new door."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm going to break it down. I need to get in there and talk to her. She has to know I didn't engineer this whole mess. Shouting isn't getting us anywhere."

Brad took a step toward Seth and put his hand on his arm. "Do you have any idea what you're planning to do? This is a well-built house. We'd be better off trying to take the door off the hinges. I'm afraid you'll hurt yourself."

Seth pretended not to listen. Instead, he ran his fingers over the fine wood of the solid door.

"Let me try to talk to her," Randy suggested.

"You already talked to her, even though I told you not to. The only thing you accomplished was to get her to lock herself away from us. She started to soften, I think she might have come to you, if not before she left Wisconsin, after she got back to Denver."

He turned his attention from Randy and Brad to the two women in the kitchen. Terri sat at the table comforting Genean. At this moment, even looking at the woman who so vividly reminded him of Katelyn didn't help. She only made him want Katelyn in his arms all the more.

Unable to think of anything else to say, he returned his attention to the door. "Katelyn," he said, trying to sound authoritative. "If you're not going to open this door, I'm going to break it down. Do you understand me?"

He waited for her response. When his question remained unanswered, he continued. "Get away from the door. Do you hear me Katelyn? Get away from the door. I'm going to break it down. I don't want you to get hurt."

The silence from the room worried him. He remembered seeing actors on TV and in movies break down doors, but he knew they used hollow ones. This door was solid. The only weak spot would be the lock.

He'd taken a martial arts course several years ago, before he started college. If nothing else, it built up his self-confidence. Luckily, he never felt the need to use his knowledge until now.

Raising his foot, he kicked at the lock. Wood splintered and the door swung open from the force of impact. The emptiness of the room surprised him, yet not really. He noticed the screen propped against the wall and knew it indicated her route of escape.

"She's gone," he said, flatly.

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He knew Brad's hand on his shoulder was meant as comfort, but instead it angered him.

"She can't have gotten far. We'll find her. I mean, where could she have gone?"

Seth stared out the open window, into the woods and wished he possessed supernatural powers, wished he could see through the trees and locate her.

"She must have run into the woods. It's strange, she's afraid of the woods, but not as terrified of them as she is of you."

As though he hadn't heard Seth's comment, Brad continued. "Don't worry Seth, we'll find her. The woods are so thick, she can't move very fast. I'll get some lanterns."

Seth turned from the window and came face to face with Genean.

Tears streaked her face. He knew her voice would be hardly louder than a whisper. "I'm so sorry, so very sorry."

He wanted to shout at her, wanted to strike out at all of them. Instead, he took a deep breath before saying anything. "It's not your fault."

"Yes, it is. Randy told me you didn't want us to come today. I wouldn't listen to him. I insisted we come and face her, make her accept us. I never expected this to happen. I thought once she met us she'd want to get to know us."

"She might have wanted to, if the timing were different. How long have you been here?"

"A couple of hours. We didn't think you'd ever get home."

Seth tried to smile at her comment. He wished he could call a place like this home, wished he could bring Katelyn home. After what occurred here tonight, he knew it would never happen. He wanted to blame Genean, wanted to blame Randy, but he couldn't. Katelyn belonged to their family, not to him. He should have told her right away about them, but he didn't want anything to tarnish the hours they spent together.

"How do I make you understand, she's terrified of you? I told Randy this morning she's not ready to find her family. I thought he listened to me."

Tears cascaded down Genean's cheeks. He wanted to take her in his arms, but he couldn't.

"He did believe you. I didn't. I thought if I could talk to her, she'd understand."

Before Seth could reply, Brad entered the room, carrying three fluorescent lanterns. Leaving Genean standing in the bedroom, he followed Randy and Brad outside.

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The light rain left the sandy ground beneath the window damp enough to show Katelyn's footprints leading into the woods. After examining them, Randy turned to face Seth. "You said the woods frightened her. What did you mean?"

"She told me she got lost in the woods when she was a kid. She spent the night alone, lost and frightened. Now she's out there again, alone. Only this time, she's not as scared of the woods as she is of you."

In Seth's mind, he could see her as a child, huddled against a tree. Had she realized the foolishness of running into this unfamiliar wooded area? Would she realize she could be in danger and turn back? Had she lost her sense of direction and decided to huddle under a tree until morning?

"We'll split up," Brad suggested. "We can cover three times the area that way. Whoever finds her first, call out."

Seth nodded. *Let Brad take over. He's the only one with a cool head.*

The night sounds, coming from the woods, made Seth painfully aware of Katelyn's fears. An owl hooted, night birds squawked, and small animals scurried through the underbrush, frightened by the sudden intrusion into their normally quiet home. Through the trees, he could see the other lanterns, could hear Brad and Randy frantically calling Katelyn's name.

"I found her," Seth heard Brad shout. He followed the sound of his friend's voice, the light from the lantern, until he came to where Brad knelt beside Katelyn.

In the eerie light of the lanterns, he could see a long gash on her forehead. Blood gushed from the cut, making him sick. Just below her shorts, her leg lay at an odd angle. A white bone broke the skin and here, too, blood ran freely.

Brad was quick to assess the situation. "She's broken her leg and the cut on her head needs to be looked at. Seth, you hold the lantern. I don't think we should move her. We'll make her as comfortable as possible, but I don't want to risk any permanent injury. Randy, you go on ahead and call 911. She'll need immediate attention. Thank goodness she's unconscious. If she weren't, the pain would be unbearable."

Everything Seth ever heard about injuries such as Katelyn's raced through his mind. "You're right, we shouldn't move her, but with this rain, getting her out of here will be a major operation."

CHAPTER 10

Seth watched as Randy headed back toward the cottage. A feeling of helplessness washed over him. He cared for Katelyn and yet he could do nothing more than hold the lantern and light the way.

A bolt of lightning flashed, illuminating the entire area, followed by a loud clap of thunder.

“I hope they hurry,” Brad shouted, to be heard over the rumbling thunder. “We have to get her out of here before the storm hits even harder.”

Seth knew what Brad meant. The wind had picked up and the rain had started falling even harder than it had earlier.

It seemed to take forever for the sirens to be heard above the storm. Then as though from nowhere, two paramedics made their way through the woods, wheeling a gurney.

Once they knelt beside Katelyn they took the precautions that he knew were necessary before they put her on the gurney and started wheeling her toward the house.

Once there, they loaded her into the ambulance. Seth could only watch as they closed the door to begin preparations for her to be taken to the hospital.

He stood and let the rain soak him to the skin. He wanted to be with her, and yet he knew she wanted nothing to do with him at this point.

To get out of the rain, he stepped into the warmth of the cottage. Once inside, he saw that Randy was talking to someone on the phone.

Seth stood off to the side and surveyed the scene before him. Brad and Terri had taken over, while Genean sat in a big chair, curled up, crying. Unable to help, knowing he would only be in the way in the living room, he turned his attentions to Randy’s phone conversation, picking out a few words here and there.

“Mr. Townsend, this is Randy Mallard. - I’m afraid there’s been an accident.—I thought you should know.”

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Seth joined Randy in the kitchen just as he hung up the phone. “Who in the hell were you talking to?”

“Jack Townsend. He’s Katelyn’s lawyer.”

“Her lawyer? Why would you call her lawyer?”

“I told you the agency recommended I call him yesterday. We talked for about an hour. I thought I should contact him about this. He represented her father during the adoption, just as he represents her now. When her folks died, they appointed him estate administrator until she turned twenty-five. He told me about her reluctance to find us. He thought she knew, until she called him after she found the adoption papers. He’s been trying to persuade her to find us. Since he’s the closest thing she has to family, I thought he should be here.”

From the corner of his eye, Seth saw a deputy sheriff come over to Randy and Seth, pad and pen in hand, ready to take their statement.

“I never thought I’d be coming to this house, Randy. What’s going on?”

“It’s nothing for the law to worry about,” Seth snapped.

“Why don’t you let me be the judge of that?”

Randy gave him a glance that read everything would be all right. “It’s common practice for an officer to respond to an ambulance call.” Randy turned his attention from Seth to the officer. “Katelyn Devereaux and our friend, Seth Miller, have been our house guests for the last couple of days.”

“I noticed someone was here, I just didn’t know who.”

“Katelyn is Genean’s twin sister,” Randy continued.

The officer looked shocked. “I didn’t know Genean had a twin.”

Seth seethed at the comment.

“I guess I don’t understand. Why would she run away from you? How did she get past five adults and out of the house?”

“She locked herself in the bedroom and went out the window.”

Seth followed Randy and the officer through the shattered door and into the bedroom. He could only watch helplessly as the officer shined his flashlight out the window and checked the place where they had seen footprints in the sand earlier.

“I assume you must be Mr. Miller. Did you know Miss Devereaux’s identity before you came here?”

“Yes, but she didn’t. Look, I had no intention of bringing her to Mallard’s Nest to meet her birth family, if that’s what you’re getting at. I certainly didn’t engineer tonight’s blow up. She asked me to bring her to Green Bay to meet her clients. Until I agreed, I had no idea she wanted to

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go to Mallard's. She mentioned wanting to see more countryside on the way up here. I certainly didn't intend to be the one to tell her about her family. It wasn't my place." Seth could feel his anger against his friends building. He knew he answered in a far more lengthy manner than the officer expected, but it gave him an opportunity to vent his anger to a stranger rather than blowing up at Randy or Brad.

The officer finished his notes and put away his pen. "As far as I can see, this was nothing more than a regrettable accident. It doesn't hurt for us to have this on file, though. If Miss Devereaux should press charges, we'll already have your statements. Should we need anything further, I'm certain I can find you at the hospital."

"We're ready to transport," Seth heard one of the paramedics say, as they came back into the house. "Has her family been contacted?" he continued.

Seth wondered how Brad would handle the subject of Katelyn's family.

To his surprise, it was Randy who answered the man's question. "We're her family, but we have contacted the people she's staying with here in Wisconsin as well as her people in Denver."

"We're taking her to Door County Memorial. Maybe one of you should ride along, in case she should regain consciousness."

Randy turned toward Seth. "You should go. Give me your car keys and I'll follow you. Since you're parked behind Brad it will save time."

Seth nodded and followed the EMTs as they wheeled the gurney toward the ambulance. He wondered if he should be the one to ride with Katelyn. She made her dislike of him quite evident in the heat of tonight's blow up.

Seth followed the men with the gurney closely. After Katelyn was inside the back of the ambulance, he surveyed the crowded space.

The first EMT closed the door to the ambulance. "You'll need to ride up front with me. My partner will take good care of your friend.

Once Seth climbed into the front seat and fastened his seat belt, they pulled out of the driveway. To his surprise, the sirens remained silent.

"Why aren't you using the sirens?"

"No need. We have the bleeding under control. The lights are enough. Don't worry, your friend will be fine."

Katelyn's moans became sobs and filled the confined space of the ambulance. Seth turned around to look behind him. As he did, he realized she'd regained consciousness. It didn't take a genius to know she must be in unbearable pain.

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“We’ll be at the hospital soon.”

Her sobs became whimpers and she half whispered, “Hospital? I don’t want to go to the hospital. I want to go home. I want to go back to Denver.”

“You’ve been hurt. There’s been an accident. We’re paramedics. You must try to relax.”

Seth wanted to comfort her, but he knew, at this point, it would be useless.

They finally pulled into the covered area leading to the emergency room. Silently, he issued a prayer of thanksgiving for the shelter. Outside, the rain came down in torrents pushed by the wind. Lightning flashed, thunder clapped and the promise of an all night storm seemed inevitable.

Seth stood out of Katelyn’s line of vision and watched as medical personnel wheeled her away from him.

“There’s a waiting room at the end of the hall, Mr. Miller,” the driver of the ambulance said.

“Thank you,” he muttered, his attention focused on the room where they took Katelyn. Standing alone, he decided to go to the waiting room. He could do nothing in the hallway.

Once in the lobby, he approached the desk. “I’m Seth Miller. Randy Mallard will be here shortly. His sister has been injured. We’re expecting some important phone calls.”

“Certainly,” the woman at the desk assured him.

He no more than seated himself, when she summoned him back to the desk. “Mr. Miller, I have a call for you from a Miss Branch.”

“Thank you. It’s one of the calls we’re waiting for,” He dreaded the thought of trying to explain tonight to Suzie.

As soon as he picked up the phone he knew Suzie was crying. “Oh Seth, what’s happened to Katie?”

“It’s a long story, Suz. You know about Katelyn being adopted. Randy Mallard and Genean Karsten are her brother and sister. To complicate matters further, Genean is her twin sister.”

“Oh, dear Lord. She planned this trip to get away from the reality of her situation and ran head first into it.”

“I honestly didn’t bring her up here to tell her about them. I told them to stay away, but they didn’t.” Seth hoped Suzie would understand. In the past they’d been at odds on and off for years. She was Jeff’s pesky little sister and he enjoyed teasing her. He wondered if she would hold him accountable for Katelyn’s accident.

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She remained silent for a moment before continuing. “The message I received said she’s been hurt. What happened? Were the two of you in a car accident?”

“It’s nothing like that. Randy and Genean came up here and confronted her. They had a blow up. She ran out into the woods and took a fall. She’ll need surgery. She has a compound fracture of her left leg and a bad cut on her forehead. I don’t know how long it is, all I could see was blood.”

“Why did you allow something like this to happen?”

“It’s a long story. I’ll explain everything when you get here.”

“Do you want me to come up now?”

“No. Wait until morning. There’s nothing you can do before then. Besides, we’re in the middle of a bad storm. It started raining when we came out of the woods. Now it’s coming down in torrents and there’s a lot of thunder and lightning as well as high wind.”

“You’re right, of course. There’s no use in risking my life on the roads in the middle of a storm.”

“There’s also no sense in running up your folks’ phone bill. We can talk about this tomorrow. Door County Memorial is in Sturgeon Bay.”

“Don’t worry Seth. I’ll find it. Get some rest. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Seth finished the conversation and turned to see the Mallards and Karstens enter the room.

“Is there anyone out here related to Miss Devereaux?” a young woman asked, before Seth could approach Randy.

“I’m her brother,” Randy answered.

“If you’d like, you can go back and see her before they take her to surgery.”

The phone rang again and the woman, who Seth talked to earlier, addressed him. “This call is for Mr. Mallard. Would you like to take it, Mr. Miller?”

Seth nodded and picked up the phone on the desk. He knew the call would be from Jack Townsend and wondered what he would say to Katelyn’s lawyer.

“I’m Seth Miller, Randy is busy now.”

“I’m Jack Townsend, Katie’s lawyer. I’m flying out tomorrow morning. I’ll take the early flight to Chicago and then a shuttle to Green Bay. My flight gets in at ten.”

“I’ll meet you.”

“How is she?”

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"I don't know. She's still in the emergency room. Randy just went back to sign the admittance papers. She'll need surgery on her leg."

The man on the other end of the line sighed deeply. Even though he didn't know Jack Townsend, Seth thought he sounded weary "I understand. I'm certain you'll know more in the morning. In the meantime, give Katie my love."

"We will," Seth promised before hanging up the phone.

He turned back from the desk in time to see Randy reenter the room. "Townsend will be here in the morning. I'm picking him up in Green Bay."

Brad looked shocked at Seth's statement. "Maybe I should pick him up. You'll need to be here with Katelyn."

"She's not going to want to see me in the morning. She may never want to see me again."

"Don't be so negative," Randy said. "We'll talk to her."

Seth laughed sarcastically. "Oh, you'll talk to her, some consolation. What makes you think she'll even agree to see you?"

"She won't have any choice. We have a captive audience here. She'll have to talk to us."

"So what's going on in there?" Seth asked, in an attempt to change the subject.

"They're taking her to surgery. I've decided to spend the night here. Why don't the four of you go back to Mallard's Nest and get some rest."

"I'm staying with you," Genean announced.

Brad put his arm around Genean's shoulders. "You can't be serious. You need your rest. The next few days will be exhausting, to say the least."

"Look, honey, we planned to spend the night at Mallard's Nest and we knew we wouldn't get much sleep. It doesn't make any difference where I spend the night. Adam is with your parents and I'd honestly feel better staying here."

"They're right, Brad. I think they need to be here tonight," Seth rationalized.

Terri nodded. It was evident she, too, agreed with Seth. "It would be foolish for all of us to stay here, though. Since we brought two vehicles, why don't we leave the van here for you and we can take Seth's car back to the cottage. If you need to leave for any reason, you'll have transportation."

He could see that Genean wanted to say something to him, but he didn't want to hear whatever anything from her right now. He needed to

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get away from here, Genean was only a bitter reminder of the woman he had wanted in his life. Instead of giving her a chance to speak, he turned to Brad. "We'd better get going. Why don't you drive?"

He looked back to see Randy and Genean engaged in conversation. *How will this meeting that Katelyn so desperately wanted to avoid end? Will any of them emerge as victors?*

Outside, the rain had not let up. By the time they got to the car, they were all soaked.

"Do you think she'll ever accept them?" Terri asked, from the seat behind them.

Seth was glad that Brad had offered to drive. He was in no shape for such an undertaking. Since he didn't have to concentrate on the road, he turned to answer Terri's question. "She'll accept them. You have to remember, this is a very stressful time for her. She never thought her biggest account would turn out to be her birth family. It will take time, but she'll come around. As for Randy and Genean, they just pushed things too quickly."

At last they arrived at Mallard's Nest. Mud caked on the hardwood floor acted as a grim reminder of the scene of only hours earlier.

Without stopping to examine the mess they had left behind, Terri headed for the kitchen. "We'd better get this cleaned up tonight. Who knows what will happen tomorrow?"

Seth watched as she disappeared behind the kitchen wall. Once he and Brad were alone. Seth turned his attention to the shattered door. "Sorry about this, Brad."

"It couldn't be helped. If we hadn't wanted you to do it, we would have stopped you. There's a lumberyard in town. We can pick up a new door tomorrow."

"I'd rather make you one, solid oak, just like this."

"You must know it's not necessary. We'll take care of it."

"Can't you see, I don't give a damn about anyone taking care of it? For the next few days I'm going to need something to keep my hands busy."

"I doubt that. You'll be seeing Katelyn."

"No, I won't. I intend to give her time to adjust to all of this. She certainly doesn't need me complicating matters. The next few days she'll have her lawyer here, along with Suzie, Randy and Genean and you and Terri. She won't be needing me."

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Terri returned to the living room to join in the conversation. “I think she will. The way I see things, you’ve fallen in love with her. I could see it when the two of you were at the office. Is she in love with you?”

“I don’t know,” Seth said, his confidence about Katelyn’s feelings draining quickly. “I thought she cared, at least until tonight. You heard her. She hates me. She has to be terribly confused right now. It’s best if I disappear for a few days, maybe forever. As soon as I see Suzie and pick up Townsend, I’m going back to the lake. I have work to do, things I’ve neglected this past week.”

CHAPTER 11

Katelyn awoke with a massive headache as well as pain in her leg coupled with a tremendous weight. Even moving in bed brought unbearable discomfort.

Little by little, the terrible events of the previous evening came back to her. It all seemed too crazy to be true. Had she dreamed it? The throbbing in her head, combined with the weight of her leg told her she dreamed nothing. It all happened. She found the one thing she didn't want to find, her birth family, and Seth was responsible. His betrayal of what she told him in confidence hurt more than any of her physical pain.

Reluctantly, she opened her eyes. Her blurred vision came as a surprise. Across the room, she could make out two chairs where a man and a woman appeared to be sleeping. In the semi-darkened room, she couldn't make out their faces. Who would be concerned enough to stay by her side while she slept?

Her stirring awakened the man. She watched him get up and make his way to her side. Her eyes continued to focus until she recognized Randy Mallard and his sister, Genean. Seeing the woman who bore such a strong resemblance to herself came as a shock, just as it had hours earlier.

"You're awake," Randy said, taking her hand in his.

She restrained herself from screaming, from insisting he leave her alone. "Yes, I'm awake."

"Do you need me to get the nurse? I could have her bring you something for pain."

Katelyn shook her head. "I feel as though I've been drugged. I need to be more alert, more aware. I'm sure I'll have some decisions to make, now that you've found me." In her heart, the only decision she wanted to make was the one to return to Denver, to never have to see these people again, but she knew she had to face the truth, if not now, later.

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“Of course you feel drugged. They kept you sedated throughout the night.”

“The night? Is it morning?”

“Almost. It’s five-thirty.”

“Did you and Genean stay here all night?”

“Of course we did. We didn’t want you to wake up alone and without your family.”

She closed her eyes, unable to stop the tears. She wished he’d stop calling her family. Couldn’t he see she didn’t want them? Max and Eileen Devereaux were her family and they were dead. Why couldn’t the Mallards just leave her alone? “I thought I told you last night...”

He put his finger to her lips to silence her. “I know you don’t want us but, like it or not, we want you.”

“Why?” Her one word answer sounded cold and filled with anger, even to her ears.

“Because you’re our sister, Genean’s other half. She’s had a hard time accepting the fact you didn’t want to find us. We both have.”

Katelyn turned her face from him. “Our parents didn’t want me twenty-five years ago. Why do you want me now? What makes me so important to you?”

“Look at me, Katelyn. Our parents wanted you. Mom died in childbirth and Dad was killed in a car accident months before you were born. Our aunt and uncle raised Genean and me. They didn’t know if they could take on two babies in addition to a four-year-old and their own four kids. They decided to keep only one. I’m certain they were sure that you would be given to a loving family. I wish it hadn’t happened, but we can’t pass judgment on them when they aren’t here to defend themselves.”

Katelyn turned her face toward the wall. She knew she couldn’t hide her tears and she certainly didn’t want Randy Mallard’s sympathy. “So, I got the ax.”

“I wouldn’t put it that way. I don’t know what was going through their heads. I would give anything to change the past, but it can’t be done.”

“What other way can I put it? I’m the one they sent away to strangers.” Katelyn’s heart ached. Why couldn’t they leave her alone?

“They weren’t strangers. They loved you.”

“How can you be so sure?” Her mind spun at his words.

“When your Dad met Grandpa Mallard, he suspected you came from our family. To confirm his suspicions, he hired a private investigator and

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found out the truth. After Grandpa died and I took over, he had the perfect account for you. I can only believe he planned to soften the blow of finding out about us by having you get to know us first.”

“Then why didn’t he tell me?”

“I don’t know. It’s something between you and your folks. With them gone, you’ll never know the answer. We’ve only known that we had another sister and that she was Genean’s twin for four years. When we found out about what happened, Genean said it explained so much, especially the crazy dreams she’d been having all her life.”

“Dreams? I’ve had some pretty crazy ones myself over the years.” For the first time she began to smile.

Across the room, Genean stirred in her chair. “Is something wrong?” she asked.

Randy turned at the sound of her voice. “No, sis, we’ve just been talking.”

* * * *

Seth sat on the deck of the cottage, thoughtfully drinking his coffee and staring out at the bay. Had it only been a day ago when he’d sat on the hotel balcony waiting for Katelyn to awaken? It seemed as though weeks had passed.

Behind him, the sliding door opened and he turned, half expecting to see Katelyn standing there, wearing Brad’s robe and teasing him to return to bed with her. Instead, Brad stood in the doorway.

“Did you get any sleep last night?”

“Very little. I slept in bits and snatches. When it did come, I could only dream about Katelyn.”

“So, now that you’ve calmed down, what do you plan to do?”

“I’ll pick up Townsend at the airport, then stop at the hospital and see Suzie. She should be there by the time I get back. Like I said last night, I’ll go back to the lake and get to work on your door.”

“I thought I knew you, but I’m beginning to wonder if I ever knew you at all. If you love her, why don’t you fight for her?”

“For the same reason I didn’t fight for Genean.” Inside Seth could feel the same hurt he experienced the day Genean told him she’d fallen in love with Brad. “I care for her too much to let her ruin her life with someone she doesn’t want. I stepped aside for Genean’s happiness, and I’m prepared to do the same for Katelyn. If she doesn’t care for me, it’s only going to hurt her. If I hurt her, what will I stand to gain?”

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“I can see I’ll get nowhere trying to reason with you. It’s like trying to reason with Genean when she wanted to come up here yesterday. You’re as bullheaded as she is.”

“Should I take that as a compliment?”

“Take it any way you want to. When Terri gets up we’ll go to the restaurant and get some breakfast. I doubt there’s much here to eat.”

“I’m sure there’s little more than coffee. Of course, we didn’t plan on eating here.”

“What are you saying? Did you bring her up here to sleep with her?”

“Are you sure you and Randy are only brothers-in-law? He asked the same question yesterday. I’ll tell you what I told him. It’s none of your business what happened between Katelyn and me. As for the food thing, that doesn’t matter either.”

“Guess we don’t keep much here. We usually bring what we need. Of course, this time, we didn’t bring anything with us.”

Seth sat quietly for a moment, then got up, walked to the railing and put his hands on the wooden boards. “Rain sure left everything fresh.”

“Are you trying to change the subject?”

Seth faced his friend and lounged against the railing. “I didn’t mean to be so obvious, but yes, I am.”

“If you don’t want to talk about what’s bothering you, so be it. I’m going in and call the hospital. It’s seven o’clock, I should be able to get some kind of word on Katelyn’s condition.”

“I’d give it a few more minutes, seven is a busy time at the hospital. It’s shift change.”

“You certainly became an expert all of a sudden. Don’t you want to find out what’s going on?”

Seth wanted the conversation to end. He couldn’t be rational when it came to Katelyn

“Of course I do. I’m going in and take a shower. I didn’t take one earlier, because I didn’t want to wake the two of you up.”

“Wake who up?” Terri asked, as she came out onto the deck with her coffee.

“You and Brad,” Seth replied. Without saying anything more, he went into the house.

Seth enjoyed the feeling of the hot water assaulting his body. In the steam, he could see her face. In the noise of the shower, he could hear her voice. All last night he could feel her body beside him, even though he slept alone in the bed she first occupied.

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Stepping from the shower, he rubbed his body briskly with the towel. In doing so, he hoped to shake the memories he knew would follow him for the rest of his life. He grabbed the first thing his hands touched in the closet and dressed for the day.

"I just talked to the hospital," Brad announced, when Seth reentered the room. "She's doing fine."

"Good." Seth wished he could rush to the hospital and take Katelyn in his arms and beg her forgiveness.

"Randy's clothes look good on you," Brad commented.

"What?" Seth asked, too lost in his thoughts of Katelyn to catch Brad's words.

"I said you look good in Randy's clothes."

"I didn't think anyone would mind. Coming up here was a spur of the moment decision."

Brad turned his attention to the stack of neatly folded clothing in Seth's hands.

"What are those?"

"Things Katelyn bought before we came up here."

"So why bring them out now?"

"I thought you might wonder where they came from. I'm sure she'll want to take them back to Denver with her. Besides, getting them together made me feel closer to her."

Seth watched as Brad picked up the sweatshirt depicting the mallard duck.

"Where did she get this?"

"A shop in Green Bay. At the time, we got quite a laugh out of it and as you know, Mallard's is her biggest account. As though trying to change the subject, Brad put down the sweatshirt. "Last night you said something about Katelyn being afraid of the woods. Why?"

"I told you last night about how she said she got lost in the woods as a kid. It terrified her."

"Strange, Genean tells about having a nightmare as a child. She says she can still remember it. In it she went hiking and got lost in the woods."

Seth nodded. "They say things like that happen with twins, especially separated twins."

"Are you two going to gab all day, or are you going to take me out and feed me?" Terri said, interrupting Seth's train of thought.

"The lady sounds hungry," Seth commented

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“From what I hear, she gets dangerous when she gets hungry,” Brad teased.

“You bet I get dangerous. It’s not a pretty sight.”

Brad chuckled at her comment and Seth thought how strange it sounded to hear someone laugh. The last laughter he heard came from Katelyn on the ride back to Mallard’s Nest last night. After the confrontation, he thought he’d never hear laughter again. Once in the car, Seth turned to Terri. “After all of this, are you and Randy still considering adoption?”

“I don’t think we’ll change our minds. Of course, we know how we’ll handle the situation, especially now.”

“I thought last night might have scared you off.”

Terri sighed deeply. “It will take a lot more than this to scare us off. We want a child too badly to worry about what could happen twenty-five years down the road. If anything, it will make us better parents.”

* * * *

To Katelyn’s surprise, she’d become almost comfortable with Randy and Genean’s presence. Even though the conversation was one she dreaded, she listened intently to their stories about growing up in Wisconsin.

Still unable to accept her connection to this family, she began to envy them. Not only did they have each other but also there were other children in their surrogate family. Katelyn grew up alone, with no one to confide in, no one to share childhood memories.

She only had to look at Randy and Genean to assure herself they were her brother and sister, but she wondered if she’d ever fit in. In her heart, she knew she belonged to no one. Her parents bought her, but did they love her? Her birth family gave her away. No matter what the reason, they hadn’t wanted her. How could Randy and Genean profess their desire to include her in their family at this late date?

The phone beside the bed rang and Katelyn gratefully allowed Randy to answer it.

“Katelyn Devereaux’s room.”

His words sounded strange to her. Over the years she became obsessed with answering for herself. She remembered, painfully, how her parents allowed their servants to answer both phone and door for them, to screen visitors and callers.

“Brad, Seth and Terri are here,” Randy said, when he hung up the phone. “I told them we’d come down for coffee.”

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“Promise me Seth won’t come up here,” she pleaded. She could hear the terror in her own voice and wondered if Randy and Genean noticed it.

“Why are you so upset?” Genean asked. “He’ll be anxious to see you.”

“I don’t want to see him. Not just yet. I said some nasty things last night. I have to decide how I feel about him before I see him again.”

Genean squeezed Katelyn’s hand, reassuringly. “If it’s so important to you, I’ll try to explain things to Seth. I just don’t know how he’ll take it.”

Katelyn watched Randy and Genean leave the room, and then closed her eyes, welcoming the sleep, which came almost instantly.

In her dream, *Katelyn ran through a wooded area at Mallard’s Nest. Behind her, she could hear voices. “Katie, stop, it’s Daddy. I love you.”*

“If you love me, why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“About my family.”

“We’re your family, bought and paid for,” he said, taking hold of her arm.

She wrenched away from his grip and ran on, leaving her even more terrified of the woods and the darkness.

“Where are you, Kaye? The two of us can be together now. Daddy’s gone, Mommy’s gone, and it’s just you and me to share everything. Don’t you know I love you?” Ken asked.

“You don’t love me, you love the agency and my money. I thought I made it clear when I fired you, I don’t need you. I don’t want you, and I certainly don’t love you.”

Ken’s laughter infuriated her, humiliated her. Before she could raise her hand to slap his face, he disappeared. Only his laughter remained to remind her of his twisted plans for her.

“Katelyn, Katelyn,” she turned toward the sound of Seth’s voice.

“Oh, Seth, I knew you’d find me. I’ve been so frightened. Hold me. Please hold me. I know you love me.”

“Of course I love you. You look so much like Genean, I decided if I couldn’t have the original, I’d settle for the duplicate.”

“NO, NO,” Katelyn screamed.

“Katie, are you OK?”

Katelyn opened her eyes to see Suzie standing beside the bed, a worried expression on her face.

“How did you get here? How did you know?”

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“Randy Mallard called me last night. All he said on the machine was you’d been hurt. When I called here, I talked to Seth and he filled in the gaps. I just met your family, they seem very nice.”

“Don’t call them my family, Suz. They’re strangers who say they’re my family, who happen to look like me.”

“Happen to look like you! Genean is your twin sister. They said they’ve been searching for you, trying to find you. As a last resort they turned to the agency for help.”

“Let’s not talk about them now. I suppose Seth is lurking outside the door waiting for you to soften me up enough to let him in.”

“No. He left right after I got here. He said he had to pick up Jack at the Green Bay airport.”

“Uncle Jack? Why’s he coming here?”

“Because Randy called him after he called me.”

“Why did Seth have to be the one to go? Jack’s bound to tell him about Martin. Oh, Suz, I’ve made a terrible mess out of everything.”

“Don’t think about it now. Seth told me he’s going to have lunch with us, and then he’s going back home. He’s certain you’ll never want to see him again. Believe me, he knows nothing about Martin and I’m certain Jack won’t be foolish enough to tell him.”

Katelyn knew she couldn’t let Suzie know how disappointed word of Seth’s plans left her. For a few wonderful days, she thought he loved her. In one terrible minute, she learned the truth. No matter what he told her, he was and always would be in love with Genean. “It’s just as well. I was a fool to cheat on Martin, especially with someone who is in love with a woman he can’t have.”

CHAPTER 12

Seth found the traffic uncommonly heavy. At last he arrived at the airport with only minutes to spare before the arrival of the shuttle from Chicago. Why had he offered to pick up Katelyn's lawyer? If he hadn't, he could have been half way back to the lake by now.

Entering the terminal, he saw the people from the flight congregating in the waiting area. Among the excited vacationers, Jack Townsend stood out like a sore thumb. Dressed in a three-piece suit, the man looked uncomfortable amid his more casual fellow passengers. To Seth's surprise, a man of almost sixty years of age accompanied him.

"Mr. Townsend?" Seth asked, as he approached the older man.

"Yes. You must be Seth Miller."

"How is Katie doing this morning?" the man who had arrived with Jack asked.

"Her brother, Randy, says she's in a lot of pain. She has more than twenty stitches in her head and they did surgery on her leg last night."

"I don't know where my manners are. Seth Miller, this is Katie's friend, Martin Collier."

"Fiancée," Collier corrected.

"That's your opinion, Martin. Let's not get into our differences now."

The man extended his hand and Seth took it, taken aback by the knowledge of his identity. "I'm pleased to meet you."

"No you aren't." The man's tone was cold and almost threatening. Add to that the redness of his face in contrast to his white hair and Seth suddenly wondered if he should fear for his life. *At this moment, he looked like he wants to punch my lights out.*

"I know you were at a secluded cottage with Katie. I told her to get her head together with this vacation. I knew something was bothering her, I just didn't know what. I told her a little summer fling never hurt

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anyone. I thought it was best for her to get something like that out of her system before we get married.”

Seth nodded. *How could I have been so blind? How could I have allowed her to use me? She didn't want a lasting relationship. Hell, she already had one with Martin. He was so open, he even suggested she have a fling. She hadn't meant any of it, not even when she said she hadn't been kissed the way I kissed her since she ended her relationship with the man who broke her heart. How could I have believed such a convenient lie?*

The drive from the airport to the hospital was an exceptionally quiet one. At last they parked the car. Martin got out immediately to get the luggage from the trunk, leaving Seth alone with Jack.

“You love her, don't you?” Jack questioned.

“I thought I did. I certainly didn't know about him. If I had, nothing would have ever happened. It looks like I've been played for a fool.”

“Not really, son. Katie is a very confused young woman. After her relationship with a man named Ken, she met Martin. He was a friend of her parents. As you can see, he's a lot older than she is. At his age he could almost be her father I never thought anything would come out of it. I still don't. You should know he's asked her to marry him, even given her a ring, but she hasn't given him an answer. In my opinion, she wants to do what she thinks would make her father happy. Maybe now she'll see the relationship for what it is, friendship and nothing more.

“It doesn't matter. We won't be seeing each other again. Not only for the obvious reasons, but because she blames all of this on me. It's for the best. I need to get back to my life and she needs to get back to hers.”

Before Jack could answer, Martin came from behind the car, carrying the bags. “I think I have everything. Are you ready to go up and see Katie?”

“Not until I talk to her brother. We need to find out if she is up to company or if she is resting.”

They found the Mallards and Karstens sitting at a table, with Suzie, in the cafeteria.

“You're just in time for lunch,” Randy greeted them.

“Who's with Katelyn?” Seth asked, unable to control the concern in his voice.

Suzie got to her feet and embraced Seth. “The doctor came in to see her, so I left. She looked so tired, I told her someone would be back after lunch.”

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Seth made the necessary introductions, and then excused himself. Although everyone insisted he stay for lunch, he knew he had to leave.

On an impulse, he stopped at the gift shop and bought a rose, its stem encased in a small glass vial of water. At the desk, he asked for Katelyn's room number, then hurried upstairs.

Katelyn lay in the bed, looking small, so very small. To his relief, she slept soundly, unaware of his presence.

He couldn't help but remember what Jack said about the relationship between Katelyn and Martin. *Does he not approve of it or was he trying to make me feel better about the past few days?*

He placed the rose on the bedside table. Before leaving he wrote a note on the gift card the girl at the shop gave him. *Thanks For A Wonderful Memory—Please Don't Forget Me—If You Need Me You Know Where You Can Find Me—Seth.*

* * * *

"Did you and your young man have a good talk?" Jack asked, once he seated himself beside the bed.

"If you mean Seth, he's not my young man, Uncle Jack. We couldn't have talked, because I haven't seen him," Katelyn replied.

Jack picked up the rose from the bedside tray and glanced at the note. "This sounds like he cares. You have to remember he picked me up at the airport. It didn't take much to realize the love he has for you."

Katelyn looked at the rose Jack held to his nose. "What does the note say?" she asked.

Jack held out the square heavy piece of paper so she could take it. "Read it for yourself."

She read Seth's words, unable to hold back her tears.

Through her tears she could see the smile on Jack's face. "Like I said, the man loves you."

Again she read the words. These were from the man that betrayed her. They were convenient, nothing more. "The man is a great actor, even on paper."

"What do you mean?"

"He doesn't want me, he wants Genean. Since he can't have her, he'll settle for me. I refuse to be second best. I won't be a substitute for my sister."

Jack smiled. "Do you realize you just called Genean Karsten your sister? Have you accepted them?"

"Do I have any choice, Uncle Jack? Genean is my twin sister and Mallard's is my biggest account. Rejecting them would hurt her and

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jeopardize the agency's standing with Mallard's. It's better for all concerned if I become as good an actress as Seth Miller is an actor. Trust me, Uncle Jack, I know what I'm doing."

"I doubt it Katie, I really doubt it. These past few months you've been on an emotional roller coaster. You're doing what you've done all your life. You're going along with what you think people want you to do. Maybe you should follow your heart rather than that brilliant mind of yours."

"And maybe not. Don't you see I can't do what I want to do? I have responsibilities, people who depend on me. Daddy brought me up to know what I have to do. Somehow, he turned me into a little Max Devereaux. Like it or not, I don't know how to react any other way."

"Give it time, Katie, with your family as well as with Seth Miller."

"I will have to give it time with my family. The thing you seem to forget, my future is with Martin and he's waiting for me back in Denver."

"Did I hear my name mentioned?"

Katelyn looked up at the sound of Martin's voice. "I didn't know you were here." Just seeing him in her room terrified her. She felt like a little girl who got caught doing something that was forbidden and she knew her concerns sounded in her voice.

"I wouldn't be anywhere else. I'm so sorry this had to happen to you, darling. Jack told me about what you've been going through. Why didn't you feel you could confide in me?"

Martin's hand brushing against her cheek made her shudder. "You were gone on business when I first found out. I was so devastated, I didn't know if I could make you understand or if you would still want me once you knew I'd been given away. Daddy bought me and I didn't want you to think..."

"Ssh. It doesn't matter. We'll be back in Denver soon and then we can start planning our wedding. I like your brother and sister and look forward to having them join us on our special day."

Katelyn didn't answer. The change in Martin's demeanor from anger to excitement confused her. He wanted her to be excited about a wedding she had never wanted. She hadn't wanted to plan it before her vacation. How could she bring herself to do it now that she knew that another man could find her attractive?

"You didn't answer me, Katie. Wouldn't you like to have your family at our wedding?"

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From the look on Martin's face, she knew that was the last thing he wanted. It would do no good to argue with him about anything when he looked like that. It was the same look she had seen so often when he was talking to clients on the phone and they were disagreeing with him. No one dared to disagree with Martin. "Of course I would, but I can't think about it now."

"Yes, you can, darling. This has all been for the best. By finding out the Mallards are your family you don't have to worry about them wanting your money. They're like me, wealthy enough to have no desire to exploit you. They're not like that Miller character. He may have shown you a good time for a couple of days, but in the end, he would have exploited you."

"What do you know about Seth?"

"Enough to know the two of you were romantically involved this week. I don't blame you for indulging yourself with forbidden fruit. Now that you can see how dangerous it can be, I know you've learned your lesson. You can put all thoughts of Seth Miller out of your mind. He won't ever bother you again."

Katelyn nodded, certain her action was what Martin expected. He would probably hold her affair with Seth against her for the rest of their lives. She didn't want to forget the last few days she spent at Mallard's Nest and on Washington Island. No matter what, no one could erase the memory of Seth's lovemaking.

Marriage to Martin would change little in her life. Perhaps it was for the best. If Seth could so easily betray her to her family, she knew she could never trust him to mean what he said about loving her.

* * * *

By Wednesday, Katelyn was released from the hospital and prepared to return home.

Just being back at Mallard's Nest brought back memories of Seth and what they could have shared. A lifetime with him was now nothing more than dream that could never come true. As she looked around the room, she saw the strangers who professed to be her family. She'd be a liar if she didn't admit that she was beginning to have feelings for them as well. As much as she tried to deny her need of the security a family provided, she knew she needed them in her life as much as they said they wanted her.

"I wish you'd come back to the house with us for a few days," Geanean pleaded, as she helped Katelyn pack her suitcase. "I don't like the idea of you going back to Denver alone."

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“Uncle Jack said he’d meet me at the airport. He’s also getting me some help, even though I told him I don’t need any.”

“I agree with Genean,” Randy said. “Maybe if you stayed here for a while, you and Seth. . .”

“Don’t start again, Randy. I’ve promised to get to know my family. I don’t need to deal with Seth at the same time. Besides, there’s Martin to consider.”

Randy shook his head. “I don’t understand that man at all. He tells us he’s planning to marry you and then he flies out on Monday morning for God knows where, on business. You’d think he’d have more consideration for the woman he’s supposed to love.”

“I understand Martin fully. He owns a multi-million dollar company and has obligations to his stockholders. He can’t shut down everything because I had a little accident. He knows Uncle Jack will take care of me. When he gets back, next month, we’ll have plenty of time for him to fuss over me. As for Seth, whatever happened between us is just that, between us. It doesn’t concern anyone else. I haven’t seen him since the night of the accident. It has to tell you something.”

Randy took her hand in his. “It does. He thinks you want him to stay away. One of you is going to have to take the first step. Unfortunately, the two of you are bullheaded fools. Nothing I can say or do is going to change either of you, so I give up.”

Katelyn smiled. “I know you’d like to see Seth happy and me closer to Wisconsin than Denver, but I don’t think it will happen. If I don’t get back home soon, who will handle your account? Besides, Seth must know I deceived him about Martin. He’ll forget about me.”

Randy shook his head and helped her into the wheelchair. “Are you certain Jack will pick you up at the airport?”

“Positive.”

“Will you come back for Thanksgiving?” Genean asked, as they helped Katelyn into the van.

“I don’t think so. I’m not ready to come back to Wisconsin so soon.” She paused, realizing her words hurt Genean as well as Randy. “I have an idea, why don’t you come to Denver? Let me show you my lifestyle. Martin will be spending the holiday in Japan on business, so we can have some quality time together.”

“We couldn’t impose,” Genean protested.

“Who would be imposing? I have plenty of room at my barn and we could get to know each other better. I may not be the best cook in the world, but I’d enjoy having houseguests.” The thought of being alone for

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the anniversary of her parents' death, brought unbidden tears to her eyes. "Besides, it will be a hard time for me to be alone. I know I have to be in Denver, but the thought terrifies me. Don't ask me to explain why, but somehow it will make me feel closer to Mom and Dad. It was just before Thanksgiving, last year, when they were killed. That alone will make it hard for me to be traveling. You'll be doing me a favor by coming to visit. I'll be where I know I have to be and yet I won't have to face it alone."

Randy bent over to give her a brotherly peck on the cheek. "We'll talk about it. I'm sure Terri would enjoy it. How's the skiing out there?"

"It's great. With luck we could have snow by then and I'd be tempted to show you the slopes."

"I don't believe you," Genean exclaimed. "How can you think of skiing with your leg in a cast and your head held together by all those stitches?"

"Easy. I've been skiing all my life. Daddy bought me my first pair of skis for my third Christmas. Do the two of you ski?"

"I don't, but Randy does. He's always been the adventurous member of this family. He learned to ski in college."

"Where did you go to school, Randy?"

"Vermont. It's where I met Terri. She insisted I had to learn to ski if I wanted to date her. I found I really enjoyed it. As a matter of fact, we've skied in Colorado several times."

"Well, I'll have to work on getting us some snow and finding a baby sitter."

"A baby sitter?" Genean echoed. "Why?"

"Because if you intend to be my sister, you'll have to learn to ski. Give me an hour on the bunny hill and you'll ski like an Olympic champion."

At the Milwaukee airport, Katelyn allowed Randy and Genean to hug her. To her surprise, she found herself reluctant to leave the family who so dramatically entered her life. Reluctant, but at the same time, relieved. Staying in Wisconsin would mean being close to Seth and she didn't know if she could handle seeing him again.

Once on the plane, she pressed her nose against the window beside her first class seat. Leaving Wisconsin meant putting a thousand miles between her and Seth. Would it be enough? She hoped so. In no way could she allow emotions to overrule common sense.

Seth was just what Martin made him out to be, an opportunist who had only his own interests in mind. He didn't want her money, but he did

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want her to be someone she wasn't. She would marry Martin and forget about the affair with Seth.

CHAPTER 13

Seth fastened his seat belt as his flight neared its destination. He'd spent the past four months thinking of little else but Katelyn. She'd turned his life upside down. He prayed the decisions he'd made about his future since he last saw her were the right ones.

The plane landed at the Phoenix airport. Seth marveled at how quickly he could leave the cold and snow of Wisconsin behind and look forward to the warmth of Arizona in November.

He saw his parents as soon as he entered the terminal. Arizona certainly agreed with them. When they sold their home in Oconomowoc and moved here five years ago, he worried about his mother's health. The change was dramatic to say the least. She's regained her strength and enjoyed the retirement community that they called home. He especially liked the way the color had returned to her cheeks. He knew it was because she no longer had to go to work every morning and took more time for herself.

"Seth," his mother called, waving as though he would not have recognized them otherwise. In Wisconsin she would have worn a dark colored dress and a heavy coat, here she was dressed in a bright print skirt and blouse and wore a funky flowered hat. He inwardly laughed at the thought of her reverting back to being the flower child his father insisted he married.

"You look good, son," his father said, pumping his hand.

As he expected it was his mother who fussed over and looked at him with a critical eye. "No, he doesn't, Charles. You've lost weight, Seth. Is that why you came for Thanksgiving? Why you're not coming for Christmas? Did you come to tell us something is dreadfully wrong?"

Seth hugged his mother tightly, and then began to laugh. "Something is wrong, Mom, but it has nothing to do with my health. The two of you haven't eaten yet, have you?"

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“You told us not to, so we didn’t,” his father said, a worried expression on his face.

“Good. Once I get my bag, we’ll go to that Mexican restaurant you like so well. I’ll explain everything over dinner.”

Once they arrived at the restaurant and placed their order, Seth’s mother covered his hand with hers. “Now, what has you so worried?”

“Last summer I met a woman. Her name is Katelyn Devereaux.”

The expression on his father’s face could only be described as complete shock and surprise. “Devereaux? Of the Devereaux Advertising Agency?”

“She owns it, but how did you know about it?”

“You can’t live down here and not know about the Devereaux Agency. Their ads are in most of the papers and on the billboards. I’m getting so I can even recognize their style on TV. It seems like a lot of small companies use them. Just how did you meet her?”

Seth smiled at the memory of meeting Katelyn at the lake. Over dinner he related the events of the week last summer that so changed his life.

When he finished, his mother still looked puzzled. “So, what does all of this have to do with you not coming for Christmas?”

“Like I said, I haven’t talked to her since she went back to Denver. You see, in addition to everything that happened, she’s engaged to be married.”

His mother’s puzzled expression turned to one of utter horror, “Married? If that’s the case, why in the world did she even go out with you, much less spend several days with you at Mallard’s Nest? She sounds as though she’s a tramp.”

“I agree with your mother, Son. This certainly isn’t the kind of girl you want. If she cheated on her fiancée, she would definitely cheat on you.”

“It’s not like that at all. She was confused and alone. I’ve tried to tell myself to forget her for months, but I can’t. I guess I have a hard time condemning her because of the way Collier, that’s her fiancée, treated her. He came out with her lawyer, stayed long enough to make an appearance, and then had to leave on a business trip. Does that sound like someone in love to you?”

“No, but the girl is engaged to marry him. There must be some feelings there.”

“I certainly can’t see why. According to Brad, he’s been gone on business almost steady since she returned to Denver. According to the

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lawyer, this Collier was the man her parents thought she should marry. I have my doubts if there is any love involved in the whole thing.”

As she had throughout the entire narrative, his mother continued to shake her head. “Nonetheless, she is engaged to him. The way I see it, you have no right to interfere.”

“I’m sorry, Mom, I don’t feel the same way you do. I lost Genean to Brad and it damn near broke my heart. Even though I didn’t have a long time to get to know Katelyn, I fell in love with her. I won’t stand by and let her marry someone else. Unless she can convince me this is the man she wants, I plan to fight for her. I know everyone thinks I’m trying to get back the twin I lost, but I really do feel that Katelyn and I were meant to be together. Brad told me they’re all going to see her for Thanksgiving. They promised me she would be coming to Wisconsin for Christmas. I’m going up to Mallard’s Nest to confront her, to ask her to marry me.”

“Marry you? You don’t even know her and you haven’t spoken to her since July. How can you consider marrying a stranger?” His mother’s questions bordered on being almost hysterical.

“Like I said before, I love her. I gave her some space because of what happened at the cottage, but...”

This time it was his father who interrupted him. “I admire your loyalty to her, but what if she says no? What if she tells you she loves Collier? What will you do then?”

“I’ll go on, the way I did when Genean told me she loved Brad. I don’t mean that I won’t try to win her over, but if she chooses Martin over me, I’ll have no other choice.”

“I admire you for following your heart,” his mother said reluctantly. “What I don’t understand is why you haven’t contacted her?”

“Believe me Mom, I’ve tried, but either I get her answering machine or I choke up when I hear her voice. I can’t tell her the things I want to on tape and...”

“You sound more like a lovesick teenager to me,” his father commented. “If you love her, you’ve got to take the bull by the horns. I doubt if the woman is a mind reader. Tell her how you feel for god’s sake.”

“That’s what I’m planning to do at Christmas, Dad.”

“Sounds like a flimsy plan to me. Does she have anything to do with this nonsense about you buying a house in Fish Creek? If she turns you down, do you want to be so close to Egg Harbour? I mean it is entirely possible you would run into each other on occasion. Are you ready for something like this?”

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Seth pondered his answer. In telling his parents about Katelyn, he also told them of his plans to move away from the lake and buy a home in Door County.

“Katelyn showed me how much woodworking means to me. I’d have a much better chance of making a living at it in Door County. In the winter, I can work on it in my spare time, like I do now. Even if I don’t get a full-time teaching job, I’ll be able to substitute teach and I can fall back on my savings. As for the other, I’ve survived being close to Genean and Brad, I can do the same with Katelyn. I’ll still be doing something I want to do and living somewhere I want to live.”

His mother wiped the tears from her eyes. He knew she’d cry. She cried about everything, even good news.

“I’m glad this doesn’t have anything to do with your health,” his father commented. “Once your offer is accepted, why don’t you call a local realtor and put the cottage on the market?”

“Are you certain you want to sell the cottage?”

“You know your mother and I don’t go out there anymore. We’ve only kept it for you. Put it on the market, right after the first of the year.”

Seth knew selling the cottage would be difficult for his parents. He also knew they would never use it on a regular basis again. Their life now centered around their friends in Arizona. During the summer, they came to Wisconsin to visit for a couple of weeks and spent time in Kansas City with Michelle. As much as they enjoyed their visits, he knew they were always glad to get back to the drier air of Arizona.

“I can only pray your decision will make you happy,” his mother said, as they drove home from the restaurant. “I worry what will happen to you if this woman doesn’t love you.”

Seth smiled at his mother’s concern. “This woman has a name, Mom. If Katelyn doesn’t want me, so be it. I’ll have the house and workshop in Fish Creek to occupy my time. I’ll tell you one thing, though, I’m going to make it very difficult for her to turn me down.”

* * * *

The Denver airport buzzed with the pre-holiday activity of the day before Thanksgiving. Waiting for the flight from Green Bay to arrive, Katelyn wondered what she was doing. *Have I lost my mind?*

Six months ago, she was only Max Devereaux’s daughter, she’d been seeing Martin, if not happily, contently, and she’d started to come to grips with her parents’ death. Now she had a brother and sister, a brother-in-law and sister-in-law, and a nephew. She wondered if she really wanted the family she’d found and also pondered her relationship

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with Martin. Genean and Brad, as well as Randy and Terri, had shown her what being happily married meant.

Am I ready to spend my life with a man who travels more than two hundred days out of the year? After what happened just before Martin left for Japan, Katelyn shuddered with apprehension just thinking of it. They'd said their good-byes at his favorite restaurant before he took her back to her place. His sterile kiss left her cold. It was nothing like Seth's mind spinning kiss.

Once Katelyn heard Martin pull out of the driveway, she purposefully marched to the kitchen and retrieved the scrap of paper from under the magnet on her refrigerator, one she had obtained from information. She punched in Seth's number. The phone had just started to ring when she heard the front door open. She whirled around and to her surprise Martin entered the living room.

"Just whom were you in such a hurry to call?" He demanded, the veins in his neck stood at attention and an ugly purple was replacing the normal color of his face in his anger.

"Hello," Seth said on the other end of the line.

She quickly hung up the receiver and crumpled the paper in her hand.

"Answer me!"

"I was just calling Genean to confirm their flight times for this week."

To her amazement, Martin grabbed her hand and forced her fingers open, stripping the paper from her grasp. Her heart beat at a terrifying rate and her stomach threatened to rebel.

Angry sparks flew from his eyes, as he looked at the word SETH printed on the paper along with his number.

"I should have known. How long have you been talking to *him*?"

"I haven't."

"You don't make a good liar, Katie. You had your fling. It's best if you realize that it's over. When I return at Christmas, we'll have more time to talk about this, and when we do, I expect to see my ring on your finger. In fact, start planning the wedding while I'm gone. I'll clear my calendar for Valentine's Day. It should be the perfect time for a wedding. I'm certain you can have all the plans in the works by the time I get here."

"Why did you come back in just now?"

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“I thought you might be interested in my itinerary. Of course, I can see you’re more interested in going behind my back. Just remember Katie, once we’re married, all of this foolishness *will* stop!”

Martin released his grip on her arm and stormed out of the house. Once he was gone, she looked down at the red mark on her wrist. He’d never used any kind of force with her before. Could this outburst have been triggered by jealousy? If it were, did it mean he actually loved her?

“Katelyn!” The sound of someone calling her name pulled her from her memories.

She recognized Randy as he hurried to her side. “You look great, Katelyn,” he said, taking her into his arms.

“You don’t look so bad yourself.” It surprised her to realize how easily she was able to say the words.

In turn, each of the adult members of the family hugged her before she felt a tug on her skirt. “You look like my Mommy.”

Katelyn knelt beside the child and stared into the face of Brad’s carbon copy. “If I look like your Mommy, you must be Adam. I’m your Aunt Katelyn. I’ve been looking forward to meeting you. I’ve got some very special things planned for you to do.”

“What kind of things Aunt-Aunt. . .”

“Adam’s having a little trouble saying Katelyn,” Brad said.

“I know how it is. It’s a hard name to say. How would it be if you called me Aunt Katie? Is that easier for you?”

“Aunt Katie, I like it.”

Genean’s gasp was audible. “Oh, Katelyn, you can’t be serious. He shouldn’t call you that. I mean, I know you prefer Katelyn.”

“You have a lot to get used to out here. Only the people in the office call me Katelyn, everyone else calls me Katie. I thought I made that clear when we talked about this back in Wisconsin.”

“You did, but I guess we have a tendency to forget details now and then,” Randy said. “As I recall, I heard Jack and Suzie call you Katie at the hospital. Even Martin called you that. Speaking of him, where did you say he was spending Thanksgiving?”

Katelyn felt a tug at her heart. She wanted to tell her family Martin changed his mind and would be spending the holiday with her, but she couldn’t. Business came first, his personal life second. She would have to come to grips with his choices. In light of his outburst only days earlier, she even considered telling them how much he loved her. Instead, she reviewed the itinerary he’d given her. “He’s in Japan. From there he

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goes to Hong Kong, and then on to South Africa before he comes home for Christmas.”

“So which do you prefer, Katelyn or Katie?” Genean asked, changing the subject.

“Katelyn, but I answer to either name. If Adam can’t say Katelyn, what’s the harm in calling me Katie?”

Her comment brought smiles to everyone in the group and she found herself relaxing. Without thinking she scooped Adam into her arms.

“Let’s pick up your luggage so we can get out of here.”

Adam’s small arms around her neck warmed her heart. The unconditional love of a child, coupled with the security of family was what she desperately needed. Until this past summer, she hadn’t realized how lonely her life with Martin would be. By opening her heart to these strangers, the pain of losing her parents eased noticeably, but it couldn’t change the inevitable. Martin insisted on an answer to his proposal at Christmas. With no other options, it was something she couldn’t change.

“I can’t believe you thought to bring along a car seat for Adam,” Brad said, when Katelyn pulled the van out of the parking lot.

“Don’t give me the credit. If it weren’t for my neighbors, the Jensens, I doubt if I’d been able to pull this off. They loaned me the van and brought over the car seat. Alice even taught me how to bake a pie. Right now, she’s probably cleaning my kitchen. Her teenagers are planning to keep Adam occupied while we get better acquainted and go skiing.”

“You must have some very special friends. Why would teenagers want to be stuck with a little kid during their Thanksgiving vacation?” Brad asked.

“The Jensens operate a dude ranch. Their son, Todd, runs the summer program for the kids. I thought he’d want to be on the slopes during vacation, but he got hurt playing football so he can’t ski. He wants to teach Adam to ride.”

“To ride what?” Genean inquired.

“A *p-o-n-y*,” Katelyn spelled out the word so Adam wouldn’t understand. “They have an inside track for training the saddle horses. Todd assured me he has the perfect *p-o-n-y* for Adam. Last year he had a two-year-old in one of his classes. I’m certain he won’t let anything happen.”

After stopping for lunch and a tour of the agency, Katelyn turned the van toward home.

“These mountains are as beautiful as they are in my dreams,” Genean said.

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Katelyn had gotten used to hearing about Genean's dreams of Colorado, just as she had begun to recall the dreams she'd experienced about life in Wisconsin.

"You really do live in a barn." Randy exclaimed, as they pulled into the driveway. "Somehow I didn't believe you. It's great."

"I enjoy living here. I use the main floor for living quarters and I keep my studio in the loft. I also keep a drawing board in the living room as well. With the big windows and the skylights, the lighting is perfect for sketching."

Katelyn ushered her guests into the barn, then pointed out bedrooms to the adults. Once they were settled, she knelt down to face Adam. "Now, which suitcase is yours?"

He pointed out a small bag and she could see tears in his eyes. "Where am I gonna to sleep, Aunt Katie?"

She took his small hand in her larger one and started up the spiral staircase leading to the loft. When they reached the top step, Adam uttered a squeal of delight. "It's a tent, a weal tent. Daddy, Mommy, Aunt Katie got me a tent. I'm gonna be campin' out."

Katelyn smiled as she looked around the room. The tent dominated the open area. Three fireplace logs were piled together and red paper was crumpled to simulate a campfire. Several toys were placed in and around the tent and a night-light plugged into the light socket, burned brightly. Before Katelyn could comment, the room filled with her adult house-guests.

"You think of everything," Genean said. "I'm afraid Adam won't want to go home with us."

"You're giving the wrong person the credit again. If it hadn't been for Todd, I would have rented a bed and slept up here myself. He told me kids like to do different things when they're away from home."

Adam had already crawled into the tent without giving Katelyn a chance to show him the upstairs bathroom or the skylight, which would allow him to see the stars once night came. He didn't even notice when they all went back downstairs.

"I can't believe your neighbors did all of this for us," Randy commented, once they sat down in the living room.

"Sometimes I can't believe it myself. Lasse and Alice came over right after I moved in. When Mom and Dad were killed they took me back to their ranch until I convinced them I'd be okay if they let me come home. They even insisted I stay with them again when I came

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home this summer. The way they fuss over me you'd think they were my family rather than my neighbors."

"I'd like to meet them," Randy commented. "I want to thank them for taking such good care of my baby sister."

The conversation turned to more general topics and Katelyn relaxed. To her surprise, no one mentioned Seth. The absence of his name could only mean one thing, she'd been right all along. Seth used her as a convenient substitute for Genean.

* * * *

"I brought along some family pictures, ones we thought you might like to see," Genean said, once the supper dishes were done and Adam was in bed.

"Let me check on Adam and I'll be ready to see them," Katelyn replied.

"You don't need to check on him," Brad said. "I'm willing to bet he's sound asleep by now. I've never seen him so anxious to go to bed before."

Katelyn ignored Brad's words and went up to the loft. The flap of the tent stood open and when she peeked inside, she saw Adam, sound asleep, a stuffed animal cradled in his arms.

If I'd married Ken, I could have a child by now. For a few days, I thought I could have something like this in my future with Seth. How could I have been such a fool?

Turning back toward the stairs, she saw the easel on the far side of the room. The soft light of the moon came in through the skylight and illuminated the work in progress on it. *How could I have been so careless to leave the portrait of Seth out in plain sight?* Quickly, she went over to the easel and took down the picture. Hopefully, no one saw it earlier. At least Martin hadn't ever seen it, since he never went anywhere near the loft she used as a studio.

With thoughts of the picture she's just hidden away still crowding her mind, Katelyn descended the spiral staircase that took her from the loft to the main floor. From her vantage point, she could see Randy and Brad looking out the big windows at the view of the mountains that always awed her. In the living room, Genean sat on the couch unpacking her carry on while, Terri lounged in one of the overstuffed chairs that faced the fireplace.

Genean had unpacked the photo albums by the time Katelyn joined her on the couch. Looking at the pictures of Genean as a child saddened her. She should have been next to Genean, so she could have enjoyed the

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love of her birth family. Although she came to grips with her family's decision, knowing how much she missed hurt.

Without warning, Katelyn turned the page and saw Seth's face smiling up at her. Dressed in a tuxedo, she assumed the picture was taken at Genean and Brad's wedding. A lump formed in her throat and tears stung her eyes.

Knowing she needed to get away, Katelyn got to her feet. "Excuse me, I have to check on something in the kitchen."

A single light, over the stove, illuminated the kitchen she designed when she first bought the barn. She braced herself by putting her hands on the counter, trying not to cry. To her surprise, someone wrapped his arms around her. She turned to come face to face with Randy.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

She shook her head. "There's nothing to talk about."

"Isn't there? I saw the way you reacted to Seth's picture. I also saw the portrait you're working on upstairs. Have you heard from him since you left Wisconsin?"

She shook her head.

"I saw his phone number under the magnet on the refrigerator," he held up the crumpled piece of paper for emphasis. "Have you tried to call him?"

Katelyn realized she'd again been careless. Not only had she not taken down the picture of Seth from the easel, she'd neglected to remove the scrap of paper held by the magnetized clip on the refrigerator. "I've dialed that number a hundred times. A couple of times I even got his answering machine. Just hearing his voice made me choke up so bad I couldn't leave a message. I'm afraid I've made a terrible mistake."

"You certainly have. Seth deserves to know how you feel."

"How can I tell him how I feel when I don't know myself? I'm so torn about everything, I don't know if I'm coming or going. What if I call him and he blows me off? I knew the minute I saw Genean he didn't want me. He only wanted a substitute for her. Since he hasn't called what else can I think? His silence certainly confirms my suspicions."

"A substitute for Genean? Where did you get such an idea?"

"He told me he, well you know, he dated Genean before she married Brad. Please Randy, let's not talk about Seth. I had a fling while I was on vacation, nothing more. The only good thing to come out of it was finding my family. I know it didn't seem like it at first, but you've all become very important to me."

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“What about the portrait? How can you explain working on something that so painfully reminds you of Seth?”

“I promised him I would do a portrait of him from the sketch I made after I first met him. I never go back on my word. I know it’s not exactly what he had in mind, but at least it’s something.”

“I think you’re wrong about Seth’s feelings. Maybe he’s having as much trouble contacting you as you are contacting him. If you ask me you’re both being as stubborn as a pair of mules.”

“Maybe we are, but that’s not your problem. For the rest of your visit, promise me we won’t talk about him.”

Randy held her closer and allowed her to shed the tears she’d refused to shed for Seth earlier.

“If you don’t want to talk about Seth, consider it a closed subject. I only have one thing to say. I think you care for him. I know he has feelings for you. If neither of you wants to make the first move, there’s nothing else I can do. Seth is my friend, you are my sister, and I hate to see either of you hurt. Give it some thought, Katelyn.”

The idea of Seth wanting her brought back memories of their love-making on Washington Island. No one ever made her feel the way Seth did. *I’ll contact him after the holidays. After Martin leaves, Seth deserves to know about the wedding.*

By the next morning a fresh dusting of snow had covered the ground. “We’re off to the slopes this morning,” she announced at breakfast.

“Are you really planning to go skiing so soon after your accident?” Genean asked, her nose wrinkled in disgust.

“You bet I am and so are you. The Jensens will be here any minute to take Adam for the day, and then we’re all going to tackle the ski runs.”

“I really think our dear sister would do much better back here sipping hot chocolate and reading one of those sappy books I know she packed,” Randy teased.

“No way!” I told you in Wisconsin that you were going to learn to ski. Trust me I’m not a bad teacher. It will be a lot of fun.”

The way Genean rolled her eyes, reminded Katelyn of the day she spent with Seth on Washington Island. The only difference was on that day she had been the one rolling her eyes at the prospect of riding mopeds.

All the way to the slopes, Genean grumbled about how she would surely break her leg. Once at the lodge, Katelyn rented skis for her

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guests. While Randy, Terri and Brad trudged off to the lift to the more advanced runs, she took Genean to the bunny hill.

It took almost an hour for the Genean to find her stride and keep her balance all at the same time. When she did, they moved on the next level.

By evening they were all exhausted. "I had a great time," Genean finally admitted. "When we get back home, I think we should all invest in skis and go down to one of the resorts for a weekend after the first of the year."

Randy put his finger in his ear as though trying to clean out the wax. "Did I just hear you right, dear sister? Are you admitting that you had a good time on the slopes?"

"Guilty as charged," Genean replied when she stopped in front of the main house of the Jensens' dude ranch.

Adam came running from the house before any of them could get out of the vehicle.

"I wode a howse! I wode a weal howse today! Can I get a pony for Chwistmas?"

"Whoa, slow down a bit," Randy said, as he swung the child into his arms. "I think a horse will have to wait until summer, when I can get that barn of ours fixed up. With the shape it's in now a horse would freeze to death. Besides, a horse is a big investment. We'll have to look for just the right one."

Katelyn smiled at the scene before her eyes. She certainly didn't want this weekend to come to an end, but she knew it would. Her family would go back to Wisconsin, and she would have to start planning the wedding Martin so desperately wanted. If she didn't she worried about her safety. The side she's seen of him just before he left on his last trip more than frightened her. She'd never envisioned him as a violent man, but more and more she was becoming concerned enough not to cross him unnecessarily.

CHAPTER 14

Katelyn sat in the living room, staring into the fireplace. A cozy fire burned and the lights from the Christmas tree Randy and Brad insisted on buying and decorating at Thanksgiving gave the room a homey atmosphere. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve. She knew she should have called Genean earlier in the week and told her she wouldn't be coming to Wisconsin for Christmas, but she hadn't. She kept thinking Martin would get home in time to make the trip with her. She finally sent the presents to Mallard's Nest by next day air, in the hopes of them arriving at the Door County cottage about the same time as Randy and Genean.

Still lost in her thoughts, the telephone rang. "Katelyn Devereaux," she answered automatically.

"Katelyn?" she recognized Genean's voice immediately. "They just delivered your packages. It means you aren't coming home for Christmas, doesn't it?"

Katelyn could hardly keep from crying at the hurt in her sister's voice. "I'm sorry. I know you wanted me to come for the holidays, but I just can't. I thought Martin would get here in time for us to come together, but I haven't heard from him."

"I kept hoping you would change your mind and come by yourself. I even put off mailing your presents. Now it's too late. I brought them up here in the hopes you might come home."

"Please don't worry about it. If the box arrives late, I can pretend I'm a little girl again. My folks observed the twelve days of Christmas with a gift for each day. Daddy said we were Christmas people, not Advent people. We never even put up our tree until Christmas Eve."

"I still wish you were coming. I so planned on having a real family Christmas this year. I hate the thought of you being alone."

"I'm not doing this to hurt you. Maybe I'll be able to come next year. Has Adam got his pony yet?"

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“No, but he hasn’t talked about anything else since we got back from your place.”

Katelyn swallowed hard. She could almost see the sparkle in Adam’s eyes at the sight of a Christmas tree and presents stacked beneath it. Before saying anything else, she had to compose herself. She was foolish not to make plans to go to Wisconsin alone. She should have known better than to depend on Martin remembering anything as frivolous as Christmas. “Has Randy arrived yet?” she finally asked.

“They pulled in right behind us. I’ll get him.” Genean must have turned away from the phone, as her voice sounded muffled. “I’ve got Katelyn on the line. She wants to talk to you,” Genean said, before Katelyn heard her start to cry. The sound of her sister’s sobs made her heart ache.

“Merry Christmas, Sis. I wish you were going to be here,” Randy greeted her.

“Next summer, I promise. I planned to call and wish you all a Merry Christmas later this afternoon.”

“I certainly don’t like the idea of you spending the holiday alone. What are the Jensens doing?”

“They’re going to Colorado Springs.”

“And Suzie?”

“She’s in Wisconsin. I took her to the airport last night.”

“Martin?”

“The last I heard he was in South Africa on business, but he did say he’d try to make it back in time to celebrate. We’re supposed to be planning the wedding over the holiday.”

“What about Jack?”

“What is this, twenty questions? Uncle Jack has dutifully asked me over for Christmas dinner and I have dutifully told him no. I’ll be just fine.” On an impulse, she added, “I love you all.”

“We love you too.”

Trying not to cry, she continued. “Genean says all of my presents for you arrived safely. Don’t you dare open them until Christmas.”

“I promise. Rather than opening presents, I should come out there and paddle you.”

“You probably couldn’t get a flight. Like I told Genean, maybe next year.”

She hung up the phone and burst into tears. For the first time in months, she didn’t want to be alone. She wanted to go to Wisconsin for

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Christmas, but going there would mean having to run into Seth at some point.

She looked at the ring she put on the third finger of her left hand after her family left at Thanksgiving. The embarrassingly large stone mocked her. How could she be thinking about running into Seth when as soon as Martin got home she would be planning her wedding?

She glanced over at the portrait she finished just last night. Seth's face smiled at her from the drawing board on the other side of the room.

"Why did everything have to blow up? I could have been so happy with you. Why haven't you even tried to contact me?" She knew the picture couldn't hear her, but saying the words aloud seemed the natural thing to do.

Why haven't you tried harder to contact him? The phone lines run both ways, you know.

Katelyn sat staring at the picture. *I have tried to contact him. I even tried again right after everyone left at Thanksgiving. The first time I got a busy signal and the second the answering machine picked up. I just couldn't leave a message. I feel too guilty about deceiving him last summer. Besides, he's the one who betrayed me to Randy and Genean. My first impression was right. He is still in love with her. Why else would he not try to call?*

Her inner voice had no answer to her question. Instead, her mind rambled on to other things. *You should go to Wisconsin for Christmas, Katie. You need to be with your family,* Uncle Jack's words echoed in her ears. *If nothing else, you could use the trip to look into the office we've talked about opening out there.*

The idea of the office was Jack's, but she'd come to agree with him. She should have an office in the Midwest. With the growing clientele east of the Mississippi, it would make calling on clients much easier. If she were to find the right manager and the right location, she could have the office up and running by spring.

The phone rang again. She tried to compose herself before she answered, but she knew whoever the caller was, they would be able to tell she'd been crying.

"Katie, it's Martin. I called to tell you to take my credit card and buy yourself something nice for Christmas."

"Where are you? I expected you home today."

"I ran into some business acquaintances and they invited me to Nairobi for Christmas."

"Nairobi? You can't be serious. What about me?"

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"I thought you said Christmas didn't mean much to you. I didn't think you'd mind. This is business."

"To hell with your business. Christmas does mean something to me. If I'd known you weren't coming home, I'd have gone to Wisconsin."

"*Wisconsin?* I wish you'd never found that damnable family of yours. I suppose you want to see Seth what's-his-name."

"For your information I didn't *find* my family, I tripped over them. As for Seth, his last name is Miller and so what if I do run into him? I mean nothing to him. He proved that last summer. I was nothing more than a tangible reminder of what he lost when Genean married Brad."

"Oh, you were tangible, all right. What kind of a lover was he anyway?"

"Does it really matter? I've tried to get you to take me to bed whenever you were home, but you just aren't interested. Is it that you don't have the time or you can't muster enough enthusiasm for the project?"

"That was a low blow, Katie. I told you before. I respect your feelings. I wouldn't want to cheapen our relationship with premarital sex."

"What relationship? A long distance phone call to say you'd rather stay in Africa than spend time with me doesn't constitute a relationship."

"There's no use in fighting over the phone. I'll come over when I get back to the States and we can iron all of this out. I'm afraid the holidays bring out the worst in you. I'll be back after the first of the year. When I do, I expect the wedding to be completely planned."

"Don't expect me to be waiting for you. As for the wedding, don't look for it to ever happen. You'll find your ring at your office. As for me, I may just sell the barn and move somewhere else. Wherever it is, don't expect me to give you a forwarding address."

The click on the other end of the line ended the call. She knew she should be upset. She had just ended a relationship that could have resulted in marriage, but what kind of marriage? Martin made it perfectly clear they didn't need to think about a house. When he was in town she could spend her nights with him in the penthouse apartment above his offices. When he wasn't, he knew she would be more comfortable staying at her place. Their brief times together would, probably, give them children, but could she raise them alone? It was better to get out now and remain single for the rest of her life than to live with an empty, loveless marriage.

What am I doing sitting here? I have to face Seth sometime. It might as well be now.

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The thought of filled flights frightened her, but she called the travel agency anyway. To her surprise, she was able to book a seat on an early morning flight to Milwaukee. By renting a car, she could be in Door County by three at the latest.

If she hurried, she could pack a bag and still be able to deliver Martin's ring to his office before going to Uncle Jack's home to spend the night. She knew both he and his wife, Lois, would be happy to have her and pleased to be able to take her the airport for her flight to Wisconsin.

Seth's portrait caught her attention. On an impulse, she took it off the drawing board and carefully wrapped it for the trip to Wisconsin. On the note she put in with it, she wrote, *Seth, I know this isn't what we talked about, but I did promise you a picture. I found my original sketch when I got home and decided not to go back on my word.—Katelyn.*

When she finished talking to her Uncle Jack, she placed a call to Seth. For some reason, she wanted to talk to him and tell him she decided to come to Wisconsin for the holiday. Maybe she could convince him she still wanted to be friends.

"Ho, Ho, Ho, Merry Christmas," Seth's voice on the answering machine greeted her. "I've gone out of town for the holidays, but I will return your call as soon as I get back. Please leave a message."

She hung up the phone, unable to stop the tears the message generated. Seth told her his parents lived in Arizona. The thought of not seeing him brought on more tears. Drying her eyes, she knew she should be relieved rather than sad. If he went out of town, he must be spending Christmas with them. On this trip, she wouldn't have to deal with him.

* * * *

Seth made a final check of things in the house. He had changed the message on his answering machine and given a number where he could be reached to the people he thought should have it.

He'd confirmed Brad and Genean's invitation to Mallard's Nest when he returned from Phoenix three weeks ago. Both Brad and Randy assured him they would be able to talk Katelyn into coming to Wisconsin for Christmas. He hoped they were right. He needed to talk to her and tell her what a fool he'd been for not contacting her over the last months.

Hell, he didn't want to say that. He only wanted to tell her how much he loved her and that he hoped she would remember what they shared and give him a chance over Martin Collier. He thought of the numerous letters he'd written since returning from Arizona, all of which ended up in his wastebasket. He even called her number on three different occasions. When he got her answering machine on the first two tries,

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he hung up. Even when she answered, his throat tightened and he couldn't bring himself to say anything. Just hearing her voice had been enough.

He knew he should have talked to her and made the first step. He also knew how much he hurt her. It was nothing he could resolve over the phone, especially with Collier in the picture.

This isn't the time to think about Katelyn and what this week could mean to me.

From under the tree, he pulled the neatly wrapped presents to take to Door County. He'd filled a grocery box with them when he picked up the last package. The small box, wrapped in red foil wouldn't be put in with the rest of the presents. He didn't want anyone to know about the ring he bought for Katelyn until he knew if she would accept it as well as him.

He slipped the small box into his coat pocket, then picked up the bigger box of packages and went out to the car to put it in the trunk.

He came back into the house and heard his voice on the answering machine. Before he could reach the phone the message ended and the caller hung up.

Had he imagined it, or did he hear a muffled sob from the other end before the dial tone came on. He replayed the tape several times. With each playing, he became more and more convinced someone on the other end had been disappointed to have reached his machine and not him.

It couldn't have been too important, or they would have left a message. No use in using up valuable tape space on a hang up. If it had been important, they would have left a message. Deciding it must have been a telemarketer he didn't even take time to check the caller ID. It probably would show up as out of area anyway.

He quickly pressed the button to erase the message then made a final check of the house. Everything seemed to be in order. Only his suitcase was left to take out to the car.

With everything packed, he pulled out of the driveway. The snow, which fell two days earlier, left the countryside freshly white.

CHAPTER 15

Seth made good time getting to Door County. Dusk had just fallen when he pulled onto the country road leading to the cottage.

All during the trip, he thought about the property he was buying in Fish Creek. If things didn't go as he expected with Katelyn, would he be happy there? He decided it wouldn't matter. He would have the house he always wanted and wouldn't have to be dependent on his friends when he wanted to go to Door County to relax. Living there would make working for a living fun.

The trip to Mallard's Nest for the holidays coincided with the closing on the house. Before he would have to return to the lake, on New Years Day, the house would be his. He would have six months to fix it up the way he wanted.

Tomorrow would be Christmas Eve. With luck, he would be giving Katelyn the ring he carried in his pocket. He knew it was a fantasy. What if she showed up with Collier? Even if she didn't, what if she laughed in his face when he told her how he felt? It didn't matter. At least he would get it off his chest and be able to get on with his life.

Brad assured him everyone would get there this afternoon and he should come early. By the vehicles in the driveway, Seth knew Randy and Brad had both gotten there. He wondered when Katelyn would arrive or if she came out with one of the couples.

Before turning off the engine, he reached into the glove box and popped the trunk. The map in the lighted cavity reminded him of Katelyn. She poured over the map all during the time they shared, months earlier. He could see her sitting in the seat next to him. Of course, he knew his memory only played tricks on him. Katelyn was never in this car. He traded vehicles, as he always did, in October. With buying the house, he knew this might be his last new car for a long time.

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After closing the glove box and taking out the keys, he opened the door and went around to the trunk to get the box of gifts. Leaving it open, he went up and knocked on the door.

“Merry Christmas,” Randy greeted him, when he answered the door.

“Merry Christmas to you, too. If you’ll take this box, I’ll go back out for the rest of the stuff.”

After bringing in the bag containing his clothes and shaving kit, he greeted Terri, kissing her on the cheek.

“We planned on you using your usual room. Since you know where it is, we’ll let you get settled.”

Seth went upstairs and into the first room on his left. He put his bags on the bed, marveling, as usual, at the size of Mallard’s Nest. Each of the six bedrooms had its own bathroom as well as a view of either the woods or the bay. From this room, Seth looked out into the woods. Staring at the darkness of the trees reminded him of running through them in the desperate search for Katelyn.

He had hardly put his bag on the bed, when Adam came running into the room. “Uncle Seth, I thought you’d nevw get hewe.”

Seth scooped Adam into his arms. “It’s not all that late. I heard you learned how to ride a horse. It sounds like you might be ready for a pony by next summer.”

“Aunt Katie’s fwieud, Todd, teached me to wide. He says I’m weal good. He says I can come back and wide anytime I want.”

“Let’s go downstairs, buddy. You can tell me all about it later. Where are your Mom and Dad?”

“In the bedroom.”

Seth let his mind wander to day when they first arrived at the cottage. That bedroom was the one where he had first intended to make love to Katelyn. Instead, she’d been frightened of the prospect. *Was it because we were at Mallard’s Nest or because she wasn’t ready to have an affair? Did she allow me to make love to her on Washington Island only because she felt she had no other choice?*

“Did you heaw me, Uncle Seth?” Adam questioned, tapping Seth on the shoulder.

“I’m sorry. I guess I didn’t. What did you say?”

“Mommy is cwying. She’s bewy bewy sad.”

“Why is she crying?” Seth asked, concerned by Adam’s expression.

“Aunt Katie’s not coming. Why does it make my Mommy so sad?”

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Seth's mind whirled. He couldn't find the words to answer Adam. In his innocent childlike way, he shattered every hope Seth harbored for the future.

"I'm going downstairs, Adam, I need to talk to your Uncle Randy. Why don't you stay up here and play for a while?"

Adam jumped off Seth's lap and ran into his room across the hall.

In a daze, Seth hurried down the stairs to confront Randy. "Is it true? Is Katelyn staying in Denver for Christmas?"

"Who told you? I wanted to get you a drink before I broke the news to you. Let me make you an eggnog and we can talk about it."

"Did you tell her I'd be here? Am I the reason she's not coming home?"

Randy handed Seth a cup of eggnog and led the way into the living room. A fire in the fireplace warmed the open area.

"No one told her you'd be here. I think she's still having trouble accepting us and considering this as her home. Besides, she's waiting for Martin to get back from Africa."

"I don't know why. He treats her like dirt and still she waits for him. I certainly can't understand it."

"Neither can I," Genean said, as she came into the room. "We all got along so well over Thanksgiving. I thought for sure she'd be here with us tonight. Even though I hadn't heard from her, I kept hoping. When I called she said she decided to stay in Denver and wait for Martin. I guess I can kind of understand her wanting to be with him at Christmas, but why couldn't they come here?"

"I told you earlier, Sis, Katelyn needs time to adjust to having a family. We just have to be understanding of her needs."

Seth nodded his agreement. "Randy's right. You've thrown a lot at her in the past few months. She'll come around when she's ready. Maybe it's for the best if she stays in Denver with Martin. The way it sounds, he's not around very much. They can probably use the time together to make plans for their wedding."

"We understand her feelings, but her not coming for Christmas still hurts. Mostly, I feel bad about getting you up here on a wild goose chase. I know you'd planned to clear the air with her," Genean continued.

"Don't worry about me. Grab some eggnog and sit down. I'd planned to make my big announcement tomorrow, but I think we could all stand some good news."

"Good news?" Terri asked, excitedly. "What kind of good news?"

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“Wait until everyone gets comfortable, then I’ll tell you.” Seth sat down in one of the easy chairs and took a drink of his eggnog. Randy always laced it heavily with rum and brandy and he enjoyed the way the drink warmed its way to his stomach. He knew once he started talking about his new house, it would take the edge off his nerves. He wouldn’t have to worry about sounding disappointed. He only talked about it to his Dad, but he knew just thinking about moving to Door County made him smile uncontrollably.

“So, what is your good news?” Brad asked, once they were all comfortable.

“I’m moving,” Seth said, as calmly as he could.

“Moving?” Genean echoed. “Moving where?”

“I bought a house.”

“You’re kidding,” Brad said. “I thought you were happy living at the lake, comfortable at your folk’s place.”

“I have been, but it’s my folk’s place. I think it’s time I got something of my own.”

“Where are you moving to?” Randy asked, obviously pleased with Seth’s announcement.

“Fish Creek.”

“You’re moving up here?” Genean asked, getting to her feet to give him a hug.

“Well, if I didn’t have good reason for moving to Door County before, I do now. It’s worth it to be so warmly welcomed by the neighbors. You know how much I enjoy spending time here. I finally decided I’d rather have a place of my own than impose on my friends any longer.”

“What kind of a place did you find?” Brad asked. “I know there a lot of houses for sale up here, which one did you buy?”

“It’s a fixer-upper. An older couple, from Chicago, owned it. When they died, they left the entire estate to the church. I guess the parishioners decided they wanted the money more than they wanted a summer get away. To say the least, I got lucky. Of course, I’ll have to spend every weekend up here this winter to get it ready to move into. I don’t think anyone’s been there in the past ten years.”

Randy nodded, as if envisioning the house. “I know the house. Isn’t it close to Margaret and Tink’s place?”

“They’re the ones who put me onto it. They said it needed me.”

“It sounds wonderful,” Brad said. “When you’re up here working, maybe we can come over and help you out.”

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Seth smiled at the offer. Getting this house ready to move into come summer would take a lot of hard work, and doing it on a budget would be even harder. Any help he could get from his friends would be appreciated. He continued to describe the house right down to the barn he wanted to convert into a workshop and sales floor.

“Oh, Seth, I wish you could have seen Katelyn’s...” Genean stopped, mid-sentence. “I’m sorry.”

Seth ached at the tears in her eyes. “It’s okay. Go ahead with what you started to say.”

“I wish you could have seen Katelyn’s barn. She has large windows to let in plenty of light and the downstairs is her living area. I took lots of pictures.”

“Did you bring them along? I’d like to see them.”

“As a matter of fact, I did.”

Genean got up to get her purse. When she returned she sat down on the floor next to his chair. Seth caught a whiff of her perfume. It reminded him of the way Katelyn smelled.

Before he started shuffling through the prints, Brad put his hand on Seth’s arm. “Are you sure you want to see these, Seth? There are a lot of pictures of Katelyn.”

Seth nodded and took the pictures from Genean. He forced himself to study the photos, wishing he were looking at them with Katelyn rather than Genean. When he finished flipping through them, he got up and went into the kitchen.

He could hear Brad following him, but didn’t turn around. “Are you all right?”

Unable to answer for fear of his voice betraying his true feelings, he merely nodded.

“No, you’re not. Believe me, we tried to persuade Katelyn to come for Christmas. We knew if the two of you could get together, all of this nonsense about her blaming you for betraying her would go away. To be truthful, we hoped you could make her see what a stuffed shirt this Collier guy is.”

“I know you did, but she didn’t come, she stayed in Denver. I don’t think she would have come, even if Collier agreed. I know you aren’t the reason she stayed away. I know why she stayed away. She didn’t want to take the chance of running into me. Why do I do these things to myself? First I fall in love with Genean and she falls in love with you. Now I fall for her twin sister and she’s engaged to someone else, to say nothing of

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not being able to stand me. Maybe I should just go home and not inflict my sour mood on the rest of you.”

“Calm down. We want you to stay for Christmas. Whether or not Katelyn agrees, you’re like another member of the family. Even if the two of you don’t get together, you won’t be able to avoid each other forever.”

Seth turned away from Brad and looked out the window at the bay. “I know you’re right. Of course I’ll stay. I need to take a walk. I won’t be gone long, but don’t wait dinner for me.”

Seth grabbed his coat and went out of the patio doors. He needed to walk down to the bay to collect his thoughts. The wind blew across the rough water and seemed to howl Katelyn’s name.

“Damn it, Katelyn, I love you. I know you think I hurt you intentionally, but can’t you even give me a chance to explain things? I know I could make you happier than Collier. If you loved him so much, you would have never agreed to even go out to dinner with me when you were here.”

The wind continued to blow, but it gave him no answers. Instead, it chilled him to the bone.

He had no idea how long he stood, staring at the crashing waves, listening for answers, which didn’t come. Even the cold ceased to affect him, when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned, surprised to see Genean standing behind him.

“We were getting worried about you,” she shouted, above the wind.

“No need to worry. I’ve just been thinking.”

“About what, your new place or Katelyn?”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t have to think anything. I know you’re both bullheaded. You’re afraid to make the first move and she’s afraid to give up the security of marrying Martin in order to find happiness. It’s nothing I can change.”

Genean’s tone made Seth remember Katelyn’s biting words about him setting her up for something she wasn’t prepared to accept.

“And another thing, Seth Miller,” Genean said, shaking her finger in his face, “if you think we’re going to play matchmaker for you, think again. Somehow, you’ll have to work it out.”

Seth silently agreed with her, but before he could say anything she continued her triad. “You know I love you both. Over the past few years, I’ve found another brother and my twin sister. More than anything else,

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I'd like to see the two of you get together, but it will never happen unless one of you takes the first step."

"But..."

"Don't interrupt me, Seth, I'm on a roll and I won't stop until I've had my say. Maybe before you start working on your dream house, you should start working on facing Katelyn. We've been talking about it. If money is a problem, we'll buy you a ticket to Denver. It would be worth it to see the two of you happy. None of us can stand to see both of you so miserable."

Without answering, Seth took Genean in his arms. He couldn't stop the tears that sprang to his eyes. He didn't want to stop them. She'd hit the nail on the head. He knew he had to face Katelyn and tell her how much he cared for her. His friends wouldn't have to buy his ticket to Denver. Once he closed on the house, he would buy it himself. He had a few personal days coming at school. If he didn't get back for the first day after Christmas break, it wouldn't matter.

CHAPTER 16

Katelyn didn't get to the car rental office until after one. Between flight delays and the busy airport, getting to her destination took even longer than she thought it would.

By last, she pulled her car from the parking lot and got onto the Interstate. A light snow dusted the road as she headed north. The further she drove, the harder the snow began to fall. Beneath her tires, the road became slippery and traffic slowed to a crawl.

At three, she'd only gotten as far as Oshkosh and she wondered if she had been wise to come unannounced. She knew she should have called ahead, maybe even suggested someone come and meet her, instead of trying to maneuver the snow covered roads alone.

By four-thirty, she finally turned onto Highway 42. Just outside of Sturgeon Bay a barrage of flashing lights blocked the highway. She slowed, then stopped and watched as a tow truck worked at pulling a car from the ditch.

In the glow of her headlights, an officer came toward her car and motioned for her to roll down her window.

"How much further do you have to go, Ma'am?" To Katelyn's surprise, he began to smile. "Oh, Genean, I didn't recognize your car. Are you going to Mallard's Nest?"

Being taken for her sister caused Katelyn to smile. "I'm not Genean, but I am on my way to the cottage."

"Of course, you're her sister, Miss Devereaux, isn't it?"

"Yes, I am, but how do you know me?"

"I'm the officer who investigated your accident last summer. We're closing the roads, but you can follow the plow back to Egg Harbour. I'll tell him to get you to Mallard's Nest safely. Have a Merry Christmas and give my best to your family."

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“Thank you and Merry Christmas to you too,” Katelyn said, before rolling up the window. She hadn’t realized anyone investigated her accident and wondered why an investigation was necessary.

The tow truck finished pulling the car from the ditch and headed back up the highway before the officer who came to the car motioned her to follow the plow along Highway 42 to Egg Harbour.

* * * *

Seth finished his lunch. He continued to sit at the table talking with Randy and Brad, while the girls did the dishes.

“Why don’t you call Katelyn?” Randy suggested. “At least talk to her.”

“You’re right. What harm could it do?”

“Her number is on the board next to the phone,” Genean said, as he got to his feet.

Seth picked up the phone and entered Katelyn’s number. On the other end, he listened to two rings before the answering machine came on.

“Merry Christmas! You’ve reached the studio of Katelyn Devereaux. The studio, like the office, is closed for the holidays. I will reopen again after the first of the year. If this is a personal call, please leave your name and number so I can call you back. I wish you a Merry Christmas and a prosperous new year.”

Seth waited for the expected beep before he began to speak. “Katelyn, this is Seth. If you’re there, please pick up the phone and talk to me.” He waited a moment to give her a chance to answer. “I’m at Mal-lard’s Nest. Please call me back.”

He hung up the phone. “She’s not answering. I guess I don’t blame her, with her business in her home. The message just said she’s closed for the holidays.”

Brad nodded. “We got a note to the same effect from the office last week. She’ll give you a call back. I’m certain she will.”

“Well, I’m glad you have confidence. I certainly don’t.”

Genean turned from the sink. “I’ve had enough of this. I’m ready to play Trivial Pursuit. Sit down and join us, Seth. You can be on our team.”

Brad turned to Genean and shook his finger in her face. “No way. If Seth’s on anyone’s team, it will be ours. As I remember, he used to beat my butt with consistent regularity.”

“I’ll leave the four of you to fight it out among yourselves. I wouldn’t want to make the odds favor either side. I’ll just go in and see

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what Adam's up to." Seth shoved his hands into his pockets and left the kitchen.

In the living room, he found Adam sitting on the window seat, his nose pressed against the glass, watching the heavy snowfall, and sobbing softly.

"What's this, tears on Christmas Eve? I didn't think anyone cried on Christmas Eve."

The comment seemed ironic to Seth. He couldn't remember being this depressed on any Christmas Eve in the past.

Adam turned from the window and threw his arms around Seth's neck. "I don't think Santa will get here, Uncle Seth"

Seth untangled Adam's arms and set him on his lap. "Oh, I don't think Santa will have a problem. This is like a spring day to him. He lives at the North Pole and it's a lot worse up there. He'll have to bring Rudolph tonight, though. What did you ask Santa to bring you?"

"I wanted to ask for a pony, but Daddy says Santa doesn't bring animals, he only brings toys."

Seth nodded. "Your dad's right. This kind of weather is pretty hard on a pony. So, what did you ask him for?"

Adam began to list several name brand toys, things Seth knew he'd seen advertised on television. "Do you really think Santa will bring you all those toys?"

"Yes! Santa always brings toys."

"You know, Santa only brings toys to good kids, don't you?"

Adam nodded. "I've been weal good."

"Then I guess you've got a good chance at getting what you want."

Adam looked into Seth's eyes. "Mommy's been weal good. Do you think Santa will bring her what she wants?"

"I don't know, Adam, what does your Mommy want?"

"She wants Aunt Katie hewe for Chwistmas."

"I think it's sort of like asking for a pony. I don't think it will work. Your Uncle Randy told me she'll be here next summer."

"Won't be the same," Adam said, the corners of his mouth drooping into a frown. "Mommy's bewy sad now."

"I know, buddy. Say, I saw a game of Uncle Wiggly up in your room. Why don't you go and get it? I haven't played Uncle Wiggly in a long time."

"Do you weally play Uncle Wiggly?" Adam asked, excitedly, obviously forgetting his earlier tears.

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“You bet I do. I used to play with my sister’s kids all the time. I even played it when I was a little boy.”

Adam hurried upstairs while Seth studied the steadily falling snow outside the window. The silent storm made him grateful he came up yesterday and avoided the treacherous roads. The way the snow was piling up, he doubted if there would be any church services tonight. He prayed it would let up enough for him to catch a flight the day after Christmas. He needed to see Katelyn and persuade her to give him a second chance.

Adam came back downstairs, clutching the box with the game in it. Seth focused on his Godson. It helped him to close his mind to thoughts of Denver and Katelyn.

After Adam sat up the game board, Seth played three games, skillfully allowing Adam to win all of them.

Adam’s eyes began to droop and Seth could tell he was ready for a nap. “You’re too good for me, buddy. You know, I’m really tired. I’d like to take a nap, but I don’t like to take naps alone. Do you?”

Adam wrinkled up his small nose. “I don’t like to take naps at all.”

“Would you lay down with me? It would just be until I went to sleep. You wouldn’t have to go to sleep yourself.”

“Okay. We can pwetend we’re camping out, like at Aunt Katie’s house.”

“I heard you had your own tent. We won’t have a tent, but we can put your Mom’s afghan down on the floor so it will be softer. We’ll lay in front of the fireplace so we can stay nice and warm.”

Seth lay down, next to Adam. Within minutes, Adam’s even breathing told him the boy had fallen asleep.

Seth closed his own eyes. If the others thought he fell asleep, he could think things over undisturbed. His thoughts blurred as sleep overtook him almost instantly.

In his dreams, he heard the telephone ring. “*Seth, it’s Katelyn,*” Brad told him. “*She wants to talk to you.*” In his dream like state, he got up to answer the phone.

“*Merry Christmas, Katelyn.*”

“*Merry Christmas to you too, Seth.*”

“*You must have gotten my message.*”

“*What message?*”

“*The one I left on your machine.*”

“*I haven’t been home. You see, Martin just got back from his business trip and we decided to get married right away instead of waiting any longer. I just thought I would call and give everyone the good news*”

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as well as wish them all a Merry Christmas. I honestly didn't expect you to be there."

"Are you happy?"

"Very. He's a good man, Seth. He loves me for who I am, for me, not Genean."

Seth shouted "NO." Waking abruptly. To his surprise, Adam no longer slept beside him. Another afghan covered him and Randy sat across from him in an easy chair.

"You must have had some dream."

"I guess I did. Where is everybody?"

"Brad took Adam up to his own bed. We thought you'd rest better without him beside you. Then Brad and Genean went in for a nap, themselves."

"Did I dream it, or did the phone ring?"

"It rang. Terri is talking to her sister. She called to wish her a Merry Christmas."

"I dreamed Katelyn called."

"I'm sorry. If I'd known how this would affect you, I would have insisted she come."

"No need. I have to get used to it. She's in the midst of planning her wedding. If I can't make her change her mind and see how much I care when I go to Denver, I'll just have to go on."

Terri appeared at the doorway leading to the kitchen, with the phone in her hand. "Randy, Melissa wants to talk to you."

"It sounds like I'm being paged," Randy said, as he got up to leave the room.

Seth got to his feet and began to fold the afghan when he heard a knock at the door.

"I'll get it," he called to Randy, before going to see who would be crazy enough to be out in a storm like this.

* * * *

To Katelyn's surprise, the snowplow turned into the driveway leading to Mallard's Nest. She waited while he backed out onto the road and pulled up beside her. The driver rolled down his window and she followed suit.

"I plowed a space for your car," he shouted, to be heard above the storm. "You'll have to walk in from here."

"Thank you!"

The plow headed back up the road and Katelyn pulled into the cleared space. She leaned back against the seat and closed her eyes. Her

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hands ached from gripping the steering wheel. Every bone in her body was tense from trying to keep control of the car on the slippery road, in the blowing snow.

Deciding to leave her suitcase as well as the picture of Seth in the back seat of the car, she opened the door, pushing aside a mound of snow. As she walked toward the brightly lit house, she realized how deeply the snow had drifted. It filled her fashionable boots and dampened the hem of her skirt. She wished she had dressed for comfort rather than fashion.

The cottage sat at the base of the hill. It had looked quiet and secluded this summer, but now it became a treacherous trip. She set her mind to the task at hand, and concentrated on picking her way carefully down the driveway.

A patch of unseen ice sent her tumbling into a snowdrift. As she picked herself up, she wished she'd worn her sheepskin jacket and blue jeans rather than the long leather coat, which didn't keep much of the cold away. She wondered if she spilled anything from her purse, but with the heavy snowfall and the cold wind from the bay she didn't stop to check. She only wanted to get into the house and warm herself by the fire.

I must look a wreck. My hair is soaked and I'm freezing to death.

At last, she made it to the door and knocked. It opened and to her surprise, Seth stood in the doorway. "Merry Christmas," she said, weakly.

"Katelyn? Where did you come from?"

"Denver," she replied, not knowing what else to say.

"You know what I mean."

Before she could answer, she heard Randy's voice. "Who's at the door, Seth?" When he entered the living room, he stopped, his mouth open. "Katelyn?"

"Merry Christmas," she repeated.

He hurried to her side and gave her a hug. From the corner of her eye, she could see Seth staring at her, his mouth hanging open in surprise. "I can't believe you're here," Randy said as he released his embrace and held her at arm's length.

"I can't either. Are you going to let me come in or do I have to stand out here and freeze to death?"

"You're soaked." Randy exclaimed, leading her further into the room. "How did you get so wet? For that matter, how did you get here? We heard they closed the roads almost an hour ago."

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"I flew into Milwaukee. It wasn't snowing very hard when I left the airport." She began to shake from the uncontrolled shivers taking over her body. Her gaze remained glued to Seth, as though unable to move to Randy's face. What she would have called ice blue eyes, only months earlier, now warmed her entire being.

"What time did you leave Milwaukee?" Seth asked, taking her hand to lead her to the fireplace.

"A little after one. The weather got worse and worse the further I drove."

"What's all the commotion out here?" Brad asked coming out of the bedroom. He stopped short when he saw Katelyn, then turned back to the bedroom. "Genean, get in here. Santa Claus just arrived."

"What are you talking about?" Katelyn heard Genean ask. Once she entered the living room, she hurried to embrace Katelyn. When she did, she stepped back, holding Katelyn at arm's length. "You're soaked."

"I didn't get wet until I got out of the car. I've never seen it snow like this, other than in the mountains. All I did was walk from the car to the house."

Terri came out of the kitchen. The look on her face turned from shock to a broad smile. "How did you even get here? We heard a bulletin on the radio, saying the roads are closed and they pulled the plows."

"I know. I'd just pulled on to Highway 42 when I came on an accident. They wanted to turn me back to Sturgeon Bay, until the officer thought he recognized me. He mistook me for Genean. After I set him straight, he let me follow the snowplow back to Egg Harbour. The driver even pulled down your road, then plowed me a space at the end of the driveway."

Randy scratched his head as if trying to remember something that was just on the fringes of his mind. "It's strange we didn't hear them. Did you bring any luggage?"

"I left it in the car. You guys are going to have some heavy duty shoveling to do in the morning. I'm parked at the end of the driveway. It's really deep out there. When I got out of the car, I went up to my knees in a drift."

Genean put her arm around Katelyn's shoulder. "We can talk about the storm later. For now, let's get you out of those wet clothes."

"You'd better let me go out and get my luggage first. If I don't, I won't have anything to put on."

"Now you're talking nonsense. Something tells me you can wear anything I have."

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Katelyn turned back and again made eye contact with Seth. What had she told herself earlier about only wanting to be friends with him? *Dear God, I want to be more than friends with this man.*

CHAPTER 17

“You get those wet clothes off,” Genean ordered, when they entered the bedroom.

Katelyn sat down on the bed and pulled off her boots, while Genean drew a hot bath. “Oh no,” she said aloud, when the snow which had packed around her foot showered out onto the floor.

“What’s wrong?” Genean asked, coming into the room.

“Nothing really. I just got snow all over your floor.”

“Don’t worry about the floor. If I were you, I’d be more concerned about your skirt. It’s ruined.”

Katelyn continued to take off her wet clothing. As she did, she thought of Seth standing in the doorway. She’d resigned herself to not seeing him on this trip. How could she handle being snowbound with him in the cottage?

Katelyn eased herself into the tub of steaming water, while Genean pulled up a chair so they could chat while Katelyn soaked in an attempt to warm up her chilled body.

“I can’t get over your coming to surprise us like this. I thought you were going to spend the holiday with Martin.”

“So did I, until he called me from Kenya. I hadn’t been off the phone more than five minutes from talking to you when the call came through. He told me he met some business acquaintances from Nairobi, while in South Africa, and they asked him to spend the holidays with them. The timing was so bad, we ended up having a terrible fight.”

“Did you call off your engagement?”

“I—I think so. I told him not to try to contact me when he gets back to Denver. I even went so far as to wrap up the ring in fancy paper with a big bow on the top and leave it at his office. I’m afraid I may have acted too hastily.”

“Does anyone else know about this?”

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“Only Uncle Jack. Please, don’t say anything to the others, not just yet anyway.”

“You know I won’t, but don’t you want Seth to know?”

“I especially don’t want him to know. I didn’t expect to find him here. It’s going to take me a while to put all of this into perspective. I don’t know if I’ll be able to cope being snowbound here, with him so close.”

“I realize this is hard for you. I promise, I won’t breathe a word of what we’ve talked about to anyone else. You’ll see everything will turn out for the best.”

“I certainly hope so. It’s funny, Uncle Jack said almost the same thing when he took me to the airport this morning.”

Genean left the room and Katelyn added more hot water to the tub. When the steam again rose from the water, she lay back and closed her eyes.

The shock of seeing Seth at the door replayed itself behind her closed lids. She tried to remember what his expression looked like, but she couldn’t. Why had he come to Mallard’s Nest for Christmas? Was it something he planned, knowing there was a possibility she and Martin would be there? Did the family call him to come up after she told them she would be spending the holidays in Denver? Whatever the reason behind his being there, she didn’t care. He was here and so was she. They could come to grips with what happened last summer face-to-face and perhaps call a truce. They might even become friends.

* * * *

Seth watched as Katelyn left the room. He was unaware of anyone standing beside him until he felt Randy’s hand resting on his shoulder. “Merry Christmas, Seth.”

“I guess I should be more careful what I wish for. The look on her face when she saw me was almost one of terror. I can only guess what my face must have looked like. One thing I know is, I can’t push her, or me either for that matter.”

Silently, he wished Randy would leave him alone. He wanted to have some private time with Katelyn to talk to her to try to explain his feelings for her.

Genean returned to the living room and allowed Randy to hold her. “Where’s Katelyn?” Randy asked.

“I made her get into the tub. She was soaked to the skin. I’ll give her a few minutes to relax, then I’ll make sure she finds everything she needs.”

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Genean turned to Seth and put her arms around his neck. "I told you everything would work out."

"Nothing has worked out yet. You seem to forget she's engaged to marry someone else. I have to get past that obstacle before I can say anything is worked out. We'll have to wait and see what happens next."

Genean kissed his cheek. "Have faith. I know everything will be fine, trust me."

Trust her, that's easier said than done. What she doesn't understand is just because Katelyn came for Christmas doesn't mean she wants anything to do with me. Collier probably stood her up and she decided to spend Christmas with her family.

Genean turned her attention to Randy, allowing Seth to turn his thoughts inward. He wanted to be careful in approaching Katelyn. He didn't want to scare her off, but he didn't want to lose her either. His biggest worry was Martin Collier. How could he ever hope to compete with a man who owned a multimillion-dollar business, someone who could shower her with gifts? All he had to give her was an old house, badly in need of repair, an out of work teacher and his love. He wondered if what he had to offer would be enough for her.

He closed his eyes and relived opening the door minutes earlier. She looked so tired, he wanted to take her in his arms and never let her go. Instead, he stood dumbfounded to see her standing there.

He wondered what he expected her to do next. He envisioned her rushing into his arms, covering him with kisses. In reality, he knew the meeting would be strained. He needed time to regain her trust, even though he'd done nothing to lose it in the first place.

* * * *

Katelyn soaked in the tub. Moments earlier, she was shaking but now the warmth relaxed her and the chills were starting to subside.

When the water started to cool she opened the drain and started the shower to wash her hair.

At last, she stepped from the enclosure and wrapped herself in a large fluffy towel. She bent down to search the cupboard for the hair dryer. Unable to find it, she stood up and ran a brush through her tangled curls.

"Can I come in?" Genean asked, from outside the door.

"Of course you can."

"Are you finding everything?"

"Not really. I can't seem to find your hair dryer. I know I used it last summer."

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“I think you have the bedrooms mixed up. You stayed in Randy and Terri’s room and probably used Terri’s dryer. I don’t even own one. I prefer the wash and go look. If you’d like, I can go and get it for you.”

Katelyn shook her head. “No need. I found a clip in the cupboard. I can pull it back and let it air dry.”

When she secured her hair, Katelyn went into the bedroom. To her surprise, a burgundy jogging suit lay on the bed, along with a pair of slipper socks.”

“Where’d you get this? Did someone brave the weather and go out to the car for my bags?”

“Of course not. This is one I bought in Chicago last winter. Don’t tell me you have the same one.”

“All right,” Katelyn laughed, “but don’t be surprised when I pull mine from my suitcase. I got it when the winter clothes went on sale at the end of the season. I guess we have more in common than I thought.”

She took a moment to dress before continuing. “When I got here, Brad said Santa Claus had arrived. What did he mean?”

“I guess I got a little emotional when you told me you weren’t coming,” Genean said, wiping her eye with a tissue. “I told Randy the only thing I wanted this year was for you to be here.” Again the tears flowed from Genean’s eyes, prompting Katelyn’s tears to flow as well. “I didn’t think Adam paid any attention to our conversation. Later he asked Brad if it was too late to ask Santa for something else. I mean with the list he sent to the North Pole, I couldn’t imagine what more he could possibly want. Brad told him it might be too late, but he wanted to know what else he wanted to add to the list. Adam said he wanted Santa to bring Aunt Katie to Wisconsin for Mommy.”

It took only a moment for Katelyn to embrace Genean. Together they cried for a few moments, before they both regained their composure. “I get all weepy just thinking about it,” Genean confided. “He asked it so innocently. He really believed Santa could just pick you up in his sleigh, and drop you down the chimney.”

Katelyn wiped away her own tears. “I’m sorry if I hurt you. I’m still pretty new at this family thing. I’m not used to having to consider any other than myself.”

“I understand. It’s just difficult.”

“Why in the world is Seth here? I called his house and got his answering machine. I assumed he went to Arizona to be with his family.”

“He’s been planning on coming here since early fall. He went to Arizona for Thanksgiving. Isn’t it obvious he wants to talk to you?”

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“To me? Why?”

“To clear the air with you.”

“Don’t you think he made it perfectly clear last summer? I said it then and I’ll say it now, no matter how I feel, I don’t want to be a replacement for you.”

Genean took Katelyn’s hand in hers and then guided her over to the bed. “Did Seth ever tell you he still loves me?”

“Not really. He said he came to see you before we drove up here, so he could decide. I wanted to believe him, but when I was in the hospital, I had a silly dream. In it, he told me he loved you.”

“Do you believe in dreams?”

“I usually don’t, but it seemed so real and you have to admit I was in no condition to think rationally.”

Genean pulled Katelyn into her arms. “You and Seth will have to take things slowly. I can only tell you he does care for you. Whatever is meant to happen will, but not if one of you doesn’t take the first step. The way I see it, that step will be much easier without Martin in the picture.”

Katelyn nodded. More than anything else in the world, she wanted Seth to love her again. She wanted to believe Genean, but five months of silence and the knowledge that Seth, at one time, had been in love with Genean still gnawed at the back of her mind.

“Like I told you, I really don’t know where I stand with Martin. In the heat of anger I rejected him, but it’s not so easy to throw away the life I thought I would be living.”

“I understand how confused you must be right now, but take things slowly. I’m a firm believer in the old saying, ‘God never closes a door but that He opens a window.’ You’ll just have to wait and see what that window brings.”

Katelyn knew Genean made sense. She’d used the same quote many times in the past. “I should have asked earlier, where is Adam?”

“He was up taking a nap when you got here.”

“How does anyone get Adam to take a nap?”

“Seth talked him into playing Uncle Wiggly...”

“Uncle what?” Katelyn interrupted.

Genean was laughing so hard she could hardly continue. Katelyn knew the laughter was prompted by her own ignorance of things related to children.

“Uncle Wiggly is a board game for little ones. After they’d played several games, Seth told Adam he needed a nap. Adam informed him he

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hated taking naps, so Seth asked if he would lay down with him, just until Seth went to sleep,” Genean was laughing so hard, that she had to stop her narrative for a moment to compose herself before continuing. “Adam fell asleep first. We were in the kitchen playing Trivial Pursuit and had a hard time keeping from laughing. When we finally went into the living room, they were both sleeping. Brad took Adam up to bed and we took a nap, too. He got up while you were in the tub. We haven’t told him you’re here. We thought you’d be a wonderful surprise for him. As a matter of fact, you’re a wonderful surprise for me. I still can’t believe you’re actually here.”

“Neither can I.”

“Let’s go out and join the others.”

Katelyn left the security of the bedroom, mentally unprepared to face Seth again. She took a deep breath as she saw him sitting in a large chair, reading a story to Adam.

“Seth really likes kids, doesn’t he?” she whispered to Genean.

“He and Adam are great friends.”

Before Katelyn could say more, Adam jumped off Seth’s lap. “Aunt Katie, Santa Claus did bring you.”

“I would have appreciated a ride from the jolly old gent, it would have been easier than driving,” she said, as she lifted Adam into her arms.

“Mommy said you didn’t want to come. It made her bewy sad.” Adam pressed his face close to hers and hugged her tightly.

“When I said I wasn’t coming, I was very sad, too, so I decided it would be better to be happy.”

Adam gave her a wet kiss on the cheek. “I’m bewy, bewy happy you came,” he said, before he struggled to get back down.

“You look good with a kid in your arms,” Seth said, coming to her side.

“Oh, you think so. What if I told you I don’t do children?”

“I think you do them just fine.”

“Supper is ready,” Terri called from the kitchen.

Randy and Brad took their places at each end of the table. “I want to sit by Uncle Seth and Aunt Katie,” Adam insisted.

“They don’t want to help you with your supper,” Genean said.

“I don’t need help.”

“It’s all right, Genean,” Katelyn assured her. “Adam and I will do just fine. Won’t we Adam?”

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He nodded and climbed onto the chair. Katelyn smiled down at the child, relieved to have him acting as a buffer between Seth and herself.

With supper finished, Genean and Terri began clearing the table and the men adjourned to the living room to talk. As much as Katelyn wanted to be alone with Seth, she knew privacy would be impossible, at least tonight. Instead, she plunged her hands into a sink of sudsy water. Washing dishes would keep her mind off the man sitting in the next room. The man who could so easily confuse her thoughts.

CHAPTER 18

“It’s time for bed, cowboy,” Brad reminded Adam, as the clock struck nine.

Adam began to protest and Katelyn couldn’t help but smile. She easily remembered not wanting to go to bed on Christmas Eve. “How would you like it if I read you a story?” Katelyn asked, as she got up from the couch and headed toward the stairs leading to the second floor of the cottage.

“Yeah,” Adam shouted.

“Okay then, you give everyone a kiss good night.” Katelyn waited while Adam made a big production out of kissing everyone in the room good night. She noticed he climbed on Seth’s lap and lingered an exceptionally long time, as he whispered something in Seth’s ear.

At last, he returned to her side and waited patiently until she bent to lift him into her arms. “Good night, everyone,” she said, as she mounted the stairs.

When she visited Mallard’s Nest last summer, she never ventured upstairs. She found too much downstairs to distract her.

“This is my woom,” Adam pointed out proudly. “Uncle Seth’s woom is over there. Are you going to sleep in Uncle Seth’s woom?”

Adam’s question caught her off guard. “Why would you think I would sleep in Seth’s room?”

“Mommy sleeps in Daddy’s woom and Aunt Tewwi sleeps in Uncle Wandy’s woom. Why don’t you sleep in Uncle Seth’s woom?”

“Because your mommy and daddy as well as your Uncle Randy and Aunt Terri are married. Seth and I aren’t married, so we can’t sleep in the same room.” She recalled spending the night in the same room with Seth and smiled at the memory. What made it so right then and so wrong now? Unfortunately, she knew the answer. Then she was on vacation and became carried away in that magical place called Washington Island, and hadn’t thought of the ramifications of what they did.

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“I think this is my room.” She pointed to the open door across the hall. The light from the hallway showed a nightgown lay on the bed.

Adam let the subject drop and they entered his room. “I want this stowy, Aunt Katie,” Adam said. He picked up the book that lie on the floor and thrust it into her hands. Katelyn looked at the book. The picture of a mouse wearing a Santa suit and sitting on the top board of a stall talking to a reindeer dominated the colored cover.

“This one will be fine, but first you have to go to the bathroom and then brush your teeth. When you’re done, I’ll help you get into your pajamas.”

Adam ran ahead of her to the bathroom down the hall. When he finished, she picked up the pajamas that were lying on the bed and pulled the top over his head, before helping his get into the bottoms.

“Hercamer’s First Christmas,” she read the title aloud, as soon as he slid under the covers. The tale of a little mouse that accompanied Santa around the world seemed a far cry from the Christmas Story Randy read from the Bible, earlier in the evening. Fantasy intertwined with the story of the Holy Birth to create an easily understandable concept for children.

By the time she read the last word, Adam had fallen asleep. She pulled the covers up around his shoulders. Once she turned off his light, a shaft of moonlight came through the window and cast a silvery glow on the floor.

She stood, for a long moment looking at the clouds, which drifted across the moon. In the light, she could see the snow had stopped falling and lay in sparkling whiteness across the countryside.

After turning from the window, she bent to kiss Adam’s forehead. Although she felt tired earlier, she now wanted to go back downstairs. As quiet as the house was, she knew she would be alone, the way she had often been alone when she’d been a child. Many Christmas Eves were spent sneaking back downstairs to sit before the fire and stare in awe at the lighted tree.

* * * *

Seth watched Katelyn and Adam go upstairs. Adam’s whispered words, as well as his wet kiss dominated Seth’s thought. “Awe you and Aunt Katie going to get mawwied now?” He remembered Adam whispering the words into his ear.

“Not right now,” Seth had whispered back. He wondered where the child came up with such a notion and then decided he must have overheard Brad and Genean talking. He’d have to remember to tell them to be careful what they said around him.

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Across the room, Seth watched as Randy stretched broadly. "I think Katelyn's got the right idea. Come on Terri, let's go to bed, too and you can tell me a bedtime story."

While Randy and Terri went to their bedroom, Seth could hear muffled laughter and remembered the night of pleasure with Katelyn.

"As soon as we finish playing Santa, I think we'll be going to bed as well. Are you going up soon, Seth?" Brad asked.

"I don't think so. I like to sit and watch the fire on Christmas Eve. It reminds me of when I was a kid and tried to wait up for Santa. It must have driven my folks nuts."

Seth watched as Genean and Brad filled stockings and put colorfully wrapped presents under the tree.

Once they finished their Santa duties and retired for the night, Seth went to the closet and took the small box from his coat pocket. He sat down on the couch and fingered it. Turning it over in his hand, he thought about the expression on Katelyn's face when he opened the door. As much as he wanted to give her the ring, he knew he must be patient with her. After all, she was engaged to marry Collier, or was she? He had seen no ring on her finger. Still, it was a fact he couldn't ignore.

She could easily turn him down completely. Maybe his dream was right, maybe he'd have to watch her give herself to another man the way he'd watched Genean give herself to Brad.

"I didn't think anyone would be up," Katelyn said, from behind him.

He quickly stuffed the box down between the cushions of the couch before he got to his feet. "I--I thought you went up to bed."

"I wanted to pretend I hadn't grown up. When I was a little girl, I used to sneak back down to watch the fire and enjoy the tree."

Seth smiled and waited for Katelyn to sit down on the couch before he again seated himself. "I'm glad you came home." He enjoyed the closeness of her. The scent of lingering perfume made him wish he could pull her into his arms and never let her go.

"Are you?"

Her question caught him unprepared. "Of course I am. Why do you think I came here for Christmas?"

"I don't know. Why did you come? It's been five months and I haven't heard anything from you. I planned to contact you over the holidays, to clear the air and become friends. When I called your house..."

"When did you call?" he interrupted.

"Yesterday afternoon."

"And you hung up as soon as the machine finished the message."

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“Yes, but how did you know?”

“I was loading the car when you called. I got in just as you hung up the phone. Why didn’t you leave a message?”

“I thought you’d gone to Arizona to be with your parents. I couldn’t see telling you I’d be in Wisconsin when you weren’t here. Besides, I didn’t know if you’d even want to talk to me. If you remember, our last day together ended on rather a sour note.”

Seth nodded. “As I recall, you said you hated me and never wanted to see me again. I thought it best to give you time to change your mind. Of course, it did come as a bit of a shock when your fiancée showed up with Jack. When were you going to tell me you were engaged?”

Katelyn’s smile faded. “I wasn’t going to tell you, because we weren’t officially engaged. Sort of like you not telling me about Randy and Genean. I was on vacation. You were a handsome diversion. I planned to go home and get on with my life.”

“It’s funny, I thought the same thing about you. I wanted to get on with my life as well, but you got in the way. I vowed I’d never let my emotions become turned upside down by a woman again, but you managed to do it quite well.”

“Are you sure I wasn’t just a convenient substitute for the woman you really wanted?”

Seth shook his head. He wondered how he could ever convince her she was a completely different person from Genean. “How would it be if we started over again?”

She began to smile. “I think we did this before, but why not? My name is Katelyn Devereaux. I own the Devereaux Advertising Agency in Denver, where I work as a commercial artist.”

Seth laughed at her somber answer. “I’m pleased to meet you, Miss Devereaux. My name is Seth Miller. At the moment, I’m working as a teacher, but I’ve given my notice. You see, last summer I met this special lady who said she thought I should devote more time to my woodworking.”

He watched the expression on her face closely. Her warm smile faded as her mouth dropped open and her eyes widened. “I thought you loved teaching and you didn’t want to turn your passion into your livelihood.”

“I’ve had five months to think about what you said concerning my work. I’ve always wanted to have my own shop, so I finally acted on what I should have done years ago. I’m buying a place where I can have a workshop as well as a showroom.”

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“Where? At Wisconsin Dells?”

“No, in Fish Creek.”

“You’re moving up here? When?”

Seth relaxed. Talking about his house would put them on neutral ground. With the change in topic, it didn’t matter that she was soon going to marry someone else. The ring he stuffed between the cushions of the couch could easily be returned, but did he want to do that? He knew he didn’t. More than anything else, he wanted her in his life, for always and forever. Somehow he was going to have to get her to change her mind about Martin.

“As soon as school is out in the spring. It will take me that long to fix up the place. I have enough furniture made to compensate for the weekends I’ll have to spend getting the place ready. No one has been there for ten years. I’ll have to modernize the kitchen and the bathroom in the house and put in new furnaces in both the house and the barn.”

“Barn? What are you planning to do with it?”

“I want to make the loft into a workshop and the main floor a showroom. With the way it’s built, I have access to both stories from ground level.”

“I don’t think I quite understand what you’re talking about,” she said, her brows knotted.

“It’s built into a hill. From the back, you can get into the loft. From the front, you can get into the main floor. I don’t know if the original builders thought about ease in heating, but with the North side so sheltered and the south side exposed, it will be energy efficient. I’d like to put in big windows to the south as well as skylights.”

To Seth’s surprise, Katelyn picked up a piece of paper from the table, along with the pencil Adam used to draw his pictures earlier. She quickly began to sketch the barn as he described it, complete with the remodeling and the skylights.

Seth took the pencil and the sketch from her then encompassed her hand in his. “How long are you staying?”

“I don’t know, at least until after the first of the year. Why?”

“I close on the house the day after Christmas. I’d like you to see it.”

Katelyn nodded. “I’d enjoy that. I think I can give you some good ideas for the barn.”

“Do you think you’d have any ideas left for the house?”

“It’s possible. Of course, I’d expect something in return.”

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Seth looked at her intently, wondering what she would ask in return. Would she want him to stay out of her life? “You know I’d do anything for you.”

“I need a tour guide.”

“Again!”

“You did such a good job the first time, I decided to enlist your services in my latest plans. You see I’m opening an office here.”

“Here?”

“Well, not exactly here. It will be somewhere in the Midwest, though. Chicago, Milwaukee, I’m not certain yet. I don’t want to go alone. Would you go with me?”

“Of course I would, but why not consider an office here?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t given it much thought. I guess I was thinking about a bigger city.”

“Green Bay isn’t what I’d call small. Everything is accessible and a lot friendlier than Chicago or Milwaukee. At least you know a few of the natives here. Besides, this area is growing. With the Fox Valley area just minutes away, the potential for new clients is unlimited. What does it matter where you open an office as long as you open one in the Midwest?”

Seth watched as Katelyn contemplated her answer. “I guess it doesn’t make any difference.”

He applauded her answer, but couldn’t understand her need to relocate. “Why an office in the Midwest? Aren’t most of your clients in the other direction? I saw your ads all over the place in Phoenix.”

Now it was Katelyn’s turn to relax. She was as at ease talking business as he had been describing his new home. “Last year I won quite an award for a Mallard’s ad I did. I received word about it after I got home this summer. Since then we’ve been picking up a lot of new clients in this area. We need someone close, someone who can come and see them easily, the way I did with Mallard’s, last summer. With clients in Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota, Iowa and Michigan, it’s imperative. They’re all small companies, ones who don’t want to hook up with the big agencies.”

“I thought Devereaux was a big agency,” Seth interrupted.

“It’s big enough for me, but not if you compare it with the giants. With the growth, I need to find an office and hire an office manager.”

Seth sat mutely for a moment. He was foolish enough to believe Katelyn intended to relocate not only her office, but her home as well.

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What a fool you are. Of course she won't be relocating her home. She'll be married to Collier.

"Won't you be running it?" he asked, trying not to sound disappointed.

"What I know about running an office is next to nothing. I'm an artist, an owner. My Dad never ran the office. He always hired a manager. Besides, I have commitments in Denver."

"Commitments, as in Martin Collier?" He couldn't help voicing his fears.

"I don't know. Things between Martin and I are a bit up in the air right now. I'm not even certain we'll be getting married. We had a terrible fight just before I came here. I-I, oh, never mind."

A flicker of hope ignited within him. He knew he had to seize the opportunity to ask the question he dreaded hearing the answer to. "Where do you plan to do your art?"

When she shrugged her shoulders, he continued. "Look, forget it's me asking you this. What do you have in Denver to rival what you have here?"

"Not much. Okay, I've been thinking about moving out here. The blow up with Martin made me think about it a little harder than I have been. I'd like to find a place close by."

"I'm sure you could stay at Mallard's Nest until you find something. What about your place in Denver?"

"My neighbors, Lasse and Alice Jensen have been after me to sell it to them. They'd like to increase the size of their ranch. Their son, Todd, will be graduating from high school this year and they'd like to open a ski resort to complement their dude ranch. My location is exactly what they're looking for. The barn would make a perfect lodge and there is enough land to build several chalets for the guests."

The flicker of hope burned brighter within his mind. He wondered if he dared to believe he would get a second chance.

"You were right last summer, Seth. I'm alone. I never thought I'd say it, but I need my family. I also know you didn't engineer our little reunion last summer. I ought to know it. Randy and Genean have told me enough times. They've asked me not to hold you responsible. I'm not ready to completely cut my ties to Denver, but I'm thinking about it."

Seth recalled her comment of only months earlier. "And all of this from a woman who is trying to decide how much to work. It seems like you're running toward more work, rather than away from it."

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Katelyn smiled and the gesture encouraged Seth. “Well, since I’ve convinced you to stay in Green Bay...”

Katelyn laughed, cutting him off before he could continue. “Whoa, you haven’t convinced me of anything. It’s going to take more than a suggestion.”

“If that’s the case, we’ll have to work on it. For now, you look exhausted.”

“I am. Driving up here in the storm tired me out.”

“Then we’d better get you to bed. I expect you out shoveling tomorrow.”

“With three men to do the work? Not on your life. I hire it done at home.”

“We’ll see, tomorrow.”

He got up from the couch and added several logs to the fire before closing the heater. “This should make things nice and warm for Adam when he comes down to see what Santa brought him.”

He bent to unplug the tree then reached for Katelyn’s hand in the dark.

“Your room is next to mine,” he said, as they climbed the stairs.

“So I noticed. Adam couldn’t understand why I wouldn’t be sleeping in your room.”

Seth held his tongue. He couldn’t understand it either. He decided he didn’t have to be a three-year-old boy to be confused by the situation.

Outside the door, he took her in his arms. As was the case the first time he kissed her, she responded willingly, easily. He wanted to scoop her into his arms and take her to his bedroom. Instead, he allowed her to go into her room alone and close the door.

Before going to bed, he looked in on Adam. He’d kicked off the covers and Seth readjusted them for warmth, “Well, buddy, I hope Santa brings you everything you want. He certainly brought me what I asked for.”

Seth lay awake for a long time before falling asleep. He couldn’t blame his sleeplessness on anxiety. He knew his insomnia came from his pleasant thoughts of Katelyn Devereaux sleeping in the next room.

CHAPTER 19

“It’s Chwistmas! Santa Claus came! Get up!” Adam’s shrill voice jolted Katelyn awake. She turned over and pulled the pillow tightly over her head. She certainly didn’t want to get up.

From beneath the pillow, she heard her door open. If she lay very still, Adam might think she was still sleeping and go downstairs. Instead, Adam jumped on her bed, bringing her fully awake.

To her surprise, someone pulled the pillow from her head. Opening her eyes, she looked to see Seth standing over her. “There’s a rule in this house, Adam can’t open his presents until everyone is up.”

“Oh, no,” she muttered, shielding her eyes with her arm.

“It’s time to get up, Aunt Katie.” Adam pried her arm away from her eyes and put his face close to hers.

“Okay, okay, you win. Give me a few minutes and I’ll be right down.”

Seth lifted Adam from the bed. “You go on downstairs, buddy. I think your Aunt Katie wants to get cleaned up and so do I.”

Katelyn smiled at Seth calling her Aunt Katie. It had a nice ring to it. As soon as she heard Adam’s footsteps on the stairs, she turned over and pulled the pillow back over her head. To her dismay, Seth again snatched it away, this time throwing off the blankets as well.

“I’ll be back for you in fifteen minutes and I expect you to be ready.”

Katelyn shivered at the sudden chill, then reached for the second pillow on the bed. “You and your fifteen minutes.” Seth closed the door just in time to stop the pillow from hitting him. She got out of bed, smiling at her unexpected wake up call.

The shower woke her fully and after brushing her teeth, she felt almost human. She again secured her hair with the clip she’d found last night and put on the sweat suit she’d borrowed from Genean. She knew she’d be glad to get her own clothes from the car. A borrowed sweat suit,

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even if it were identical to the one she packed, hadn't been her intended attire for Christmas Day.

She finished dressing and stepped into the hall, just as Seth came out of his room. "You look lovely," he said, putting his hand on her arm.

His gesture excited her and she shook her head to rid herself of the feeling. She couldn't allow him to confuse the matter. She intended to become friends, so why did she harbor the unsettling feelings for him?

Once downstairs, she noticed a large drift outside the window. "It looks like *someone* has a lot of shoveling to do," she teased, her eyes meeting Seth's.

"We'll see who will be doing the shoveling."

"Come and sit down, Aunt Katie. It's time fow Chwistmas."

"I'm coming, Adam."

"Coffee?" Terri offered, passing a tray of full mugs to Katelyn.

"I'd love some." She picked up a steaming mug of coffee and tentatively tasted the hot liquid.

Adam opened his presents and Katelyn enjoyed his childish excitement. Having never been around children, she relished her nephew's pleasures. *How could I have ever considered missing this?*

"You got lots of pwesents, too, Aunt Katie." Adam pointed to the pile of gifts Randy placed at her feet. "Awen't you going to open them?"

"I guess I am. I was having so much fun watching you, I forgot about these."

"Open this big one. My Mommy bwrought it up hewe."

Katelyn lifted the box to her lap and then read the tag. *TO KATELYN—FROM MOM AND DAD*. She looked questioningly at Randy and Genean.

"It's a tradition. Uncle Paul and Aunt Liz kept a lot of things from Mom and Dad. Every year, they would give us each a present from them. We didn't realize they always kept presents for you, too. Uncle Paul gave them to me and said if we ever found you, we should make sure you got them."

Katelyn opened the box and smiled at the treasures it contained. She never expected anyone to give her anything belonging to her mother. Now she held a piece of her family roots in her hands. At the bottom of the box, she found an eight by ten picture. In it, the bride looked like Genean and herself, while the groom could have been Randy.

"It's our parents on their wedding day." Randy took her hand in his.

"I never expected to see anything like this," she said, unable to control her tears.

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Randy hugged her. “No more tears, now it’s time for the good stuff.” From the next box, she pulled a beautifully carved mallard duck.

“We asked Seth what he thought you’d like and he said he knew the perfect thing. Within a few weeks, he brought up this duck,” Genean explained.

“It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in my life. Did you really do this?”

Seth nodded. “Sometimes it’s convenient to have a woodworker for a friend. I hope this will replace the one I scared away.”

Katelyn could feel the color rising in her cheeks at the mention of their first meeting. Returning her attention to the duck, she noticed a gold chain around its neck. “What is this?” When she removed the chain, she noticed a key dangling from it.

“Your own key to Mallard’s Nest. You’re part owner, you know,” Randy said.

“But you and Genean own Mallard’s Nest.”

“We added your name to the deed. You own it as much as we do. There’s another paper in the bottom of the box, making you a full partner in Mallard’s. We’ll have to see a lawyer while you’re here to make it official, though.”

“It’s a good thing I talked you into staying in Wisconsin last night,” Seth teased, taking her hand.

“You talked her into what?” Randy asked.

“Into staying in Wisconsin.”

“You didn’t talk me into anything, Seth Miller. I’d already made up my mind before we ever...” Katelyn stopped, knowing she said more than she intended. Last night she led Seth to believe she would merely think about relocating her home. This morning, for the first time, she admitted aloud the thing she’d been contemplating ever since her blow up with Martin.

“You’re moving here?” Genean questioned, her excitement genuine.

“I’m going to open an office somewhere in the Midwest and Seth suggested Green Bay. Considering I only bought a one way ticket, I guess you’re stuck with me until I can find a place of my own.”

After excited congratulations, they finished opening their presents. At Adam’s insistence, the adults went out to the kitchen to start breakfast, leaving Katelyn alone with Seth.

He got to his feet, and pulled Katelyn into a standing position as well. “Merry Christmas, Katelyn,” he said, before encircling her in his arms and kissing her.

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Breathless from his kiss, she whispered, “Merry Christmas, Seth.”

* * * *

While the women did the breakfast dishes, Seth joined the men in going outside to shovel.

“You and Katelyn were having quite a talk after breakfast,” Seth said to Randy, once they closed the door.

“I wanted to be sure.”

“Sure of what?”

“Of her intentions to stay. I didn’t know if she was really sold on the idea. How much did you push her last night?” Randy questioned.

Seth took a deep breath. He could have pressed her a lot harder than he did. If he would have given her the diamond ring like he’d planned, he would have pressed her a lot. “A little, well, OK, a lot. She belongs here. She needs her family.”

“Is it her family you think she needs or do you need her? I don’t know if I like the idea of you pushing her into anything.”

“I didn’t push her half as hard as you did this morning. I mean, adding her name to the deed for Mallard’s Nest and making her a partner in the business sounds like pushing to me.”

“It’s nothing she doesn’t deserve. Grandpa left all of this to the three of us, to all of his grandchildren.” Randy stopped and turned to Seth. “With you moving to Fish Creek and Katelyn moving to Green Bay, the two of you won’t be able to avoid each other. Just what happens when she marries Collier? How will you handle the situation?”

“Unless I miss my guess, I don’t think there will be a wedding. Last night she told me they had a falling out. I think she came here to decide what she should do about him.”

“If that’s the way it is, I certainly hope you realize you have to go slow. She’s still hurting. If you’re not careful you could...”

“Hurt her? Look Randy, I would never hurt her, not intentionally. I think I fell in love with her the first time I saw her. At first, I tried to tell myself it was because she looked so much like Genean, but I finally admitted her resemblance had nothing to do with it. I brought an engagement ring up here with me.”

“An engagement ring? What did you think she’d do, throw Collier over for you?”

“I didn’t know, I only hoped I could convince her how much she meant to me. After what she told me, I’m not certain if I should even bring up the subject until I know where she and Collier stand with each

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other. I know I'll have to go slow, maybe not even say anything for several months."

"Are you certain? You're talking some pretty heavy stuff here."

The scene from the night before flashed in front of Seth's eyes. "Damn," he said aloud.

"What?"

"Last night, I went to get the ring out of my coat pocket. I'd forgotten I'd left it there until everyone went to bed. I thought I should take it up to my room. From the look on her face when I opened the door, I knew she wasn't ready to accept it just yet. Maybe she'll never accept it. She came back downstairs when I had it in my hands, so I shoved it down between the cushions of the couch. I certainly hope she doesn't find it before I can put it away. I don't want to scare her off."

"I doubt she'll find it. No one would have reason to check couch cushions today."

Seth nodded and silently made his way to the storage shed with Randy and Brad. The short walk took much longer than usual, giving him time to think about what Randy said. He knew everything about the conversation made sense. Still, he couldn't help but wonder if going slow was the solution. He'd dragged his feet ever since last summer. Of all the times he called her number, he never once left a message. In doing so, he'd given her cause to question his sincerity.

At last, they reached the storage shed. "We'll let Randy use the snow blower," Brad teased. "Since he's the old man of the group, we wouldn't want him to overexert himself."

"I'll remember that. Since you think I'm so old, I'll expect you two to respect your elders."

"Respect my elders? I must say it's an interesting concept."

"Speaking of elders," Seth said, "which one is the oldest, Katelyn or Genean?"

From Randy's puzzled expression, Seth knew he didn't know the answer. "It's Genean," Brad said. "We went to the court house and got copies of both birth certificates. She's older by four minutes."

Before Seth could comment, Randy started the snow blower and cut a path between the shed and the house. Seth followed Brad's lead and picked up a shovel to begin clearing the walk to the front door.

Although the snow fell light and fluffy, the deep drifts made the work back breaking and tedious. Seth didn't mind the work. It took his mind off Katelyn and the ring resting in the couch cushions.

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When they had the walk to the house cleared, Brad began to work on the sidewalk leading to the deck, while Seth busied himself clearing off cars.

A light breeze began to blow from the bay and Seth shivered for the first time. Behind him, he heard the front door open and turned to see Katelyn and Adam making a snowman. He smiled at her earlier comment of, *I don't do children*. Seeing her with Adam, he wondered why she ever made such a comment. She seemed completely at ease with him.

A snowball caught him in the back of the neck and snow showered down inside his coat. As soon as it hit, he could hear Adam's excited laughter. He turned, trying to look stern and sound annoyed. "Adam Seth, did you throw a snowball at me?"

Adam's laughter ceased and his expression became somber. "No, Uncle Seth. It was Aunt Katie."

"So, it was Aunt Katie. Well, we'll just have to show Aunt Katie about snowball fights, won't we?" He lay down the snowbrush and started toward Katelyn.

She backed away from him. "Oh, Seth, no. You stay away from me. I've got another snowball, you'll be sorry."

"I'll be sorry? I doubt it."

Snow hampered her escape and he easily tackled her, sending her tumbling into a drift. Randy shut down the snow blower and Seth knew he stood watching the two of them playing in the snow.

"Randy! Brad!" Katelyn shouted. "Help me!"

Randy began to laugh. "You got yourself into this mess. No one throws snowballs around here if they don't expect to get a good fight out of it."

Seth quickly straddled her, pinning her arms over her head with one hand while scooping snow with the other.

"Don't you dare touch my face. No one touches my face."

"Oh, don't they? Well, maybe they should. It's high time you learned, little girls shouldn't play with snowballs if they don't want their faces washed."

Behind him, tiny fists pounded him on the back. "Don't huwt my Aunt Katie."

"Your Aunt Katie asked for this," Seth said, as he began to wash her face with the clean snow. "She needs to learn not to start fights she can't finish."

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“I’ll finish this fight. Just let me up and I’ll show you about fights. You’ll be sorry.”

“Who’ll be sorry?” Seth asked before he bent down to kiss her. He freed her, then picked her up. As he did, she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“I’m afraid you have to learn the ways of the world, Miss Devereaux. Now, your punishment for throwing snowballs is shoveling snow. You can use my shovel. I’ll gladly help Adam finish his snowman.”

Katelyn’s eyes widened and Seth enjoyed watching her seethe. “You wouldn’t make me shovel snow, would you?”

“Oh, wouldn’t I?”

“I don’t have to shovel snow, do I, Randy?”

“It sounds like a wonderful idea to me.”

“Oh, I get it. This is a conspiracy, isn’t it? The three of you against me.”

“You can get out of it on one condition. I know of some office space in Green Bay you might be interested in seeing. All you have to do is agree to let Seth bring you in to look at it tomorrow.”

Katelyn looked from Randy to Seth. “Do I have to ask where this property is?”

Seth shook his head. “If I know your brother, it’s the suite of offices on the third floor of Mallard’s. He’s been trying to find a sucker, I mean a renter, for it for years.”

Once Katelyn agreed to consider the office space, she began clearing off cars. Seth turned his attention to Adam and helped him finish his snowman.

“You made quite a snowman here, but I think you’re getting cold. You’d better go in so I can help finish up.”

Adam protested mildly and then did as he was told.

Once Adam disappeared into the confines of the house, Seth turned to Katelyn. “Have you got the keys for your car? I’ll go and clean it off, then pull it up to the house.”

Katelyn pulled off her snow-caked mitten and reached deep into her pocket producing a set of keys on a ring from the car rental company.

Seth trudged through the snow and began to clear off the car at the end of the driveway. As he swept off the snow, he realized she’d rented a luxury car. “This thing must have cost you a bundle.”

Katelyn finished cleaning off Randy’s truck and came out to join him.

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“It was all I could get. At the time it didn’t matter. Since I could only get as far as Milwaukee, I needed a car to drive up here.”

“I still can’t believe you drove up in yesterday’s storm. If I’d known you were out there I would have been worried sick.”

“Would you have been worried or are you just trying to get back into my good graces after you washed my face? Maybe you’re saying what you think I want to hear, so I’ll stay and make Randy and Genean happy.”

“Right now, I don’t give a damn about Randy and Genean. Tell me what you want me to say and I’ll say it.”

“I don’t know, maybe something like you want to get to know me better, or you’re falling in love with me.”

Seth didn’t let her finish. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her deeply. “Any more doubts?”

She shook her head and allowed him to kiss her again. “I love you Katelyn Devereaux. I’ve waited five months to tell you how much I really love you.”

CHAPTER 20

Katelyn embraced the warmth of Mallard's Nest. She hadn't realized how chilled she'd become while outside, until she stood in front of the fireplace.

Seth's words about loving her rang in her ears. *Do you even know what love is? You thought you loved Ken and look what happened. If you gave yourself a chance, you might come to love Martin.*

Never, I've seen what true love is in Genean and Brad, as well as Randy and Terri. I want more out of life than Martin is willing to give me.

Do you really think Seth loves you? Don't forget about Genean. She'll always be his first love. Can you compete?

Seth entered the house, silencing her annoying inner voice. "I brought in your luggage. It looks like you expected me to be here after all."

"What do you mean?" Brad asked.

"Katelyn brought me a present."

She turned to see what he was talking about and saw him holding the package containing the portrait. In her bold calligraphy, his name stood out like a beacon. She'd forgotten about it being in the back seat of the car along with her bags.

Seth opened it up and she could hear him gasp, when he saw the likeness of himself.

"I did promise you I'd do a portrait. I knew Brad would get it to you, since I thought you were in Arizona. It wasn't meant as a..."

"I don't care what it was meant to be. It's great. It will look wonderful hanging over the fireplace in my living room. I certainly never expected you to actually do this."

He sat the picture down against the couch and took her in his arms. Again, his kiss sent a warm feeling flowing to every part of her body. She didn't even care that her entire family looked on.

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Randy's words broke the magic of the moment. "I think I'll shower. Believe it or not, I worked up a sweat out there."

Brad began to laugh. "A sweat? How could you work up a sweat running a snow blower? You weren't even working, just walking along behind it."

"If you think it's so easy, I'll let you run it next time."

Katelyn stood, as if on the edge of the conversation. She knew they wanted her to believe she belonged, but in reality, she understood she might never be completely comfortable with these people.

"Is something wrong?" Seth inquired.

"No. Why do you ask?" She turned to bury her face against his chest so she didn't have to watch the scene being played out in front of her.

He put his finger under her chin and lifted her head until she looked into his eyes. "You have a far away look on your face. Where were you just now?"

"Back in Denver, I guess, trying to decide how I will ever fit into this family I've inherited. This all comes so easily to them, the joking, the teasing, even the laughter. Even you fit in with them. Why don't I?" She lowered her eyes and turned slightly to avoid his gaze.

Seth forced her to face him again. "You do, you just don't realize it yet. Genean and Randy have had a lifetime to get used to the teasing. Give it time."

Katelyn wanted to give it time, but she wondered if she would ever be able to.

He hugged her reassuringly, then released their embrace and went out to the kitchen.

She turned back toward Randy and caught a sly smile on Genean's face. "You look like the cat who swallowed the canary. What's on your mind?"

"Not much. I'm just enjoying watching you and Seth. Is something going on I should know about?"

"Maybe." She said, grinning like a schoolgirl admitting to her first crush.

"Don't play innocent with me. I heard a lot of talking last night and even more while you were outside. Adam told me Seth washed your face with snow. So, what's going on? Seth wouldn't do such a thing if he didn't like you and believe me I know he likes you."

"If that's what he does when he likes someone, I certainly wouldn't want to see what happens when he hates a person. I guess I made a mistake in judgment. I threw a snowball at him."

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Genean began to laugh and sank down onto a chair. “When you make a mistake, you make a big one. I can tell you grew up as an only child. Even Adam knows better than to throw snowballs. Randy and I used to get into some hellacious snowball fights when we were kids. As I remember, I always got the worst of it. Consider this your official welcome to the family. It’s happened to all of us, at one time or another. We all ganged up on Seth the first time he came up here in the winter. Of course, we did the same thing to Terri and Brad. It’s official, you’re really a Mallard now.”

Rather than get the furniture wet, Katelyn seated herself cross-legged on the floor. “I’ve been through worse initiations. I have to admit, I did learn my lesson.”

“What’s this about lessons?” Randy asked, joining the conversation, his hair still wet from the shower.

“I was telling Genean about—well you know, what happened outside.”

“So, have you given my offer any more thought?”

“Yes. I think taking the suite of offices above Mallard’s is a good idea, for more than one reason. If I’m to be part of Mallard’s, why can’t Mallard’s be part of the Devereaux Advertising Agency?”

“You know why. Mallard’s and Devereaux are as different as day and night.”

Katelyn began to smile. “They may be different, but it doesn’t mean they can’t merge. Look at your large corporations. They’re usually created from a lot of little companies with absolutely nothing in common. By bringing both of our small companies together, we’d have more leverage. With health care costs and all, the larger companies are always able to negotiate for the best insurance benefits. By merging, we can get better rates for all of our employees.”

“And this from the woman who says she doesn’t know anything about business,” Seth said, as he returned from the kitchen.

Until he spoke, Katelyn hadn’t realized the implications of her statement. His comment, however innocent, made her see she opened herself more than she planned. She enjoyed the image she portrayed for her family. They certainly didn’t need to know she held a BA in business in addition to her degree in art. She disliked playing boss and everyone in Denver knew it. It was just best if here they allowed her to do what she thought best.

“I guess my office manager and Uncle Jack have talked about the benefits of growth so much it’s rubbed off on me. Of course, our lawyers

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would have to work out the details. I mean it's not just something for the three of us, it will benefit our employees as well."

"I'll have to think about it." Randy got to his feet, and held his hand out to Katelyn, to help her up. "If you don't get those wet clothes off, you'll catch pneumonia and without all of this fancy insurance you've been talking about we could end up in deep trouble."

* * * *

"Do you want to make another snowman, Uncle Seth?" Adam asked, when Katelyn went upstairs.

"Not any more today, buddy. I just got warm. Besides, your Mom and Aunt Terri have dinner almost ready and I'm starved."

Adam went back to playing with his toys and Seth wandered into the kitchen. "How are my two favorite cooks?"

"Getting everything finished up," Terri replied, as she pulled a pan of rolls from the oven.

"Can I talk to you, Seth?" Genean asked.

"Sure. You look like you have something on your mind. What is it?"

"What do you think?"

Seth couldn't keep from smiling. "Katelyn. What do you want to know?"

"What's happening between the two of you?"

"I'm not sure. One minute she's all warm and fuzzy and the next she goes back into her shell. She mentioned something about her and Collier having a misunderstanding and then there's the business of her moving here and leaving him behind. At times she's a million miles away, as though she was trying to decide which way to turn. I don't understand her. She's so different than she was last summer. I had thoughts of asking her to marry me before the end of the year. Now I'm not sure what to do."

Genean sighed, obviously relieved. "Then this must belong to you." She reached into her apron pocket and held out the small red foil wrapped box Seth stuffed between the couch cushions the night before.

"How did you find it?"

"I didn't. Adam did. He brought it out to the kitchen while you were finishing up outside. He said Santa must have dropped it last night. Did Santa get interrupted?"

"You might put it that way. I hoped to retrieve it before anyone found it. Only time will tell as to when, or if I'll get up the nerve to give it to her."

* * * *

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Katelyn smiled at her reflection in the full-length mirror. The green silk dress she found at the end of last season looked better on her than it did on the hanger. The heavy gold necklace and matching earrings she received from Uncle Jack completed the outfit.

This all seemed so different from the life of self-pity she'd led for the past year. Her only escape had been infrequent visits from Martin. Now she wondered if it were an escape or merely an act of submission to her father. Martin was someone her father would have approved of. He had been pleased when she showed an interest in Martin. She'd welcomed his concern, but knew there would never be any love between the two of them.

Could she live in a loveless marriage, acting the way her parents did when they were together? She knew any love they shared had been strained by her mother's many miscarriages and illnesses. The sterile environment in which she grew up in no way resembled the family she'd found downstairs. She could get used to being one of many very quickly, but was she capable of falling in love?

She entered the hall and could hear voices. How strange it seemed to be surrounded by family. For over a year, she faced quiet days and nights in her studio, locked away in her private world.

Suddenly, she'd found what she swore never to seek, her birth family. Now her worries, her fears, all seemed terribly foolish.

As she started down the stairs, she heard the phone ringing. It seemed good not to have to wonder who would be on the other end of the line. Even though her name was added to the deed, Mallard's Nest still belonged to Randy and Genean. She knew any calls would be for the rightful owners, since virtually no one knew where she went or why.

"There's a call for you, Katelyn," Terri called, from the base of the stairs.

Katelyn hurried to pick up the living room extension.

"Merry Christmas, Katie," Jack greeted her.

"Merry Christmas, Uncle Jack. I planned to call you after dinner."

"We just finished watching the news. We heard you had quite a storm. We were worried about you and wanted to know if you got there safely."

"How sweet of you. I almost didn't get here. I ran head first into the storm yesterday. With a little help from the local snowplow, I got here in one piece."

"When will you be seeing your young man?"

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Katelyn couldn't help but laugh at Jack's old-fashioned expression. "He does have a name."

"I know its Seth Miller. So, when will you see him?"

"I saw him last night. I thought he went to Arizona to be with his parents. Instead, he came up here."

"So?"

"So what?"

"Don't play games with me, Katie. Have you talked to him? Did you tell him about breaking your engagement to Martin? Have you cleared the air?"

"Yes, no, and somewhat. I have talked to him, but I didn't tell him much about Martin, and as for clearing the air, I need more time to decide what I'm going to do. Would it surprise you if I said I think I'm going to move to Wisconsin?"

"Do I have to ask if you're happy?"

"I don't think you do." She laughed easily, "Randy and Genean made me a partner in Mallard's and put my name on the deed to the cottage. We've even been talking about merging the two companies."

"Now you're talking sense. I knew your degree in Business Administration would come in handy if you ever decided it put it to good use."

"I've been playing dumb. You know how much I dislike business. My degree is something I'd rather no one knew about. I want no part of running the office out here. No matter what Daddy's intentions were, I don't want to be an administrator."

She finished her conversation with Jack and turned to see Seth standing behind her, leaning against the wall.

"So, you've been playing dumb. Your degree wouldn't be in business, would it?"

"It could be. Would it make a difference?"

"Not to me, but it might to your brother and sister. Do you plan to tell them?"

"No. There's no need for anyone to know. I have no intentions of running the Devereaux office or sticking my nose into the workings of Mallard's. I told you last night, I'm an artist, not a business woman."

She brushed past Seth and headed for the kitchen. His eavesdropping on her private conversation upset her. If he knew about her degree, did he know the truth about her and Martin as well? How long would it be before he asked Genean if she knew anything about the situation with Martin? Would he tell Randy and Genean about her educational background?

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“What did I say wrong?” Seth asked, grasping her arm to prevent her from walking away from him.

“Nothing, nothing at all.”

“It had to be something. I thought we cleared the air. I thought we were on even ground with each other.”

“I did too, but I certainly didn’t think you’d stoop so low as to eavesdrop on my conversation with Uncle Jack.”

“I didn’t mean to overhear you. The girls sent me in to get you for dinner. I just happened to catch what you were saying. Look, if you don’t want them to know about your degree, I won’t tell them. Just don’t turn cold on me. Let me get to know you.”

“I’m sorry I snapped at you. I guess I’m still on edge. I can’t say I’m completely comfortable with my family yet.”

“Another few days at Mallard’s Nest will take care of your jitters. Just relax and accept the love we all have to give you.”

Katelyn smiled and allowed Seth to take her hand in his. She enjoyed feeling the warmth of his touch and seeing the happiness in his eyes. Her body responded to his touch and Katelyn wished she could slip away with him and enjoy the intimacy of his lovemaking.

She could feel her smile fade as she thought about making love to Seth. Even if he didn’t betray her to Randy and Genean, he hadn’t contacted her since summer. No matter what he said, she refused to believe he wanted anything more from her than another pleasurable evening in bed.

She couldn’t get carried away. Just because she wanted Seth to make love to her, she wouldn’t be a conquest. She had too much self-respect to give herself to someone who didn’t want her. She’d proved it by breaking off her engagement to Martin. It was too soon to jump into another relationship before she was certain of the man’s true feelings.

CHAPTER 21

“Where is everyone?” Katelyn asked, finding Seth sitting alone in the living room, the morning after Christmas.

“Randy and Brad went into Green Bay to do a few things at the office and the girls went day after Christmas shopping. They left Adam with us.”

“Now, that’s a scary thought. I told you, I don’t know much about taking care of kids, even ones I love as much as Adam.”

Seth laughed at her comment. “Never fear, I’m an old hand at this.”

“So where is Adam?”

“He’s out in the kitchen fixing you breakfast.”

Katelyn gasped. In no way would she trust a three-year-old alone in the kitchen. “What do you mean he’s fixing me my breakfast?”

“I told him we’d make French toast. I got everything mixed up and let him swish the fork around in the eggs.”

Seth put his arm around Katelyn’s shoulders and escorted her toward the kitchen. She enjoyed the feeling of his closeness and fought the urge to allow him to take her in his arms. The thought of how much he’d learned from listening to last night’s phone conversation bothered her. She detested the idea of not being in control.

“You got up, Aunt Katie. I helped Uncle Seth make breakfast for you, didn’t I Uncle Seth?”

Seth smiled at Adam, as he held out a chair for Katelyn. “You bet you did, buddy. Now, let me see what a good job you did with this batter.”

Katelyn watched Seth take the bowl from Adam and pretend to scrutinize the consistency. “I think you’ll turn into a first rate cook. Now, why don’t you go in and play with your toys so your Aunt Katie can eat her breakfast in peace?”

Adam obediently jumped down from the chair where he was standing and came over to Katelyn and climbed up onto her lap. “I hope you

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like your breakfast. Uncle Seth said he made his special French toast, just for you. I'll tell you a secret. I think he likes you."

"What's going on over there?" Seth called over his shoulder. "I hear a lot of whispering."

"Nothing to concern yourself with" Katelyn replied, as Adam slid off her lap.

Within minutes, Seth set a steaming plate of French toast in front of her, along with a cup of coffee and a glass of juice. She watched him put butter and syrup on his bread, and then followed his lead. Tentatively, she tasted the finished product.

"You act like you've never had French toast before."

"I haven't. This is delicious."

"Do you want me to believe you've gotten to be this old and never tasted French toast?"

"I don't care what you believe," Katelyn teased. "I've never eaten it before, but I certainly want to have it again."

"I can't believe your mother didn't make this for you for breakfast. My sister and I always looked forward to having friends spend the night, because Mom would make it for us the next morning. She made it a lot on Sunday mornings as well."

Thoughts of growing up in the Devereaux mansion flooded Katelyn's mind, bringing tears to her eyes. "I didn't grow up exactly the same way you did. My mother wasn't up to doing household chores. Our cook would have never mixed savorys and sweets."

"What are you talking about?"

"She wouldn't have mixed savorys, eggs and bread, with sweets, syrup. She was very British and she told me it just wasn't done. You see, I heard some of the girls at school talking about having French toast, and I asked Cook if she would make it for me. She acted like I wanted to steal the crown jewels or something. I learned, very quickly, not to question her judgment when it came to food. As for having friends spend the night I didn't have many friends. Daddy was always skeptical of the people who wanted to get too close to me. We were never sure if they wanted to be friends with me or with my money."

"You certainly are a unique girl, Katelyn Devereaux. You're one of the most brilliant women I've ever had the pleasure of meeting and yet in some things your education is lacking. I'm afraid I'll just have to take over your education, starting in the kitchen."

"Then it's a good thing you're a teacher, because you'll have to start from scratch. I can grill a great steak and manage making a peanut butter

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and jelly sandwich for myself. Otherwise, most of my cooking talents are along the lines of taking the container out of the box and putting it in the microwave for about six minutes.”

“Enough talk. If you don’t eat up, this stuff will get cold and it won’t be any good.”

A knock at the door dissolved any further thoughts of conversation. While Seth went to answer it, Katelyn concentrated on the food on her plate. She sheepishly admitted, if only to herself, she liked Seth’s French toast. She savored each bite, trying to decide what he put into the batter to give it such a delectable flavor.

“I should have known you’d be here! Just where is she?”

Martin! Katelyn cringed at the sound of his voice. He couldn’t possibly be the person who just knocked on the door of Mallard’s Nest. He was in Kenya. She pushed herself away from the table and went into the living room.

As she rounded the corner, she saw Martin standing next to Seth. Seeing them together, she knew there was no comparison. For the first time Martin looked like an old man. Why hadn’t she seen it before? Unlike Seth who looked comfortable in his sweater and jeans, Martin looked stiff and out of place in his suit and overcoat.

She shifted her gaze to his face and saw only contempt and anger in his eyes. She remembered seeing this side of him before he left for Japan. Seeing it again frightened her. To complicate matters, she was afraid open hostilities would break out between Martin and Seth at any moment.

“I’m right here, Martin,” she said, in the hopes of defusing the tension she could feel in the room. “I certainly didn’t expect to see you again.”

“After what you said on the phone, did you think I’d be content to sit back and take it? I’ve come to talk some sense into your head.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. I think I summed everything up quite well when we spoke on the phone.”

“Summed it up? Like hell you did. You can’t drop a bombshell like that and not expect some sort of reaction from me. We need to talk, but not here. Come outside with me.”

“I don’t think you should,” Seth warned. “Anything the two of you have to say can be said in the house. I’ll go upstairs and check on Adam so you can have your privacy.”

“Butt out, Miller. Katie and I need to be alone and not with you listening from the top of the stairs.”

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Katelyn realized Martin wasn't about to take no for an answer. Although the thought of being alone with him outside frightened her, she knew she didn't want Adam to hear the harsh words between them. "All right, I'll go outside with you. Just let me get my coat."

Turning to Seth, she continued. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Keep my breakfast warm, and for God's sake, don't do anything to upset Adam." She hoped the tone of her voice as well as her body language did not betray her apprehension about going outside with Martin.

Once out of the house, she saw a limo parked at the end of the driveway.

"What's the meaning of this?" Martin said, pulling the perfectly wrapped box containing the ring out of his pocket.

"I told you, it's over. We aren't getting married, because I don't love you. I don't intend to spend my life with someone I neither love nor respect."

"You will love and respect me, right now you're confused by this damnable family of yours. Get your head out of the clouds and see what you're doing. Now, get in the car," Martin demanded.

"Whatever else you have to say to me, can be said right here," she replied, refusing to do as he told her.

"I said, get in the car." Martin grabbed her arm and forced her toward the vehicle. For the first time, she was close enough to him to smell liquor on his breath. It was evident he'd been drinking throughout the night and into the morning.

"I told you no!"

To Katelyn's horror, Martin pulled her into a tight embrace and kissed her hard. "I'm the one you want, not that lowlife in the house. You know it. We are the same kind of people. We're both cut from the same mold. How long will you be content stuck out here in the middle of nowhere. You're used to the lights and excitement of Denver, to say nothing of all the wonderful places you could visit once we're married."

Martin's words, coupled with the tightness of his embrace frightened her further. With all the force she could muster, she wrenched her hand free and slapped his face.

"Get out of here and leave me alone. I don't love, you, I never will."

"That my dear is impossible. You're coming with me back to Denver. Once we get there, you will be my wife. I know a judge who will gladly marry us immediately."

"And I know a lawyer who will slap you in jail faster than you can blink an eye."

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“My dear Katie, you do underestimate me. I flew back as soon as I could after we finished our conversation. When I got to Denver, I went directly to your place. You really should have a better security system installed. It didn’t take me long to break into the house. Finding your passport took a little time, but not enough to detain me for long. As soon as we’re married, I intend to take you on an extended honeymoon. Once we return, you will play the part of the happy bride.”

“My family will never allow anything like that. They’ll move heaven and earth to stop you.”

“Then they’re bigger fools than I first thought them to be. The only thing their search will accomplish will be throwing them into bankruptcy. I have enough connections to break them both emotionally as well as financially. As for your lover, you can forget he ever existed. I’m certain he’ll forget you as soon as you’re no longer around. If not, he can be easily taken care of. Either you do as I tell you and let your family know you’re happy, or you’ll be responsible for what happens to them.”

The thought of what Martin might do to Seth, as well as to Randy and Genean, brought tears to her eyes. “I hate you.”

“You won’t after we get airborne. You said you wanted me to take you to bed, and so I shall. There will only be you and me in the passenger compartment and I intend to use you the way you’re used to being used, like a whore.”

“A whore! I’m not...”

“Of course you are, my dear. Now that I know how you like to be treated, I’ll be better able to satisfy you.”

He pulled her into his embrace and kissed her long and hard. When he did, she brought her knee up into his crotch with such force that he released his grip on her and doubled over in pain.

“I told you I don’t love you. Take that back to Denver and stew on it. I’m going nowhere with you, not now or ever. I do intend place to call Uncle Jack and tell him just what you are. When I do, he’ll know exactly what to do with you. You’re not the only one who has connections and knows how to break someone. You seem to forget Max Devereaux raised me, and he was one of the shrewdest men in the business world. Now get the hell out of here. I never want to see you again.”

* * * *

Seth wanted to run after Katelyn and bring her back into the house. Instead, he stood at the window watching her and Martin. He knew he had to stay in the house with Adam.

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The scene that was being played out before his eyes made him want to punch someone, anyone. Martin held out a beautifully wrapped box toward Katelyn. It had to contain the ring she said he'd given her months earlier.

He thought of the ring that was securely hidden. It probably couldn't compare with the one Martin held in his hand. All he could afford had been a half-carat diamond. Martin's ring was undoubtedly a full carat or perhaps larger. Martin had money and a high social position. How could Door County and Fish Creek ever hope to compare to that?

As his thoughts ran wild within his mind, he continued to stare out the window. Instead of seeing Katelyn turn to return to his side, he saw Martin take her in his arms and kiss her passionately.

Seth couldn't stand to watch any longer. It was like watching Ge-near give herself to Brad, it had taken him a long time to accept the fact that his best friend had won the woman he thought he loved. At the time he thought he would never get over it, but he had. He couldn't go through that again. Let Martin have her. Somehow, he would find a way to get on with his life.

I refuse to be made a fool for a second time.

Grabbing his coat, he opened the door to go outside. Katelyn almost bumped into him as she ran toward the house.

"I can see you're in a hurry to get your things and go with your lover. Have a great life, Katelyn. Just don't expect me to stand here and watch you walk out on me."

"But Seth..."

He turned away from her before she could say the words that would break his heart. Instead, he hurried toward the bay. He needed time to think and the biting cold of the morning breeze coming in off the water would clear his mind.

* * * *

Katelyn watched in horror as Seth walked away from her and Martin made his way toward the house.

"Stay away from here, Martin," she warned. "If you come one step closer, I'll call the police and have you arrested."

Martin stopped short. "Arrested? What the hell for?"

"Kidnapping, trespassing and attempted rape. If I can't make the charges stick, my brother and brother-in-law will. Go back to whatever hole you crawled out of and leave me alone."

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Without saying anything more, Katelyn hurried into the house and slammed the door, putting the solid oak barrier between her and the man who had fooled her for so long.

Before she could gather her thoughts, the phone rang.

“Katie? This is Uncle Jack, I’m so glad I reached you.”

“What’s wrong?” Katelyn asked, hardly able to talk for fear of the tears that threatened to fall at any moment.

“I called to tell you that someone broke into your house. The police called me early this morning. I’m there now. I don’t know how to tell you this, but I think Martin is behind it.”

“You don’t have to tell me, he’s already been here. I can tell you what’s missing. He took my passport and came here with some concocted story about taking me back to Denver to marry him and leaving immediately on our honeymoon. Luckily I remembered a little trick Daddy taught me and got him good with my knee.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t say something to you before Christmas. I hired a private investigator and had him investigated. He’s not at all what any of us thought. There are no millions. In fact, he’s up to his neck in debt. I think the only reason he wanted to marry you was to get control of your company as well as your money.”

“There must be more to it than you’re saying. What else did you learn?”

“He’s involved in some pretty nasty business. From what I’ve learned, he’s ruthless in his business dealings and capable of almost anything to get what he wants. I think he’s a very dangerous man.”

Katelyn shuddered at the threats Martin made against not only her family but also Seth. She knew she had to warn him. Somehow she had to get him to come back into the house, away from where Martin could find him.

“Katie, are you all right?”

“I’m, ah, well, I have to go. Martin made some terrible threats against Seth and he’s out at the bay. I have to warn him. I’m fine, but I’m so worried about Seth and my family.”

“I’ll call you later. I’ve filed a police report against Martin here. I’ll alert the authorities to get in touch with the Door County Sheriffs Department. You just be careful.”

“I will, Uncle Jack. I promise.”

Katelyn hung up the phone and hurried to the kitchen. She knew she could get to the bay through the back door without being seen by Martin.

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To her surprise, the back door was ajar. It had been closed when she was eating her breakfast and Seth had come out through the front. The only other person who could have gone out of that door was Adam.

Panic clutched at her as she hurried out on the deck and looked around the immediate area. To her horror, Adam was nowhere in sight.

Rather than allowing her imagination to run away with her, she went back into the house. After searching all of the downstairs bedrooms, she hurried upstairs. A search of the bedrooms there was just as fruitless.

“Damn woman,” she heard Seth mutter as she was coming down the stairs. “Not only does she run off with her lover and leave Adam alone but she left the door open.”

Katelyn heard the door slam, as she walked into the kitchen. “Just why did you do that?”

“I thought it might help on the heating bill. Of course, someone with your kind of money doesn’t worry about anything so trivial as that. I thought you’d be long gone with your lover by now.”

Katelyn bristled. “I don’t know what burr you go under your saddle, mister. For your information, I sent Martin packing, but I don’t have time to go into that right now. Adam is missing. If he’s out in those woods...well, I don’t even want to think about it.”

“What do you mean he’s missing? Isn’t he upstairs playing?”

“No. I just checked his room. For your information, I think he slipped out when you went outside in a snit over something, although I have no idea what. That’s not important. I have to get out there and find Adam.”

“Not alone you don’t. As a matter of fact, you should stay here. The girls should be back from shopping soon.”

“Like hell I’m going to stay here. I care about Adam as much as you do.”

CHAPTER 22

Katelyn and Terri waited for them in the emergency room waiting area. To Seth, it seemed as though the entire scene was a rerun of last summer's events.

In her mind she relived running through the woods in search of Adam. This time she hadn't been running from her family. This time she was looking for a little boy who had touched her heart and become very important to her.

She had found him a few yards into the woods. He had stumbled and fallen. The fall must have knocked him unconscious, because he lay limply in her arms as she rushed him back to the warmth of the car.

Terri and Genean were back at the house and as soon as she explained what had happened, they rushed out to the car for the frantic drive to Sturgeon's Bay and the emergency room.

"How is he?" Seth asked, shattering the memory of the frantic search and rushed trip to make certain Adam would be all right.

It was Terri who replied. "He's going to be fine. He woke up in the car and asked if we had found you. He was worried when you weren't in the house. They're going to keep him overnight to get him warmed up."

From the corner of his eye, he saw two officers coming toward them. "Are you Miss Devereaux?" one of them asked.

Katelyn turned. "Yes, do you need a statement about my nephew?"

"In due time. Mr. Miller has given a complete statement to my partner. We need you to come to Green Bay with us."

"Are you arresting me?"

"Hardly. We received word that they have Martin Collier in custody and we need you to press charges. Before Katelyn could answer the man, her cell phone rang. Without thinking, she answered it.

"Uncle Jack?" Seth heard her say, giving her caller an identity. "Yes, the officers are with me now. I'm going to Green Bay with them. –

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Of course I'm pressing charges. He tried to kidnap me and made terrible threats against my family."

The one-sided conversation was more confusing than comforting. Once Katelyn hung up, she followed the officer out of the room. Randy was quick to follow them.

"Do you have any idea what that was all about?" Seth asked Terri.

"A little. Before Katelyn found out that Adam was missing, Jack Townsend called the cottage to warn her about Collier," Terri began. "It seems he broke into her house and trashed the place, then flew directly to Green Bay. Jack told her that Martin is a wanted man for some unsavory dealings he's had in the past."

Terri's words made Seth cringe at the memory of leaving Katelyn alone with such a man.

"From the sound of that conversation she just had with him, the man is wanted on more than state charges. She told me he threatened our lives as well as yours. The sooner they have him behind bars, the better it will be for all of us."

The story was more terrible than what he had imagined. What if Katelyn had been forced to go with such a monster?

"Adam is asking for you," Brad said when he entered the room.

Seth turned to face his friend. "Me?"

"He's worried about where you went. They're taking him up to his room, but he wants to see you first."

Seth pushed past Brad and hurried to the emergency cubical where Genean stood holding Adam's hand.

"Hey buddy, you gave your Aunt Katie and me quite a scare."

Adam looked up at him. "I was looking for you. I went into the woods, but I got lost. I was so scared."

"I know, buddy. I was scared too. I should have never gone outside without you."

"Don't even go away without me again, please."

"You bet I won't."

"Aunt Katie was cwyng. Can you make her happy again?"

"I'll try. They tell me you are going to spend the night here. Now, I want you to be good and do exactly what they tell you. I'll be back to see you later."

"Will Aunt Katie be back, too?"

"You just try to keep her away."

Seth went back out to the waiting area. There he found Brad and Terri engaged in conversation.

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“It seems like we have two people willing to take the blame for this,” Brad said, getting to his feet. “Katelyn feels responsible and after talking to Terri it seems you do too. Don’t be so hard on yourself, this could have happened at our house as well as up here.”

Seth knew that Brad was trying to make things better, but for some reason it wasn’t working.

“Adam just doesn’t understand that he needs someone to go outside with him,” Brad continued. “During the summer he could come and go as he pleased and not have to worry about putting on a coat. Genean has a terrible time getting him to dress warmly to go out and play. She caught him outside without his coat on just last week. It scared her half to death. Of course he was only out for a couple of minutes when she missed him.”

“Then you don’t hate me?”

“Good God no. I’m going back to be with Genean and get Adam settled in his room. Why don’t you and Terri go down to the cafeteria and get a cup of coffee? We’ll join you there later.”

Seth watched as Brad went down the hallway to where they were preparing Adam to go upstairs.

“Where’s Randy?” Seth asked once they were seated at a table in the cafeteria.

“He took Katelyn to Green Bay. The officers said it would be all right if they followed them in a separate vehicle. The way it sounds, Martin had everyone fooled. Katelyn told me some of the things Jack told her about the man on the phone. Thank God he’s out of her life for good.”

Seth sipped his coffee, thoughtfully. As he did, his cell phone rang.

“Where are you, Seth?” The man on the other end of the line asked.

“What do you mean, where am I? Who is this?”

“This is Al Pritchert at the bank. We were expecting you a half an hour ago.”

“The closing,” Seth said. In all of the excitement, he had forgotten that today was the day he was supposed to close on his house. “It’s going to have to be postponed until tomorrow. I’m sorry, but there’s no way I can be there today.” He went on to explain what had happened and why he had forgotten something as important as sealing his future.

“Were they able to change it?” Terri asked when Seth finished his conversation.

“As soon as I explained, they understood. I’ve certainly made a mess of everything.”

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“Well, you can trash that attitude if you know what’s good for you.”

Seth looked up to see Brad and Genean standing at their table.

“Shouldn’t you be with Adam?”

Genean seated herself at the table and reached out to grasp Seth’s hand. “He’s sleeping and he’s going to be just fine, it’s you and Katelyn that we’re worried about right now. You’re both blaming yourselves for something that could have happened even if it had been us with him at the time.”

“But I left him in the house alone. If he hadn’t wondered where I went he wouldn’t have gone outside and gotten lost.”

“That’s just an excuse,” Brad said. “I told you he got out on Genean last week and she was standing right in the kitchen talking on the phone. Kids have a tendency to get away from you when you least expect it.”

“Then you don’t hate me?”

“Hardly. You and my sister-in-law, you make quite a pair. She wants to go back to Denver and never see us again because she thinks we hate her. You’re ready to bolt like you did last summer. Well, buddy, it ain’t a gonna happen. You’re stuck with this family whether you like it or not. Adam made me promise not to be mad at you. He expects you to be in his room with Aunt Katie when he wakes up.”

Relief was the only word to describe Seth’s feelings. He knew he would never forget what happened today. Somehow, he was going to have to figure out a way to reestablish his relationship with Katelyn.

* * * *

Katelyn sat next to Randy in the cab of the truck as they pulled out of the parking lot behind the squad car. She could still feel Adam’s lifeless body in her arms. No matter what, she had been responsible for what happened today. If she hadn’t gone out with Martin, Seth wouldn’t have become jealous and walked away from her. If that hadn’t happened, Adam wouldn’t have gone outside looking for the adults who were supposed to be responsible for him. How ironic it was that when her family wanted her she didn’t want them and now when they had become so very important to her she had alienated them from her.

“When we get done at the police station, take me out to the airport.”

“The airport? Whatever for?”

“I need to book a flight back to Denver.”

Randy turned and looked at her in disbelief. “You’re talking nonsense. I thought you were staying until after the first of the year.”

“How can I? Because of me Adam is in the hospital and Seth hates me.”

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“Look baby sister, if I didn’t have to keep both of my hands on the wheel, I’d take you over my knee and give you an old fashioned spanking for talking such nonsense. It seems I heard the same crap from Seth less than an hour ago. No one hates you and if you think you can use this as an excuse to get away from us, you’re out of your mind.”

“But...”

“There are no buts in this situation. Adam is safe, Collier is heading for jail and as for you, well, like it or not you’re a Mallard. You always have been and you always will be. There’s a suite of offices above Mallard’s just waiting for you. If that’s not enough, there’s Seth to consider. From that’s not enough to get you to relocate to Wisconsin, maybe the fact that Adam wants his Aunt Katie in his life as much as we do is.”

Katelyn let out a sigh of relief. “You’re right about most of it, but when it comes to Seth, I think that’s a whole other ball game. He was mad as a hatter when he ran out of the house. He’s not the type to forgive and forget so easily. If you recall I never did explain to him about Martin last summer. By now, he must think I’m a terrible person. I wouldn’t blame him if he never spoke to me again.”

Randy merely shook his head, making Katelyn believe he completely agreed with her. It was best if she said no more on the subject of Seth Miller, even if it did break her heart.

The police station in Green Bay bustled with the day after a holiday activity. “This is Miss Devereaux,” the state patrol officer who accompanied her said to the desk sergeant. “She’s come down here to press charges against Martin Collier.”

“Good, because I don’t know how much longer we could have held him. We’re still waiting on the federal warrant we were told was being sent out from Denver.”

Katelyn was escorted to an office and asked more questions than she cared to answer. Included among them were questions about why she had allowed someone like Martin to get close to her and what kind of charges she was willing to press.

She maintained that Martin had come unannounced and that he had made threats against her as well as her family. All the while she talked she couldn’t understand the skeptical look on the officer’s face.

“Did he hurt you?”

The question left her flabbergasted. Of course, Martin had hurt her. Maybe there weren’t physical bruises, but there were certainly emotional ones.

“I-I don’t know what you mean.”

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“Did he hit you?”

Katelyn thought of the way he had held her and kissed her, his embrace had hurt, but it was nothing she could prove. The memory of his kiss prompted another memory that was equally as frightening.

“He grabbed my arm.” Instinctively Katelyn put her hand to the spot above her right elbow where Martin had grabbed her. To her surprise, she felt the same pain at her own touch as she did when Martin held her tightly.

“Are you all right?” the officer asked.

“I-I don’t know.”

Gently the officer took her right hand in his then pushed the sleeve of her sweater up past her elbow. The bruise that encompassed not only the spot where Martin’s grasp had occurred but most of her forearm came as a shock.

“I’d call this assault. It sounds good enough to hold him until we can get the federal warrant for his arrest. Are you going back to the hospital?”

Katelyn nodded.

“Good. I would suggest you have this checked out. It’s entirely possible that this is more than a bruise. There could be some internal damage. It looks like when my kid took a header off his bike and got a bad sprain. It’s nothing for you to be ignoring at this point. I’ll have a photographer come in and take pictures. Are you certain there aren’t any more bruises?”

“If there are, they would be around my midsection where he held me when he kissed me. I doubt there would be any though. I was pretty well protected with my heavy sweater and my coat.”

“You were protected on your arm as well. If any more bruises show up when you’re examined have the doctor document them with pictures and get them to us. Has this man ever hurt you in the past?”

“I’m afraid so. I took it as a jealous rage then and dismissed it. I guess I should have pursued it at the time, but I didn’t.”

“That’s the problem with so many domestic abuse cases, no one wants to play the bad guy and get someone they think they love in trouble. I can assure you there will be no further problems for you from this man. From what I’ve heard, he’ll be spending the rest of his life behind bars.”

The officer left her in the room while he went to write up the charges as they had discussed them. A light rap at the door surprised her.

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When she opened it she saw two women, one with a Polaroid camera waiting for her.

“I’m Officer Judy Kline and this is my partner Officer Constance Bride. Officer Dirk asked us if we would come and document your bruises. He also said he thought there might be more of them around your midsection. Do you mind if we take a look? He thought you might be more comfortable with us rather than a male officer.”

The woman who identified herself as Judy, helped Katelyn take off her sweater. It amazed her as to the amount of pain she was feeling in her right arm. Was it only her imagination or had she felt the pain and ignored it because of the intensity of the situation that had occurred this morning?

She didn’t have to look down to realize that her midsection was also bruised. The looks on the faces of the two officers said volumes.

“I honestly don’t think you should wait to get back to Sturgeon Bay to have that looked at,” Connie said. “We have a doctor on call, I’m going to arrange for her to take a look at you.”

“But it’s only a bruise,” Katelyn protested.

“It could be a cracked rib. Are you having any pain?”

“Not really. I mean it hurt when he held me so tight and of course it hurt after that, but I haven’t had any problems in breathing.”

“I agree with Connie. I think it could be more serious. At least get checked out before you leave here. I don’t think this is anything you should be fooling around with.”

The humiliation of the confrontation with Martin was doubled by having to have pictures taken by the two female officers. When they finished a young woman doctor came into the room and did an examination. When she was convinced the bruises were not more serious, she agreed Katelyn could follow up with a private doctor and gave her a bottle of pain medication.”

After two hours of being poked and prodded, Katelyn again joined Randy at the reception area of the police station.

“What took so long?”

“I don’t think the fact that Martin told me he had come to take me with him was enough evidence for them to press charges. The officer asked me if he harmed me. When he pushed up my sleeve I saw this terrible bruise. They had to document it. Thank goodness they sent in two female officers to take pictures. They had me take off my sweater and we found more bruises around my midsection. They insisted I see the doctor

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who was on call. She gave me some pain pills and told me to follow up with a private physician. Luckily, there are no broken ribs.”

“We’ll see about that. I think you should have x-rays taken. I’ll take you over to the hospital here myself.”

“Honestly, Randy, it can wait until we get back to Sturgeon Bay. I’m concerned about Adam.”

“I’ll let you win this time, but once we get there and you satisfy your curiosity, it’s down to x-ray we go. I’m not taking any chances of hidden damage that could cause problems in the future.”

* * * *

“I’m going back to the house and clean up the mess we left,” Seth said, once he’d seen Adam.

“Aren’t you going to wait for Katelyn?” Terri questioned.

“Who knows when she’ll get back here? I know that Adam is going to be fine and that’s what really matters. I’ll see you all later back at the house.”

As Seth pulled out of the parking lot, he thought about how he would react to seeing Katelyn when they all got home. Rather than chance it he decided once he cleaned up the mess in the kitchen, he would drive up to Fish Creek and take another look around the house he planned to buy. If things had been different, he could have stayed there tonight. Instead, he would be at Mallard’s Nest enduring the tension that would surely be there.

The silence of the empty rooms of Mallard’s Nest made Seth painfully aware of the fact everyone else was at the hospital. Perhaps this is for the best, I certainly need time to sort out my feelings about all of this.

The ringing of the phone stopped his mental ramblings.

“Mallard’s Nest,” he answered.

“Seth is that you? This is Tink. What’s going on over there? We heard that someone by the name of Collier was arrested for assault and attempted kidnapping of someone there.”

“I guess you heard right. I hadn’t heard any of that, but of course, I haven’t been listening to the radio.”

“We heard it when we were on our way home from Margaret’s folks’ place down in Janesville. Is everyone all right?”

“More or less. I just got back from the hospital. Everyone else is still there.”

“You don’t sound so hot. Why don’t you come up here and fill us in? I don’t like you being alone down there.”

“That’s not necessary, Tink. I have things to do here.”

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“Bull. If you don’t come to us, we’ll come to you. Maybe you should get out of there for a while.”

“Maybe I should. I was going to clean up here, but your offer sounds a hell of a lot better. I’ll stop and pick up the makings for Tom ‘N Jerry’s.”

“That’s not necessary. I’ve got everything we need. Just get your butt up here so we can talk.”

Seth went out to the kitchen and cleaned up the mess he’d made fixing breakfast then prepared to go. He thought about leaving a note, but he would be back long before anyone got home from the hospital. No one would even know he left.

CHAPTER 23

Katelyn got out of bed slower than she had on any previous morning in memory. Even though the x-rays confirmed the diagnosis of the doctor at the police station, she still hurt. The pain pills Randy had forced her to take the night before left her too groggy for intelligent conversation, sending her to bed early. She had hoped to see Seth, but he had not been home when they arrived and didn't return before she went to bed. It was entirely possible he had gone back to the lake to rethink his decision of buying a place that would put him so close to her.

"I didn't expect you up so early," Terri said, when she joined them for breakfast.

"I guess I'm all slept out. Did Seth ever get in?"

"No. I'm starting to get concerned. I really thought he'd be here when we got home last night."

"He was pretty down on himself yesterday. It wouldn't surprise me if he went back to the lake," Randy said.

Katelyn wished she had stuck to her guns and gone to the airport to look into a ticket back to Denver.

"I just talked to Genean at the hospital," Terri said, changing the subject drastically. "She and Brad will be bringing Adam home at about noon. You'll never guess what he wants to do."

"Knowing Adam it's hard to tell."

"He wants to go to McDonalds. Brad tried to tell him we were all waiting for him at home, but he insisted that we come into town and meet them there."

"You go ahead," Katelyn replied. "I think I'll stay here and see if Seth shows up."

"Nonsense," Randy declared. "You're coming with us. If you aren't there, Adam will be disappointed. As far as Seth is concerned, let him

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stew in his own juices for a while. He'll come to his senses and show up sooner or later."

* * * *

Seth left the bank, the deed to his house, along with the hefty mortgage, in his pocket. No matter what he paid for the place, it was worth it. At least he had something of his own to offer Katelyn.

The thought of Katelyn brought to mind his night of drinking with Tink. A couple of Tom 'N Jerry's had turned into several boiler makers until he was too drunk to even consider driving back to Egg Harbour. By the time he realized just how drunk he'd really gotten, it was too late to even call Mallard's Nest.

This morning when he finally woke up there was no answer at the cottage. Since he didn't have anyone's cell numbers memorized, he decided to wait until he finished his business at the bank before he showed his face at Mallard's Nest.

He glanced at his watch. The meeting took longer than he expected it would. Hell, it was past three. He'd be lucky to get everything done before dinnertime.

From the bank, he went to the power and phone companies. Each place seemed to take longer than he thought necessary. They both said the same thing, being the week between Christmas and New Years they were running at half-staff.

It was already dark when he finally arrived at Mallard's Nest.

"Just where have you been?" Randy greeted him, when he entered the living room. "I'm sure Katelyn thinks you've deserted her."

"Everything took longer than expected."

From the kitchen, he could hear Genean and Terri talking. "Where is Katelyn? I need to talk to her."

"It's about time you got home," Brad said, his tone accusing. "Today really wiped her out. Randy insisted she take a couple of pain pills and go to bed early."

"Pain pills?"

"That's right, you'd left before she got back yesterday. Collier bruised her up pretty badly. She didn't realize it until she was at the police station in Green Bay. They took pictures of the one on her arm and then asked her to take off her sweater. I guess the one around her midsection is nasty as well. We insisted she have x-rays taken. Luckily there were no broken bones or cracked ribs. She's just in a world of hurt. The doctor said the best thing for her was rest."

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Although Seth agreed, he wished he'd been here to comfort her last night. Wished he'd been able to tell her about the closing today. Tomorrow, tomorrow would have to be soon enough for them to clear the air.

After going to his room, he searched the dresser drawer for the ring he had planned to give her earlier in the week. Once he found it, he put it on the dresser. He would put it in his coat pocket tomorrow. If he was lucky, she would be receptive to the idea of accepting his proposal.

CHAPTER 24

Katelyn came down for breakfast at seven. To her surprise, Seth sat on the landing at the bottom of the stairs waiting for her.

“I didn’t think you’d ever get up.”

“What do you mean? It’s still so early it’s dark outside. Besides, you’re the last person I ever expected to see. I figured you’d hightailed it for the lake.”

“That’s a long story. It’s too long to go into now. As long as you’re dressed, you’re coming with me.”

“With you? What about breakfast?”

“We’ll stop in town and eat. I want to get out of here before your sister finds out you’re up and insists you eat with her.”

“I think you’ve lost your mind. What makes you think you can just walk in here after two days and expect me to go anywhere with you?”

“Just a hunch. Please Aunt Katie, if you won’t come for me do it for Adam. He wants me to make you happy again.”

Seth’s expression told her she’d hurt his feelings. “Oh, all right. I can’t stand to see that hurt puppy dog look on your face. Let me get my coat.”

“Where are the two of you going?” Genean asked, coming out of the kitchen.

Seth spoke before Katelyn had a chance to say a word. “It’s none of your business. Don’t look for us until we get back. We might be gone all day.”

Katelyn merely shrugged her shoulders. She had no more idea of where Seth intended to take her than Genean.

After a pleasant breakfast in town, they turned toward Fish Creek. The memory of the house Seth said he planned to buy flashed through Katelyn’s mind. As she remembered, he was to have signed the papers the day after Christmas, but then the business with Martin came up to say nothing of the emergency with Adam. Had he been signing the papers

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yesterday? It would certainly explain his absence. Of course, it still left the night before unaccounted for.

“Just where were you the last night?” she finally asked.

“I went up to visit friends and drown my sorrows. I guess I did a pretty good job of it, because I woke up yesterday morning on their couch with the worst case of cottonmouth I’ve ever had as well as one hell of a hangover. Of course that’s not really a good explanation.”

“Then you weren’t running away from me?”

“Hardly. I think I was running away from myself. It was quite a guilt trip.”

Katelyn made no comment. She’d been on her own guilt trip these past few days. She knew all about feeling sorry for yourself.

“This is it,” he said, when they pulled into the driveway of a large rambling house badly in need of paint.

In her mind’s eye, she could see it painted a soft buff color with rust accenting the scalloped shingles around the roof. “It’s magnificent, is it yours?”

“It’s mine and I have the mortgage to prove it. As for the magnificent part, it will be, one day. What do you want to see first, the house or the barn?”

“What a silly question, the barn, of course.”

After walking around the main floor, they climbed to the loft. The sight of it made Katelyn smile uncontrollably. “This has possibilities, great possibilities.” She immediately began pointing out where windows, as well as skylights, should be placed and where she would put free-standing fireplaces.

“I wish I had your eye,” Seth said. “I could only think about putting in windows. I didn’t have a clue what else I would have to do.”

Katelyn hung her head, sheepishly. “I didn’t mean to take over. I just get so excited about projects like this one.”

She allowed him to take her to the house. When she entered it, her mouth dropped open at the beauty of the interior. The foyer led into a living room with plush burgundy carpeting and beautiful cream-colored furniture. Although everything was covered with a thick layer of dust, Katelyn looked beyond the dirt to see the room as it could be with a lot of tender loving care. “This room is beautiful. With a new coat of paint and a good cleaning, we won’t have to do anything else to it. I can’t believe anyone would leave all of this furniture. Do we get to keep it?”

“I asked them if I could and they were happy to oblige. I doubt if anyone wanted the hassle of having to dispose of it. Let me show you the

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rest of the house. This is the least impressive room, after the bathrooms and kitchen, that is.” The tone of his voice was inviting. It was almost as though he wanted her to share this place with him.

As they wandered from room to room, Katelyn knew what he meant. The formal dining room contained a crystal chandelier as well as a massive oak table and six chairs, with matching sideboard.

At last, they entered the master bedroom. An antique sleigh bed dominated the room and made her gasp in disbelief. “This is beautiful. You know, we could put up white eyelet curtains and use the same material for the bedspread. Of course, under the eyelet, we could put a brown satin comforter. It would give this room a lot of warmth.”

She felt Seth put his arms around her and lightly kiss the back of her neck. “Do you mean it?”

“Mean what?” she asked, when she turned to face him.

“Did you mean it when you said ‘we’?”

“I didn’t realize I even said ‘we’.”

“You’ve been saying ‘we’, ever since we got here.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“You didn’t offend me.” He kept her imprisoned in his arms. “I’ve rather enjoyed watching the artist in you. I guess that’s why I love you.”

“Did you say love? I mean after the other day with Martin and then Adam, I thought...”

“Yes, Katelyn, I said love. I know you thought I hated you. I think the one I hated the most was myself. I was so jealous, I caused us all a lot of hurt. I should have decked Collier when he first came in the house.”

“We both said some hurtful things. Are you certain? I mean this is a big step and.”

He silenced her with a kiss. “And nothing. I think I’ve loved you since the first time I kissed you, I was just too bullheaded to come to you earlier. What I’m trying to say is, will you - I mean could you consider spending your life in this house, with me?”

“Are you trying to ask me to marry you, Seth?”

The words prompted images of her wearing a white dress, standing beside Seth, pledging her life to his. Those images gave way to ones of delightful lovemaking in the sleigh bed and the promise of a life together.

“A lot depends on the past. There were five months when I heard nothing from you. Can you honestly say you love me when. . .”

“When I didn’t call? You didn’t call either. Since you tried to call me before you came out here I must assume you have my number.”

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“Don’t put me on the defensive. I tried to call you. It’s just. . .”

“Let me finish that for you. It’s just that every time the answering machine came on you got all choked up and couldn’t say a word.”

“How did you know?”

“The same thing happened to me. The one time you did answer, I realized I didn’t know what I could say to change your opinion of me.”

“Are you saying you tried to call me?”

“Only about a hundred times.”

Katelyn began to laugh. “We’ve both made a lot of mistakes. Do you think we can work past them?”

“I think that could be arranged. Now, if I were asking you to marry me, what would your answer be?” he inquired, looking deeply into her eyes.

She could fight her desires no longer. Ken betrayed her; Martin threatened her; only Seth promised her his undying love and proved it by giving her the time she needed to accept her family before he confused her further with the emotion of love.

“If you had asked me, which you haven’t, I think I would have said yes.” She remained captured in his arms, hypnotized by his eyes.

“Will you marry me, Katelyn Devereaux? Will you make my life complete? I can’t bear the thought of ever losing you again,” he said, moving his hands until they no longer held her close to him, but clasped her hands tightly.

Katelyn took a deep breath, her head spinning. For a few hours last summer, she wanted to hear Seth ask her to marry him. When she thought he too betrayed her, made love to her only to soften her toward Randy and Genean, she hated him. Now, months later, the words she so longed to hear rang in her ears, like bells heralding the new day. The knowledge that he, like she, had been unable to bring himself to take the first step seemed suddenly funny.

“Just what are you laughing about? My proposal isn’t that funny, is it?”

“No, but we are. We wasted five perfectly good months of getting to know each other by neither of us being willing to take the first step. I know it’s crazy, we’re virtual strangers, but yes, I’d be proud to marry you. I do love you, Seth Miller, if what this feeling is whenever I’m around you is love. Suzie said you’d help me become a woman again and...”

“Did anyone ever tell you that you talk too much?” Seth said, interrupting her. He didn’t allow her to answer. Instead, he kissed her ten-

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derly. When, at last, he released her, he reached into his pocket and handed her a red foil wrapped box. “Open it. Please.”

Katelyn took the box from Seth and nervously unwrapped it. When she flipped open the lid, the pear shaped diamond sparkled in the morning sunlight filtering through the dirty window. It wasn't the huge diamond Martin had insisted she keep for so long. His had been bought without thought, just something he picked up to get her to sign everything over to him. This ring had been bought out of love and chosen especially for her.

Seth took the ring from the box and then slipped it on her finger. For a moment he stood, as though admiring it, before taking her in his arms and kissing away all of her doubts.