

There's no room in her life for love. Love has other ideas...

Konigsburg, Texas, Book 3

If Jessamyn Carroll had only herself to consider, staying in Pennsylvania after her husband's death would have been a no-brainer. Her vindictive in-laws' efforts to get their hooks into her infant son, however, force her to flee to a new home. Konigsburg, Texas.

Peace...at least for now. She's even found a way to make some extra money, looking after sexy accountant Lars Toleffson's precocious two-year-old daughter. She finds it easy—too easy—to let his protective presence lull her into thinking she and her son are safe at last.

Lars, still wounded from enduring a nasty divorce from his cheating ex-wife, tries to fight his attraction to the mysterious, beautiful widow. But when an intruder breaks into her place, and Jess comes clean about her past, all bets are off. Someone wants her baby—and wants Jess out of the picture. Permanently.

Now Jess has a live-in bodyguard, whether she wants him or not. Except she does want him—and he wants her. Yet negotiating a future together will have to overcome a lot of roadblocks: babies, puppies, the entire, meddling Toleffson family—and a kidnapper.

Warning: Contains Konigsburg craziness, creepy in-laws, a conniving two-year-old, a lovelorn accountant, a sleep-deprived Web developer, and lots of hot holiday sex.

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Be My Baby

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Be My Baby

Meg Benjamin

Dedication

To all the helpful critiquers in SARA (Beckie, Linda, Masha, y'all know who you are), to my ever-supportive editor Lindsey Faber, and to my guys, Bill, Josh, and Ben.

Chapter One

Lars Toleffson had oatmeal in his hair. He found it by accident while he was sitting drinking a beer with his brothers at the Dew Drop Inn in downtown Konigsburg, Texas. Since that was around five in the afternoon, he'd probably been wearing the oatmeal all day. He only hoped other people hadn't noticed. Daisy, his two-year-old daughter, was learning to feed herself. She was really enthusiastic about breakfast, and sometimes her enthusiasm slopped over.

So to speak.

The only way Lars could have a beer with his brothers was through the generosity of his sisters-in-law, who'd taken Daisy with them to the park to see the city workers put up some decorations. Lars wasn't sure what holiday was being decorated for—it was early November, but he had a feeling the decorations were probably for Christmas. Christmas was a big deal in Konigsburg, given the shopping frenzy the tourists usually went into once the season was officially open.

Lars sighed, rubbing his eyes. He adored his daughter. He'd moved to Texas to make a better life for

her than she would have had in Iowa where his ex-wife lived within meddling distance, even though it meant giving up the automatic babysitting services provided by his folks. But sometimes he wished he could take a day off from being a full-time single parent.

Of course, every time he wished that, he ended up feeling like a total shit.

“Hey, bro.” His brother Pete dropped into a chair opposite him. “No dozing off at the table. At least not until you’ve listened to us talk for a few minutes. I mean, give us a chance to bore you to sleep first.”

Lars shook his head. “Sorry. Late night last night. Daisy didn’t feel like sleeping until midnight.” He’d felt like sleeping around eight-thirty himself, but that was par for the course these days.

His brother Cal pulled out a chair next to Pete. The three of them took up all the available space and some that wasn’t really available, like the area around the table where they tried to stretch their legs out. Their mother had given birth to four giants, all of them standing over six feet four. No wonder Mom had her grumpy moments.

“Hey, y’all, where’s the beer? Don’t we have a standing order by now?” Cal asked.

Pete shrugged. “Looks like she’s working her way down the tables.”

“She?” Cal raised an eyebrow.

“The waitress.”

Cal leaned forward, squinting into the darkness. The Dew Drop wasn’t well known for the candle power of its lighting. “What waitress? Ingstrom fired the waitress he had last week. Or she walked out—I’m not sure which.”

“He’s hired another one. He’s trying to upgrade the place.” Pete raised a hand, signaling. “Wonder says Ingstrom may even wash the windows one of these days.”

Cal widened his eyes in amazement. “You mean so we could actually see what this place looks like? Wouldn’t that destroy his business?”

“Whatcha want?”

Lars blinked. The woman standing beside the table wore a leather vest zipped over breasts the size of melons. Big melons. Her bare arms were covered in so many tattoos they looked blue. A roll of white flesh bulged between the bottom of her vest and the top of her jeans. The nametag on her left breast read *Hi! My Name Is Ruby*.

“Ya want anything or not?” Ruby sounded like she was getting pissed. Lars figured that would not be a good thing.

“Lone Star.”

“Dos Equis,” Cal muttered.

“Corona.” Pete was staring down at the table, trying very hard not to look at Ruby’s chest, which was only inches from his nose.

Ruby turned and stalked away.

Pete watched her retreat into the darkness. “You think she’s actually going to bring us those beers? Did we order right? Were we supposed to say ‘May I’ or something?”

“I think I’m not going after her to find out.” Cal shook his head. “Where the hell does Ingstrom find them?”

“Central casting. It doesn’t matter anyway. She won’t stick it out more than a couple of days. None of them ever does. Being a barmaid at the Dew Drop is not a major career move.”

“Here she comes again,” Lars cautioned.

Ruby reappeared from the gloom and plopped three bottles in front of them. “Six bucks,” she snapped.

Pete shook his head. “We’ll run a tab.”

“Fuck that,” Ruby snarled. “Six bucks.”

All three brothers dug out their wallets and plunked their dollar bills in front of her. Ruby stalked off again.

Cal took a deep breath. “That is one terrifying female.”

“Just wait a couple of days.” Pete took a deep swallow of Corona. “The next one will be worse.”

Lars took a pull on his Lone Star. Ruby was par for the course these days. At least for his course. Maybe his brothers’ lives were going more smoothly.

“Any luck on the new babysitter front?” Cal raised an eyebrow.

Lars shook his head. “Most of the home-care people are full up at this point. There’s that Wee Care place out near Highway 16, but they charge an arm and a leg, plus I didn’t like the look of it much.”

Pete frowned. “Dirty?”

Lars wasn’t sure if Pete’s jurisdiction as an assistant county attorney stretched to daycare center compliance, but he didn’t particularly want to find out.

“Not exactly. I just had a feeling Daisy would dismantle the place in under twenty minutes, given the large number of kids and limited number of caregivers.”

“And Daisy’s scientific curiosity about the Way Things Work.” Cal grinned. “Horace offered one of the large animal pens to hold her so we could keep her at the clinic, but I figured it’d never work. Plus Bethany said she’d skin both of us if we even thought about it.”

“If I didn’t do it first. This is my daughter you’re talking about. Your only niece, remember?”

Cal grinned. “Aw, come on, Lars. Knowing Dais, she’d regard it as a challenge to her mechanical abilities. She’d have that cage apart in ninety minutes, tops.”

“I’d give her an hour,” Pete mused, “but it would probably be more like forty-five minutes. Did you see what she did to my old Rubik’s Cube?”

Lars tried scowling at Cal, but it didn’t work. His younger brother had been the nicest guy in Lander, Iowa, for twenty years and was now the nicest guy in Konigsburg, Texas, as well as its most popular veterinarian.

Pete took a swig of Corona. “When does Mrs. Melendez leave?”

“End of next week.” Lars sighed again. “If I can’t get anybody by then, I’ll have to go with Wee Care until I can.”

Mrs. Melendez had been Daisy’s babysitter ever since they’d made the move to Konigsburg permanently, a week after his divorce from Sherice had become final. Now she was leaving for McAllen. Lars only hoped they hadn’t driven her out of town.

“You still running the ad in the *Tribune-Zeitung*?”

“Until the end of the month. I’ve only had a few calls, though, and none of them were people I wanted looking after Daisy.”

Cal grinned again. “If only you didn’t have this unreasonable prejudice against multiple body piercings.”

“Right. You never know—maybe Daisy would like tooling around the countryside in the sidecar of a Harley.” Pete took another pull on his Corona.

“You two are hilarious.” Lars sighed. Sometimes it seemed like he did nothing but sigh these days.

Pete’s forehead furrowed. “Janie would do it in a shot. So would Docia. But Daisy wouldn’t be happy stuck in the bookstore all day, and they both need to be there. We’re moving into the big tourist season from Thanksgiving through the end of December.”

Lars nodded. “I know. I appreciate them taking her when they do. They’ve been great.”

Cal leaned forward, suddenly serious. “Look, bro, we all love Daisy. We all want to help. Just ask us.”

Lars felt like sighing again, but he didn’t. His brothers were two of the main reasons he’d moved Daisy down here, his ex-wife and her presence in their former home in Iowa being the other main reason. “Thanks. If I think of anything you could do, I’ll let you know.”

“Dadee!” someone crowed.

Lars didn’t have to ask who that someone was. Only Daisy’s voice had that odd combination of Iowa and Texas, with a trace of Texican thrown in, courtesy of Mrs. Melendez.

He glanced toward the bar. Ingstrom was narrowing his eyes in the general direction of his *No minors allowed on the premises* sign. Both Cal and Pete occasionally brought their dogs to the Dew Drop, but Lars figured Daisy would be one step over the line.

“Dadee!”

Lars turned toward the doorway. His sisters-in-law stood just inside, like a gorgeous female version of Mutt and Jeff—six-foot redheaded Docia and five-foot-two brunette Janie.

Daisy twisted in Docia's arms, black curls dancing wildly around her bright pink cheeks, and wearing a smile that made his heart crack in two every time he saw it.

He pushed himself to his feet, setting his half-finished beer on the table, and strode toward the door. "Hang on, sweetheart. Daddy's on his way."

Jessamyn Carroll gave the living room at the Lone Oak Bed and Breakfast a quick once-over before she placed Jack in his portable playpen. At least the people who'd just checked out hadn't been pigs. Sometimes Jess wondered what the hell the guests had been up to that made the place such a mess. Sometimes she could see only too well what they'd been up to and really didn't like thinking about it.

Jack cooed happily, reaching for his favorite plastic blocks. Based on past experience, Jess figured it would take him at least ten minutes to throw them all out of the playpen. By then she could probably have the dishes rinsed and in the dishwasher.

She grabbed a trash bag, shaking it open as she tossed in a couple of half-empty bags of chips. Too bad the guests never seemed to be into healthy stuff. She swore if they ever left some flatbread or granola bars, she'd take them home for dinner.

Behind her she heard a block hit the floor as Jack crowed. *Right. Five more to go.* The dishes were piled in the sink—not too many for once. She scraped some calcified cheese into the garbage disposal and ran water to soak the silverware. The coffeepot still had grounds in it. Too bad she hadn't had time to start a compost heap yet.

Two more blocks flew over the side of the playpen. Jack was getting ambitious, doing more than one at a time.

"Slow down, mister," Jess called over her shoulder. Jack crowed back.

She grabbed the box of dishwasher detergent and filled the dispenser. Everything was loaded now except the silverware. Another plop sounded behind her.

Please, Jack, please just let me finish this. Jess rubbed the remains of the cheese and something orange and sticky off the knives, tossing them into the dishwasher as she went.

One more plop. One more crow.

She pushed the dishwasher door closed, flipping the catch and turning the knob. The sound of water rushing into the washer mingled with Jack's discontented squawks.

"Okay," she muttered, "okay. If you didn't throw them out, you'd still have them, though."

He squawked louder, and she knelt beside the playpen, picking up the blocks. "Good arm, kid, you

tossed those a good two feet this time.”

He gave her a beatific baby grin, revealing three tiny, pearl-like teeth.

“Ah, that’s Mama’s boy,” she murmured, burying her nose in his neck as she leaned in to hug him. Sweet powder, sour milk—essence of baby. Her heart contracted.

Jack squealed in delight, grabbing handfuls of her hair.

“Ouch.” She pulled his hands away gently, then reached into the toy bag. “How about some time with Mr. Wiggles?”

Jack threw his arms around the terry-cloth rabbit, then overbalanced in the other direction, landing flat on his back. For a moment he lay wide-eyed, staring up at her.

“No, it’s okay,” she cautioned. “You’re fine. You’re just startled. Don’t shriek, okay?”

But his chest was already expanding, his face flushed, as he let loose the first wail.

Jess reached down and gathered him into her arms, rubbing a hand across his back. “Hey, kid, you need to learn to roll with those punches. How are you ever going to be a captain of industry if you cry whenever you land on your ass?”

He wailed a few more times as she bounced him on her shoulder, then subsided into hiccups.

“Attaboy,” she whispered. “Just let it go.” She felt him relax in her arms, halfway to sleep. “C’mon, Jack,” she crooned. “Just let Mama finish up here, and we’ll head back home, okay?”

A few moments later, she laid him down in the playpen again, dropping a flannel blanket over his tummy as he slept.

Thirty minutes. Maybe. But no running the vacuum sweeper until he woke up. Jess headed for the bedroom to strip off the sheets. She could do the bathrooms fast if nobody had done anything really gross.

Fifteen minutes later, sheets and towels loaded into the washer and clean ones draped over her arm, she headed back into the living room to check on Jack. He still slept, one fist tucked against his cheek.

She stood in the doorway, staring at him. Jack. Her Jack. As pigheaded as she was. As ready to yell for his own way. Maybe as ready to stand up for himself in a few years. But not yet. Not now. Now he needed her to do the standing up, and the protecting.

Which meant finding yet another way to put food on the table. Managing the Lone Oak Bed and Breakfast at least gave them a place to stay, but she couldn’t bring Jack up on a diet of croissants and orange juice, even if they came with the job. And he was already growing out of the sets of onesies she’d brought with her. Even at Costco prices, a new baby wardrobe would stretch her budget.

Tomorrow she’d take another look at the *Tribune-Zeitung*. Maybe they’d have something other than waiting tables or data entry, preferably something she could do from home and under the radar, like her work on the gaming sites.

“Goddamn it, Barry,” she whispered, “why couldn’t you have held on for just a few more years?”

Lydia Moreland picked up her cell phone on the second ring. The phone did ring, just like a regular phone. She had, in fact, demanded that it ring like a regular phone. She despised phones that tinkled out tinny versions of classical music.

“Yes,” she snapped.

“Mrs. Moreland, it’s Charles Hampton.” Hampton always sounded like he was speaking in a hall with an echo, probably a holdover from addressing all those courtrooms.

“Yes, what is it?” She straightened a sheet of paper on her otherwise-immaculate desk.

“I just wanted to give you a progress report on our efforts to locate your...daughter-in-law.”

The pause was small, but enough to bring a wintry smile to Lydia’s lips. “Barrett’s widow. The marriage was legal, Charles. We did have it checked, remember?”

“Of course.” Hampton cleared his throat before continuing. “Yes, well, we’ve confirmed that she left the state, probably six weeks ago.”

“Probably?” She raised an eyebrow. If he were standing in front of her, she’d have narrowed her eyes at him. As it was, she made do with tone of voice.

“The exact date is a little hazy, but yes. The place where she was staying has been vacant for around that length of time.”

Lydia leaned back in her chair, rolling her Montblanc ballpoint between her fingers. “And where is she now?”

“We think Texas. She mentioned Texas to friends. Before...that is, while she was still working.”

Lydia closed her eyes and clenched her jaw. Raising one’s voice was not only unladylike, it also got one nowhere with the Charles Hamptons of the world. And it showed weakness. She settled for letting her tone slide into acid. “Texas is a big place, I understand. Do you have a more exact location than that?”

“Not yet. We’re working on some leads, however.”

“Why is this so difficult, Charles? I assume you’re using private investigators. Surely, locating missing persons is fairly routine.”

“Not if they don’t want to be located. Your daughter-in-law has stopped using her credit cards. She hasn’t called anyone in Belle View since she left, nor has she sent letters. The cell phone number we have for her is no longer active, and we haven’t located a new one. She left no forwarding address with the landlord, and she paid all her bills before leaving. In cash.”

Lydia pinched the bridge of her nose. “I assume she closed out the bank accounts?”

“Yes. Both her checking and savings. And she demanded the entire amount in cash. She refused a cashier’s check.”

“There can’t have been much.” She picked up her pen again. “The house wasn’t hers. And her severance package was supposedly quite small.” In fact, Lydia had made sure that it was quite small.

“Yes, well.” Hampton cleared his throat again. “There was the bequest from Barrett.”

She stared down at the pen between her fingers for a moment, fighting the quick rush of anger. *Never show emotion with an underling.* One of her father’s guiding principles. “I understood that had been blocked.”

“Not all of it.” He sounded uncomfortable. “Your son left her his personal fortune in addition to his share of the corporation. We couldn’t sequester all of his money.”

“Barrett’s personal fortune.” The words had a bitter taste. Her lips twisted. “Not a great deal of that, was there?”

“That lawyer of his managed to find some for her.”

Lydia couldn’t resist. “You’re saying that Barrett’s storefront lawyer was better at his job than you are?”

She fancied she heard a quick intake of breath on the other end of the line. “We did what we could, Mrs. Moreland. We did manage to protect the majority of the money.”

She sighed. Amusing though it was to bait Hampton, it wasn’t accomplishing her purpose. “The woman did some kind of work with computers, as I recall. She’ll have to find a job to support herself and the child. Approach her that way.”

“We’ve thought of that,” he explained. “We have people watching the chat rooms where she was a member, and we’ve posted job listings at the online employment sites. So far she hasn’t shown.”

“There must be something more you can do.”

This time Hampton sounded more annoyed than defensive. “We’re doing all we can, Mrs. Moreland. However, your daughter-in-law hasn’t done anything illegal, and she doesn’t want to be found. That makes it difficult.”

That makes it difficult if you believe she has any rights in the matter. Lydia rolled her hand into a fist, keeping her voice level. “Very well, Charles. You’ll keep me posted.”

“Of course, Mrs. Moreland.”

Hampton disconnected. She could imagine his relieved expression.

She sat staring at the cell phone in her hand. Barrett’s bitch of a wife hadn’t done anything illegal because the law simply didn’t recognize the facts of this situation. She’d taken a Moreland grandchild, the only grandson, Barrett’s heir, and run away. That might not be illegal, but it was enough to make her a criminal in Lydia’s eyes.

Charles Hampton obviously was not the best person to find Barrett's slut. In fact, he wouldn't find her, not using his current methods. He'd give Lydia some claptrap about the woman's rights and the child's rights and nothing at all about the real rights, the Moreland rights.

Her rights.

Obviously, she needed to use someone else. Someone who'd know what to do after the woman had been located. Someone who'd make sure that she didn't keep a Moreland child from being raised as a Moreland. Lydia needed someone who'd make sure things worked the way they were supposed to. She opened a desk drawer and pulled out her black Moreland Enterprises directory. Roy Westerman was still listed under the security division.

Her son Preston had expressed doubts about Roy's methods in the past, but Lydia had managed to keep him on the payroll. It was always useful to have someone with the right contacts. Roy Westerman might not be able to do what she wanted himself, but he'd know someone else who could.

Her hand tightened on the phone as she punched in Roy's number, then waited for the connection to go through. Westerman's "Hello" was suitably brusque.

"Hello, Roy," she purred, "it's Lydia Moreland. I'm looking for a contractor. One with some particular skills. Perhaps we could discuss it over lunch."

Chapter Two

Jess skimmed through the ad again, trying to convince herself that this job was a good idea. *Caregiver for two-year-old, 8-5, in my home or yours. Salary negotiable. References required. Contact L. Toleffson, 210.555.3222*

"Short and not particularly sweet," she muttered. Jack glanced up from his high chair, clearly more interested in the bowl of rice cereal she was cradling in her hand.

"How about it, Jack?" She scooped up a quick spoonful. "Want to share our space with some two-year-old terror?"

Jack blew a bubble of cereal and made a mildly distressed sound.

"I'm not crazy about the negotiable salary part." She wiped a smear off his cheek and tried inserting another bite. "No way am I haggling over this."

Jack pushed most of the bite out again with his tongue, then beat his palms against the high chair tray, his expression mildly mutinous, at least for a nine-month-old.

"Come on, kid," Jess murmured. "Just a couple more bites and we'll call it breakfast. Mom isn't providing the whole diet anymore." She shoveled in another bite, scraping excess from his lower lip. "Just swallow a little more now."

Some of the cereal made it down his throat, but a significant amount reappeared immediately.

She sighed. "Okay, you win. But the Mommy lunch counter won't be open again for another couple of hours."

Jack grinned at her beatifically while she did her best not to grin back. Wouldn't that be reinforcing him? Probably. On the other hand, not grinning back at him was well nigh impossible.

"Oh, man, have you ever got my number," she murmured, removing his bib and wiping cereal off his face with a washcloth.

Jack chuckled at her, clearly delighted to have his fingers wiped.

"Okay, we'll go talk to this person." She unhooked the high chair tray and lifted her son into her arms, trying not to get the remains of his cereal on her shirt. "You get a ride in the backpack, after we've cleaned you up a little more and I've given L. Toleffson a call. If she doesn't turn tail and run the minute she sees you, we'll consider her offer, assuming we like her."

Jack grabbed a handful of her hair in enthusiastic agreement, smearing a bit of leftover rice cereal on her forehead. Jess grimaced, wondering if she had time for a quick shampoo before they went into town.

Lars glanced at his watch. The woman had said she'd be at his office at ten, which had been fine at the time, but then a couple of his clients, owners of a new hotel complex on B Street, had requested a consult. They wanted him there at ten-thirty. If his potential babysitter was late, he'd be late. And it would be his own fault because he should have told the hotel people he couldn't make it until eleven.

He blew out a quick breath. Except that they were new clients, with a potential for a good commission, and he needed them. The hotel manager had wanted him to drop by at five originally, but he had to get Daisy then, and he had a feeling she wouldn't be welcome at a business meeting. Particularly not since the manager had already given him a couple of thinly veiled come-ons. Either she'd heard he wasn't married or didn't care if he was, but he doubted she knew he was raising a two-year-old daughter. She hadn't looked much like the nurturing type, considering the four-inch heels and the mid-thigh-length skirt.

The bell on the outer office door jingled, and Lars pushed back from his desk. His receptionist, Mrs. Suarez, was on a coffee break.

He stepped into the waiting room as the woman at the door muttered something. She wore a hooded sweatshirt and jeans, and she seemed oddly hunched. For a moment, he wondered if she was a homeless person who'd wandered in to escape the slight autumn chill outside.

"Can I help you?" he said, a little more briskly than usual.

The woman turned, and he immediately understood both the hunch and the muttering. She held a baby in a backpack in front of her. "Mr. Toleffson?" She straightened slightly. "I'm Jessamyn Carroll. We spoke on the phone."

"Oh." Lars did a quick memory search. "I didn't know you had...that is, did you mention..."

"This is my son, Jack." Jessamyn Carroll pushed the baby's hat off and he bounced up, bracing his feet against the backpack frame.

He took a breath. Not necessarily a deal-breaker. "How old?"

“Nine months.”

“Any more at home?” He tried to make the question sound friendly. Multiple children didn’t necessarily mean she wouldn’t be able to take care of Daisy. On the other hand, the more kids around, the more possibilities that Daisy might lead an infant insurrection.

“Nope. Jack’s it.” She watched him carefully, probably waiting for him to tell her she couldn’t have the job because of the baby. Little did she know just how desperate he was.

“Come on in.” He gestured toward the office. “Let’s talk about this sitting down. He looks like a handful.”

“Handful, armful, you name it.” Ms. Carroll grinned as she stepped through the office door.

Lars felt a quick surge of warmth somewhere around his solar plexus. She had a killer smile, complete with dimples. Not, of course, that he was in any position to do anything about it—or wanted to. These days, he only had enough energy for Daisy and the office.

She set the pack down before he could step forward to help her, opening the frame to prop it up, then lifted the baby into her lap and flipped back her hood. Her short feathery hair glowed like old gold in the sunlight streaming through the office window.

The heat in his solar plexus increased. He willed his nether regions to knock it off as he slid into his desk chair. The last thing he wanted to deal with right now was a hard-on. “Okay, Ms. Carroll, I’m looking for someone to take care of my daughter, Daisy. She’s two and a half. Do you have any child care experience?”

“Just Jack.” Ms. Carroll handed the baby a ring of oversized plastic keys. “I’m home with him all day, and I figure I can look after two as easily as one.”

Lars frowned slightly. “Daisy’s very active.”

“So’s Jack. But at least he’s not entirely mobile yet.”

She grinned at him again, the kind of sunshine smile that made the room seem slightly warmer. Parts of the room, anyway. He gritted his teeth, reining himself in. You’d think he’d have learned by now that physical attraction was no indication of character. “Is your husband home during the day?”

Ms. Carroll’s smile dimmed slightly, as if he’d hit a nerve. “I’m a widow.”

Right. Well, he couldn’t afford to be choosy, and women had babies on their own for all kinds of reasons. “Would you be able to look after her at my house?”

Ms. Carroll’s grin diminished to slightly upturned corners. “No. I’m the manager at the Lone Oak Bed and Breakfast, and I need to be there during the day. But she’d have lots of room to play. There’s a swing set and a small slide in the back yard.”

“You’re managing a bed and breakfast, but you’d have time to look after a two-year-old along with that?”

Ms. Carroll's grin was gone altogether now. "Look, Mr. Toleffson, managing the B and B means cleaning the house when it's vacant and putting out the breakfast when we have guests. And checking the online reservation requests. It's not like running a hotel."

"And you live there, too?"

She nodded. "There are two cabins. I live in the smaller one."

He took a deep breath, trying to decide if he really heard alarm bells or if he was being an idiot. He sort of remembered the Lone Oak—a lavish log cabin on Lone Dog Creek, lots of live oaks, some plaster deer lawn ornaments that Daisy always squealed over. The creek was pretty close, and Daisy had a thing about water. On the other hand, at this point, the alternative was Wee Care. "Do you have any references?"

She nodded again. "Mrs. Carmody, the woman who owns the Lone Oak, can vouch for me. She's out of town right now, but I have her e-mail address. She's the only one I've worked for down here."

He felt another prickle of doubt. "How long have you been in Konigsburg?"

"Three months." She stared back at him, her face a polite mask.

More references would be helpful. On the other hand, one local was probably as good as he could get at this point. "Okay, maybe we can give this a try. A month or so, and then we can see how everybody feels about it."

"Terrific, Mr. Toleffson." Her voice was dry. "But before we shake on it, maybe you could tell me what the salary is."

Lars closed his eyes. *Salary*. How could he have forgotten salary? He was an accountant, for the love of heaven. He really was losing his mind. "Yes," he muttered, "by all means, let's talk about that."

Jess put Jack into his jumper seat, listening to him crow as he danced back and forth in the doorway to the living room. She slid into the chair at her computer and fired up the Paloma Gaming site. The e-mail from the site owner said that the win-loss ratings kept going flaky. Jess opened her console window and began checking code. The jumper seat usually kept Jack occupied for twenty minutes or so. With any luck she'd find the bug in less time than that.

The encounter with Lars Toleffson still rankled. Obviously, he was looking for June Cleaver. Obviously, as far as he was concerned, she was closer to Britney Spears. Tough. She'd do a good job with his daughter, no matter what he thought of her.

Toleffson wasn't exactly what she'd expected. Weren't accountants supposed to be wimpy? He was at least six four or five, given the way he towered over her five-foot-ten. And his shoulders were broad enough to block the light from the office window when he leaned back. He'd worn a predictable gray business suit, but his dark hair had the kind of curls that never stayed put, inching down slightly over his forehead.

The type of guy who probably made female hearts go pitter-pat, if one were susceptible to that kind of thing. Which Jess definitely was not.

She wondered briefly what had happened to Mrs. Toleffson. Probably a divorce, given the lack of sympathy he'd shown when she'd mentioned Barry. Not that she wanted sympathy. But why didn't people ask single fathers where their significant other had gone the way they asked single mothers?

Jack gave a shriek of delight and Jess turned to look at him. He danced across the doorway on his tiptoes, bouncing up and down enthusiastically.

She remembered when she'd brought him home from the hospital. Small and wrinkled and rosy. Totally vulnerable. Totally dependent. Hers to protect. And love.

She bit her lip. "Oh, lord, Jack, don't grow up too fast, okay? Let me savor this just a little."

Jack grinned up at her and did a baby pli  . Jess closed her eyes a moment, willing herself not to tear up, then turned back to the monitor. "Okay, time for Mommy to earn us some bread, kiddo. You just keep working on those dance moves so you'll be ready for your big break when you decide to keep me in style."

Assuming I can keep you to myself that long. Jess shivered, then concentrated on her screen. Maybe Lydia Moreland had just walked across her grave.

Roy Westerman watched the Ice Queen pour another cup of post-lunch coffee. Of course she knew he'd prefer something stronger, but of course she wouldn't give it to him. Probably didn't drink with underlings. Either that or she wanted him sharp for this conversation, which was a more unsettling possibility.

Roy wasn't sure exactly how old Lydia Moreland was. He'd guess she was in her sixties, but the work she'd had done on her face, plus the exercise she put in to keep her figure in check, made it hard to know exactly.

Now she raised her gaze over the rim of her porcelain coffee cup. She reminded him a little of a water moccasin he'd stumbled across once down on the Delaware—that same steady, ice-cold gaze. He'd killed the snake before it struck, but he wouldn't get that chance if the same situation ever arose with the Ice Queen.

"Well, Roy, it seems we have a bit of a problem on our hands." Even her voice sounded like it was frosted over.

"What problem is that, Mrs. Moreland?"

The Ice Queen set her cup carefully back on its matching saucer. "Barrett's wife. She took off with my grandson. Charles Hampton isn't having any luck in finding her."

Roy managed to keep his expression bland. "I hadn't realized Mr. Moreland had married." *Let alone had a kid. Interesting.*

“He didn’t invite the family to the wedding.”

Right. He could definitely see Barrett Moreland’s point. Having the Ice Queen at your wedding would tend to put a damper on the celebration, particularly if she wasn’t happy about the bride.

“How old is the child?” He pulled out his notebook, ignoring the Ice Queen’s sudden frown. He needed a record of whatever details she deigned to give him.

“Less than a year.” She shrugged. “I can’t tell you exactly. We didn’t know she was pregnant until Preston saw her at the funeral. You did know about Barrett’s death, I assume?”

Roy nodded. “I understood it was heart disease.”

The Ice Queen’s lips narrowed to a grimace. “It was alcoholism. But I suppose that puts a strain on the heart, doesn’t it?”

He nodded again, noncommittally. The kid, Barrett, had always been the old man’s favorite. The Ice Queen preferred the older brother, Preston. If the old man had lived, the kid might have made it, but Roy had a feeling that having the Ice Queen for a mother could have wrecked anybody. Preston didn’t look all that healthy himself these days.

“So the baby was born after Mr. Moreland’s death?”

“Yes.”

The Ice Queen picked up her cup again, then set it down. Nerves? Hard to believe. More probably excess venom.

“We weren’t informed when the child was born. We only found out after the fact.”

Roy cleared his throat, pretending to write a note. The Ice Queen ignored him.

“We offered her support, of course, but she declined our help. And then she disappeared. We don’t know that much about her, and I’m concerned about the child.”

He blinked, making a couple of careful notes for real this time. Unless he missed his guess, most of what she’d just told him was total bullshit. He’d have to get the full facts later from more reliable sources.

“Where was she from? Maybe she’s gone back home again.”

The Ice Queen shook her head. “I haven’t any idea. Somewhere in Texas supposedly. Charles may have found out more as he’s been looking for her. I’ll get a copy of his report and send it to you.” Her mouth narrowed to a thin line. “Barrett met her in a bar, if that tells you anything.”

It didn’t tell him much. Given where Barrett Moreland spent most of his time, it wasn’t much of a surprise. “So you want me to see if I can track her down for you?”

The Ice Queen shook her head. “I don’t want anyone directly connected to Moreland Enterprises to look for her, other than Charles, of course. She’s covered her tracks quite well, apparently. I’m afraid she might run away again if she knows we’ve found her. And I’d prefer that we not be directly...involved in the search.”

The hairs on the back of Roy's neck did a quick dance. Something was way off here, but it was in his best interests not to find out exactly what it was. He'd rather stick with the Ice Queen's fabricated story than dig too far beneath the surface and find out something he'd be better off not knowing. He'd get paid either way, and someone else could do the dirty work. "You want me to have someone else do the looking?"

She nodded. "Yes. Someone not associated with us. But someone who can do a more thorough job than Charles."

"A contractor, like you said."

The Ice Queen smiled, slowly. "Yes, exactly. A contractor. Do you know someone who might be...appropriate?"

"I know a couple of people." He shrugged. "I can get in touch with them and see if they're available."

"Excellent." The Ice Queen reminded him vaguely of Mr. Burns on *The Simpsons* for a moment, particularly when she smiled again. "Have them get in touch with me directly. I'll give you the number. That way you won't have to concern yourself with the details. I'll make sure your bonus reflects the help you've provided."

Roy breathed a silent sigh of relief. This was one operation he definitely didn't want to be in on directly. He'd be delighted to turn it over to somebody else, preferably somebody several steps removed from him. "Yes, ma'am. I'll see what I can do for you."

"Excellent," the Ice Queen repeated. "I appreciate your help on this, Roy. We need to find this woman. More importantly, we need to find my grandson."

Her smile chilled him to the bone. Roy decided to head to the nearest bar for a quick warm-up before he did anything else.

At one, Lars wandered over to Sweet Thing, Allie Maldonado's bakery and café. He figured one or more of his brothers ought to be around, and if not them, Wonder Dentist since he was Allie's Significant Other. Why his nickname was Wonder Dentist had always been a mystery to Lars, particularly since his real name was Steve Kleinschmidt. Wonder could be sort of annoying, but he definitely qualified as a distraction. And distraction was what he needed after deflecting another round of veiled passes from the hotel owner during the morning.

He wondered briefly if he'd have been interested in the woman if he hadn't spent those years married to Sherice. Maybe. Before Sherice he'd been dumb enough to let his dick do his thinking on occasion.

Wonder was ensconced at a table on Allie's patio in spite of the distinct nip in the air. Sitting outside in mid-November wouldn't have been a possibility back in West Des Moines, but in Konigsburg, cool weather seemed to mean temperatures in the high fifties. Some Konigsburgers reacted by joyously pulling on sweaters, while others ignored it on the assumption that the hot weather would be back in a couple of weeks. Apparently, Wonder fell into the latter group.

Lars slid into an Adirondack chair opposite him. “What do you recommend for lunch?”

“Well, you can go with the Winter Wonderlanders and have cream of mushroom soup and a hot sandwich to top it off, or you can join the rest of us in Reality Land and have your usual.”

“I don’t have a usual.” Lars leaned back, spreading his napkin in his lap. “Just because I’m an accountant, that doesn’t mean I’m predictable.”

“Hi, Lars.” Allie stepped into the open doorway, brushing her hands against her chili-pepper-adorned chef’s pants. “Roast turkey on whole wheat, cole slaw on the side, right?”

“I rest my case,” Wonder muttered.

Lars narrowed his eyes. “How’s the ham?”

“Same as always.” Allie grinned. “Not that exciting, though. How about if I bring you the chicken salad? That’d be a change.”

Lars frowned. As a rule he didn’t like chicken salad. On the other hand, he hated falling into a stereotype. “Fine.”

Wonder slurped up a spoonful of whatever soup he was having. “Your problem, Toleffson, is that you’re resisting the whole accountant thing. Why not revel in your predictability?”

“Because I’m not sure how much I enjoy being one of your walking punchlines.” Lars leaned back in his chair as the sunlight warmed his face. If this constituted winter, he figured he could give his earmuffs to Goodwill.

“So how goes the search for the babysitter? Anything new on the ankle-biter front?” Wonder took a large bite of his sandwich, using his napkin to wipe off a stray bit of mayonnaise at the corner of his mouth.

“Do not refer to my niece as an ankle-biter. She’s way beyond that.” Cal slid into a chair beside Wonder. “As I recall, she nibbled on at least three of your fingers the last time you looked at her teeth.”

“Don’t remind me,” Wonder grumbled. “I don’t usually do kids under five. My fingers still tingle when I hear her name.”

Lars shrugged. “I’ll feed her before I bring her in next time. Still, if somebody sticks their fingers in your mouth, there’s always this temptation to bite them.”

Wonder gazed at him through narrowed eyes. “You bite my fingers, and you’ll be doing my books for free for the next decade, so help me.”

Allie stepped through the door carrying a plate with a sandwich. “Getting back to the more interesting topic, how’s the babysitter search coming?” She set the plate in front of Lars, along with a glass of tea. “Here you go. I didn’t have time to come up with something more interesting for you to drink. Maybe next time.”

“Maybe.” Lars studied the chicken salad, checking for pineapple or grapes. He didn’t see any—so far,

so good. "I may have found somebody. She's a single mom with a baby, so she can take care of Daisy while she takes care of her son."

"What's her name?" Pete dropped into the chair beside him.

Lars had to think for a moment. He really needed more sleep. "Jessamyn Carroll."

Three faces stared at him blankly. Four, if you counted Allie.

Wonder shook his head. "Never heard of her."

"Me neither." Allie's forehead was furrowed. "Where does she live?"

"She manages the Lone Oak B and B."

His brothers and Wonder still looked blank.

Allie's forehead smoothed marginally. "Okay, I think I've seen a woman out there. I just didn't know her name."

Pete narrowed his eyes. "You get her references?"

"Yes. It's fine." Lars set his glass down with a click. Pete was only a couple of years older but he sometimes behaved as if they were dog years. "We're going to give it a try for a month, see how it works out."

Allie was smiling again. "It sounds win-win to me, Lars. She gets to stay home with her son and you get someone who's got the time to look after Daisy."

Right. Lars decided not to mention his own concerns about the amount of time Jessamyn Carroll would have to do that. For better or worse he was committed.

He took a bite of chicken salad. Not bad. Not bad at all. But he liked the turkey better.

Chapter Three

Daisy Toleffson didn't strike Jess as a charming child. Nor, at this particular moment, was she a happy one. She stood in Jess's living room, surveying the furniture with the look of an unimpressed customer. Her lower lip was pushed forward, and her arms were crossed over her chest. She glared up at her father.

He appeared not to notice. Or at least he pretended he didn't. Jess could see a certain tension in Lars Toleffson's jaw. His fine, squarish jaw.

"Daisy, this is Mrs. Carroll. You'll be staying with her and her son Jack today." Toleffson's voice was firm, but not too cheery. He probably knew what was coming.

"No," Daisy snapped. Her lower lip jutted forward even further.

Jess tried a smile in Daisy's direction and was rewarded with a fierce scowl. "Have you had breakfast, Daisy? Want some oatmeal with Jack?"

“No! Want Mrs. M.!” Daisy looked up her father again, her eyes suddenly pooling with picturesque tears.

Jess had to hand it to her—being able to cry on cue was a very neat trick. Clearly the kid was an infant Meryl Streep.

And clearly her father wasn’t immune, even though he had to know his daughter’s tears weren’t exactly genuine. He knelt down to eye level with her. “Daisy, we’ve talked about this. Mrs. Melendez is moving away from Konigsburg. You can’t stay with her anymore.”

“Want Mrs. M.!” Daisy’s voice rose a couple of decibels.

In his high chair, Jack stared at her, his forehead creasing.

“Want her *now* !” Daisy’s lower lip was trembling. She appeared to be on the verge of a spectacular meltdown.

Jack began to whimper, staring up at Jess in distress. She wasn’t sure if it was Daisy’s noise or her unhappiness that was getting to him. Given his tendency to sympathize with everybody in range, she’d guess the latter. She reached down quickly, moving his bowl of oatmeal to the dining room table and picking him up out of the chair before he could let loose with anything worse. The last thing they needed was two screaming children.

When she turned back, Daisy was staring at Jack, her mouth open in mid-wail.

Jack looked down and smiled, his own mouth spreading in one of his joyful grins as he reached toward Daisy’s hair. Like her father’s, Daisy’s curls spilled around her face in a corona. Jack’s fingers fastened on one dark spiral, and he giggled.

Daisy leaped back, her expression changing from misery to outrage. “He pulled!” she sputtered.

“Sorry. He likes hair.” Jess shifted Jack onto her other shoulder so that he was a little out of range. “I’m sure he likes yours a lot because it’s so pretty.”

Daisy stood transfixed, her hand on the curl that Jack had touched, her eyes wide. “Pretty?”

“Very.” Jess managed to keep her voice matter-of-fact. “It’s so curly and dark and soft. He’s probably never seen anything like it before.”

“Pretty.” Daisy stroked her hair again, thoughtfully. Jess had a feeling she was experiencing a paradigm shift.

Lars Toleffson cleared his throat. “Yes. Well, I’ll take off. See you this evening, Dais.” He stepped through the door quickly, closing it behind him. His daughter seemed barely aware of his absence. Smart man.

“Pretty,” Daisy repeated once more, and her lips spread in what would someday be a killer smile.

Jess sighed. “Welcome to the sisterhood, kid.”

All morning long Lars waited for the phone to ring with Jessamyn Carroll telling him to come get his daughter.

It wasn't that Daisy was stubborn, exactly. He sighed. Who was he kidding? Daisy was the most stubborn kid he'd ever met. Daisy made Genghis Khan look reasonable.

It was a trait she'd inherited from her mother. Yet another thing for him to worry about. Considering that Sherice had only been around Daisy for her first year, Lars really hoped she hadn't had a chance to imprint much of her character on their daughter, but every once in a while he saw Sherice in something Daisy did.

Like this morning when his daughter suddenly began to look like an infant femme fatale. Lars shuddered. He really didn't want to think about what it would be like when Daisy hit high school and boys started coming around the house. He'd probably have to put up razor wire or something.

When his office phone finally rang, he picked it up without looking to see who was calling, figuring it was probably the Jessamyn Carroll call he'd been dreading all morning. "Lars Toleffson," he barked.

"If you talk to all your customers like that, no wonder you aren't making any money," his ex-wife purred on the other end of the line.

Lars gritted his teeth. He'd been avoiding Sherice's calls for a couple of days, figuring anything she wanted to talk about could be handled by his lawyer with a lot less pain. "What do you want, Sherice?"

"Did you see the final price on the house? It's about fifty grand less than you said it would be."

He closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Read the papers lately, Sherice? The market sucks all across the country right now. Your lawyer cleared the deal. It was the best offer we could get."

"It still leaves me with a lot less money than I was supposed to have."

Sherice's voice had a slightly metallic edge. He wondered if she'd always sounded like that—had he just been too overcome with lust to notice until now? He had a sudden memory of Sherice in a bikini, shimmering blonde hair above improbable breasts. Lust had a way of making you brain dead. It sure as hell had with him.

With an effort, he kept his voice level. "By the terms of the settlement you got a percentage of the sale price, not a fixed amount. Nobody promised you a particular payoff."

"Whatever happened to 'Just take it all and give me Daisy', Lars? Our deal was that I got the assets and you got the kid." Sherice didn't bother with sounding amused anymore. Her voice could freeze boiling oil.

"You did get the assets," he snapped. "Most of them. I got enough to set up a business so that I could support Daisy. I'm not renegotiating, Sherice. I need everything I've got to keep us going down here."

"I could always go back to court," she mused. "Judges like for kids to be with their mothers. Are you

ready to give up custody, Lars?”

He eased the phone into his other hand, flexing the fingers that had been holding it in a death grip. “Yeah, and I could request you pay child support. Before you start figuring out how big your pay-out would be, consider what you might lose too.”

“I won’t lose, Lars.” Her voice dropped an octave. “I don’t lose. You keep that in mind.”

He sat staring at the receiver in his hand, hearing the click of Sherice’s disconnect. His shoulders were clenched so tightly his neck felt stiff. His stomach was roiling with acid. This was what happened when you let your brain fog over with testosterone. When you let your dick rule your life. The ex-wife from South Hell.

And Daisy. Lars blew out a breath. *Never forget Daisy*. No matter what else Sherice had done, she’d managed to produce his daughter. And now he had to protect her from her mother.

So be it. If he had to go to South Hell to hang onto Daisy, he’d do it. With bells on.

The first crisis came at mid-morning. Daisy didn’t like animal crackers. She wanted Cheerios, like Jack. Jack wanted animal crackers, like Daisy. Jess gave them a selection of each, then watched as Daisy surreptitiously relieved Jack of his Cheerios, while pushing a load of animal crackers his way. Well, at least she wasn’t exactly taking candy from a baby—cereal probably didn’t count.

The second crisis came when Jess wanted to get some work done on the computer. Daisy didn’t want to color. She didn’t want to play with blocks. On the other hand, she had a major interest in Jack’s collection of stuffed animals, particularly Mr. Wiggles. Jess held her breath, but Jack, hopelessly in love with Daisy, let her arrange the animals in a heap in front of him. Daisy proceeded to make up an elaborate narrative that featured a series of highly improbable adventures for Mr. Wiggles and his close personal friend the lavender bear, a.k.a. Spiderman.

Jess found three bugs in the Web app she was putting together for Synchronicity. Fortunately, it wasn’t due for another week. She wondered idly what would happen if she turned Daisy loose on the video games front. Maybe they could convert Mr. Wiggles into an action hero. Lord knew, Daisy was active enough for both of them.

At lunch, Daisy studied the chicken with rice soup suspiciously. “Is this fish?”

“Nope.” Jess shoveled a quick spoonful of minced turkey into Jack’s mouth. “It’s chicken. So help me.”

“I don’t like fish.” Daisy’s lower lip jutted out again.

“Your objection is noted. But that’s not fish, it’s chicken.”

“Mrs. M. gives me tuna.” Daisy looked doleful. “I don’t like tuna.”

“No tuna here. It’s chicken.” Jess was beginning to feel slightly desperate. “Maybe you can’t handle that spoon by yourself. Would you like me to help you?”

"I can do it myself!" Daisy gave her an outraged look, then jammed a spoonful of soup in her mouth. After a moment's pause to evaluate it, she swallowed and dipped her spoon again.

Jess grabbed a bite of her own soup, then gave Jack another spoonful of his turkey.

"I'm gonna marry Jack," Daisy announced.

Jess raised an eyebrow at her as she managed another bite of soup. "Are you?"

Daisy nodded. "When I'm five. He's too little now."

"Yes." Jess wiped Jack's mouth quickly. "Very high maintenance."

Daisy's brow furrowed. "What's high main'nance?"

"A lot of work," Jess explained. "He can't take care of himself very well yet."

"I take care of myself."

"Yes," Jess agreed quickly. "You're a big girl. He's a baby."

Daisy shrugged. "He'll be old when I'm five."

Jess felt a sudden twinge. *Don't grow up Jack, not yet, not yet.* "He'll be older, anyway."

The next crisis came after lunch, but Jess was ready for this one.

"I don't take naps," Daisy snapped, pushing her lower lip forward again. "I'm too big."

Jess shook her head. "That's too bad. I was going to give you the bower. I guess I'll have to give it to Jack instead."

Daisy narrowed her eyes. "What's a bow-wow?"

Jess pointed toward the window alcove she'd equipped with a stack of lace-covered pillows and a woven throw from the guest cabin. "Over there. It even has a drawbridge you can pull up." The baby fence she used to keep Jack away from the window leaned against the wall next to the pillows.

Daisy stared at the alcove, blinking, then turned back to Jess. "I'll try. Can I take those?" She pointed at the stack of Jack's picture books.

Jess nodded. "Sure. But I need to get Jack ready for his nap. It would go faster if I had some help. Do you think you'd be able to do that?"

Daisy's eyes narrowed in disdain. "Course I can. He's a baby."

"Yes, he is," Jess agreed, settling into the rocking chair in Jack's room. "Why don't you pick out a book for us to read while I give him the rest of his lunch?" She pushed her T-shirt up and began unfastening the nursing bra.

Daisy stared at her wide-eyed.

Well, crap. “I’m going to nurse Jack, Daisy. Do you know what that means?”

Daisy shook her head, totally silent for the first time all day.

“It means he’s still getting part of his food from me. That’s what mothers do for babies until they’re older.” She angled Jack’s head into the crook of her elbow as he fastened enthusiastically onto her nipple.

Daisy was still staring. “Did my mama do that for me?”

“Probably,” Jess hedged. “It’s good for babies. Did you find a book?”

Daisy nodded, handing Jess a large picture book she’d pulled from the stack.

“Okay.” Jess extended the arm not holding Jack and helped Daisy clamber into her lap. “You’ll need to turn the pages, but you can do that, can’t you?”

“I can do that.” Daisy nodded. “I’m a big girl. And Jack’s a baby.”

“I know.” Jess sighed. “Believe me, I know.”

The call came in late afternoon. Lydia was unsurprised. Roy Westerman was a weasel, but he was *her* weasel. She knew he’d find someone, particularly since he’d have a commission on whatever his contractor was paid.

She clicked the connect button on the cell phone she’d purchased just for this particular caller, then flicked the lock on her office door. It wouldn’t do to have someone wander in during this call. Particularly Preston. “Yes?”

“Mrs. Moreland?”

The voice sounded oddly distorted. It took her a moment to realize the contractor was using some voice-disguising device. She was momentarily annoyed but decided to ignore it. “This is Lydia Moreland. To whom am I speaking?”

There was a brief pause on the other end of the line. The thin, metallic voice sounded faintly amused. “If you need a name, you can call me Smith. Or Jones. Or anything else you choose. Any name I gave you would be a convenience, nothing more, Mrs. Moreland.”

Lydia’s jaw tightened. “Very well, *Smythe*. I assume you’ve spoken with Roy Westerman.”

“I have. I’ve also studied the documents he sent me—the results of your lawyer’s ‘search’.” Smythe’s tone was definitely contemptuous.

“Inadequate, I know.” Lydia settled into the leather chair behind her desk. “That’s why I asked

Westerman to find someone like you.”

“Yes,” Smythe murmured. “Keeping things legal does tend to slow a search down. Particularly when the searchee doesn’t want to be found.”

Once again there was a touch of amusement in the odd electronic voice that Lydia found annoying. “Then I assume you can find her more quickly.”

“Certainly,” he purred. “Provided I’m adequately paid for it. The question is, what do you want me to do once I’ve found her?”

“Do?” She frowned. Was he really that dense? “Notify me, of course.”

“Really? And what will you do after that?” Again the note of amusement, mixed this time with a hint of sarcasm.

“That is none of your concern,” she snapped.

“Perhaps not. On the other hand, you might want to think about what you want to do once you’ve located your daughter-in-law. I’d hate to see my efforts go for nothing.” He sounded bored now.

Lydia bit back her immediate retort. She wanted results. Up until now, she hadn’t gotten them. “What are you proposing, Smythe?”

Again, a faint pause. “Is it your daughter-in-law you really want, Mrs. Moreland?”

She stopped to think. “No. I don’t particularly want to see her again. But she has my grandson.”

“Yes. But in fact it’s the child you’re interested in finding, isn’t it? Not the mother.”

“Not the mother,” she echoed.

“So if you could have the child without the mother, wouldn’t that make more sense, Mrs. Moreland?” The electronic voice hummed in her ear, rather like a finely tuned machine.

She ran her tongue across her lips. “Is that a possibility, Smythe?”

“Oh, it’s more than a possibility, Mrs. Moreland,” he murmured. “In fact, I’d say it’s the best solution to your problem, all around.”

“But...” She paused to gather her thoughts. “You’d bring the child to me directly? Unharm’d?”

“If that’s what you want.” His voice was brisk. “Of course, it would require more compensation. My expenses would be greater.”

“Of course.” She took a deep breath, considering. “Keep it as a possibility. For now, just find the woman and my grandson. Once that’s done, we’ll proceed from there.”

“All right, Mrs. Moreland. I’ll be in touch.” The click of the disconnect sounded remarkably loud against her ear.

Lydia sat staring at the cell phone in her hand as if she could see “Smythe’s” face through the screen. She wondered idly how far she was prepared to go, but the thought really was idle. In fact, she knew precisely how far she’d take this.

And Smythe would get her there.

Lars arrived at Jessamyn Carroll’s front door promptly at five. He’d been tempted to come early, but he wanted to give her the full day so that she’d know exactly what she was up against. Mrs. Melendez had frequently looked like she’d spent the day chasing a herd of cats when he’d appeared on her doorstep.

Jessamyn Carroll didn’t look appreciably different from the way she’d looked at eight-thirty that morning. Her feathery golden hair framed her face, looking as if she’d run her fingers through it just before answering the door. Her eyes were the color of a stormy sea.

For just a moment, he wondered what she’d look like with makeup, in a dress. Then he ruthlessly pushed that thought into the farthest corner of his mind.

“Oh, hello.” She pushed the hair away from her eyes, bouncing her son on her hip. “Is it five already? I guess we lost track.”

“Daddy!” Daisy yelled, cannon-balling into his knees.

Lars gathered her up and gave her a hug. “Hi, Dais. Did you have a good time?”

Daisy wriggled out of his arms, grabbing his hand on the way down. “C’mon, Daddy, come see the bow-wow.”

“The bow-wow?” He turned back toward Ms. Carroll as Daisy towed him through the living room like a determined tugboat.

“Bower,” she explained, as if he should know exactly what that meant.

Daisy stopped in front of a deep window alcove full of pillows. It was covered in a velvet throw with an angel pattern, probably from Margaret Hastings’ angel shop downtown. “My bow-wow.” She pointed at a pile of pillows and picture books. “I sleep in there.”

“Daisy takes her nap in the bower.” Ms. Carroll shifted her son to her other hip as she gestured at a mesh baby gate. “We raise the drawbridge.”

The baby, Jack, looked up at him, grinning a guileless baby grin. Lars managed not to blink at his mother again. He figured it was best to just go with it. “I guess that keeps her in.”

Daisy gave him a look of pure outrage. “No, Daddy. It keeps everybody out. Just me inside.”

“Daisy decides when it comes down,” Ms. Carroll added. “And then she joins us.”

He nodded. Better than razor wire.

“And we read stories,” Daisy continued. “And I saw Mrs. Carroll’s booby!”

There was a beat of absolute silence in the room except for Jack’s coos. Ms. Carroll’s face turned a very attractive shade of pink, Lars noted. Much better than blusher.

“Okay. Well, time to go home, Dais,” he muttered. “Go get your coat.”

He watched Daisy bounce off down the hall, black curls flying. No wonder Jack had been entranced.

Behind him, Ms. Carroll cleared her throat. “I’m still nursing Jack. That’s what Daisy meant.”

Lars turned back toward her. Her cheeks were still faintly pink, but her forehead was creased. She looked worried. It took him a moment to understand what she was worried about, and then he felt incongruously like laughing. “Right. Look, don’t worry, Ms. Carroll, I figured it was something like that. Daisy is a genius at saying things I really wish she wouldn’t.”

She took a quick breath, then gave him a faint smile. “Maybe you should call me Jess.”

He thought of telling her no, telling her they should keep their interactions strictly business. But instead he found himself saying, “Call me Lars.”

“Okay, Lars.” Her smile widened slightly, just enough to delve those dimples in her cheeks.

Daisy galloped back into the room, trailing her coat behind her. Jack chuckled with delight. “Can we go to the bar with Uncle Pete and Uncle Cal?” Daisy pleaded.

He took a deep breath. “You can’t go into bars, Dais. I told you that.”

“But Uncle Pete and Uncle Cal can. And Auntie Docia and Aunt Janie. Why can’t I?”

He held the jacket for her, deftly inserting one of her arms in a sleeve. “Your uncles and aunts are all big people. When you’re big you can go to a bar.” He closed his eyes briefly. “Or not. That is, you might not want to. That is...”

He glanced up at Jess. Her lips were pressed tight, as if she was trying very hard not to grin. Jack waved his arms desperately at Daisy, whimpering.

“Time to go now, Dais,” Lars repeated, herding her gently toward the door.

“Okay. Bye, Jack. Bye, Mrs. Carroll. See you tomorrow.” Daisy sailed through the door, giving Lars just enough time to aim a distracted grin in Jess’s general direction as he trotted after her.

He grabbed Daisy’s hand before she got too far in front of him. “Slow down, Dais.”

She looked up at him with huge brown eyes, the color of blackstrap molasses. Toleffson eyes. His eyes. Lars felt another of those quick shots to the gut he’d felt ever since he’d picked Daisy up the first time, staring down at the smallish bundle in the receiving blanket the nurse had handed him.

“Daddy,” she murmured sweetly, “did Mama feed me with her boobies?”

Lars sighed. "Come on, Daisy, let's head home."

Chapter Four

By the end of the week, when Lars joined his family for their usual Friday night potluck supper, he had decided Jess Carroll was probably a witch. He figured nothing less than magic could explain her ability to manage Daisy, Jack and the Lone Oak Bed and Breakfast without losing her mind. Managing Daisy alone was making major inroads into his own sanity.

Now he sat in Cal's oversize rocker and watched his brothers and sisters-in-law try to deal with Daisy, two dogs and a cat while they put food on the table. They didn't seem overly harassed, but then they didn't have to deal with all four on a daily basis.

Cal's Chihuahua had established an uneasy alliance with Pete's greyhound. Both of them were thoroughly cowed by Docia's demonic black cat. So was Lars, truth be told. Daisy, of course, wasn't cowed by anybody.

Friday dinners rotated from one Toleffson house to another. Cal and Docia lived in a terrific renovated barn he'd found and rented after moving to Konigsburg three years ago. Docia's parents had given it to them as a wedding present. Pete and Janie lived in a former bed and breakfast they'd reconverted into a single-family home. It had a great yard, a strange mauve paint job, and serpentine halls that led to more bedrooms than any sane family could use.

Lars studied Cal's living room, with its warm wooden walls and its vaulted ceiling high overhead, and wondered when he'd have time to find a real home for himself and his daughter. Right now they were renting a pleasantly bland house next door to Pete and Janie on a pleasantly bland residential street with lots of pleasantly bland elderly retirees. They all thought Daisy was adorable from a distance. He had a feeling she'd lose a lot of her appeal if she got much closer. He sighed. One more thing to put on the to-do list for when he had the time and the energy. To say nothing of the money.

Once upon a time he'd been as lively as his brothers. These days, he felt lucky if he could drag himself out of bed in time to fix Daisy a decent breakfast.

His brothers were both working in the kitchen, along with his sisters-in-law and Allie Maldonado. The barn consisted of one large room downstairs with a couple of bedrooms in the loft upstairs. The downstairs room had areas for cooking, eating and slacking off, as Lars was currently doing. He watched Cal toss a colossal amount of pasta with some kind of green sauce that Lars devoutly hoped was pesto rather than strained spinach. Since Cal was the only vegetarian in the family, he always made sure at least one entrée was meat-free and usually delicious.

Pete was taking care of the carnivores, slicing a large ham on the cutting board while his wife, Janie, tossed salad on the counter beside him. His greyhound occasionally cast a few hopeful looks his way, but Pete had so far ignored her.

Docia was in charge of dishing up the bread and the bowl of scalloped potatoes that Lars had brought, while Allie, praise be, took care of dessert. Beside him, Wonder took care of nothing much beyond his beer.

"We should help," Lars ventured.

Wonder shook his head. "Don't even try. You'd just become collateral damage. This dinner is a

well-oiled machine, and you and I would constitute grit in the cogs.”

Allie raised her head, scowling at Wonder. “Not to mention you’re far more comfortable sitting on your ass.”

Lars blinked. Allie and Wonder usually had a playful banter thing going, but that last statement hadn’t sounded particularly playful. Beside him, Wonder’s mouth tightened slightly.

“Far more comfortable,” he agreed.

Allie turned abruptly and walked back toward the kitchen area. Wonder’s gaze after her was bleak.

“Trouble in paradise?” Lars asked. He waited for Wonder to reply something witty, sardonic, Wonderish.

Wonder sat staring after the woman Lars happened to know he loved to distraction. “Trouble in paradise.” He sighed, then swallowed a large gulp of his Spaten.

Lars took a swallow of his own Lone Star. “What did you do?”

“Why do you assume I did anything?” Wonder snapped. “Maybe she did something this time.”

Lars raised his eyebrows.

“Okay, okay,” Wonder muttered. “I asked her to marry me.”

“And she’s mad about that? What did you say?”

“I said, ‘I think maybe it’s time we should probably get married.’” Wonder slid further into his seat. “I think it was the *maybe* that set her off.”

Lars shook his head. “Couldn’t you have worked a *possibly* into that? Did she say no?”

“She said I was a moron. I’m not sure if that’s no or yes.”

Lars took another swallow of Lone Star. “I think you’d better come up with something pretty spectacular to apologize.”

“I’m working on it.” Wonder watched Allie as she sailed by again, paying him no attention whatsoever.

Dinner was the usual buffet of chaos. Lars sat at the table with his own plate and Daisy’s side by side, not that Daisy was sitting there herself. She bounced between her aunts and uncles, grazing from the various plates before finally settling into Docia’s lap with a piece of bread and butter.

Lars sighed. His daughter was turning into a feral child before his eyes. “Daisy, at least use a fork.”

Daisy mostly ignored him. “Aunt Docia,” she piped, “is my hair pretty?”

Docia glanced down at her absently. “Sure, Dais, your hair’s gorgeous.”

“Jack thinks so.” Daisy nodded in satisfaction. “He touches it. I’m gonna marry him.”

Docia's look this time was pure shock. She raised wide eyes to Lars. "What? Who's this?"

"Jack is nine months old," Lars explained. "The marriage won't be for a while yet. He's Jess's son."

Docia's gaze transformed from shock to something more like calculation. "Jess?"

Oops. "Mrs. Carroll," Lars amended. "Daisy's sitter."

"Jess Carroll," Janie echoed. "I still haven't met her. Why don't you bring her to dinner?"

Lars heard alarm bells ringing in his brain. He hadn't yet been able to convince his sisters-in-law that efforts at matchmaking were futile. He had no intention of getting hooked up with anyone until Daisy was twenty-one, and maybe not even then, given the catastrophe he'd stumbled into the last time he tried it. "Maybe sometime. What's new at the bookstore?"

Janie's look told him she wasn't even slightly fooled by that diversionary tactic, but she apparently decided to let him get by with it. "Right now, it's hell, but things will get better in January."

"That long?" He turned toward Docia.

"We've got the Kris Kringle Market to plan for," she explained.

"Kris Kringle Market?" His eyebrows stayed in questioning mode. "It's only the first week in November. I thought that didn't happen until after Thanksgiving."

Docia sighed. "It doesn't. The thing is, whatever we sell in the booth has to be approved by the Merchants Association, and it has to be something nobody else is doing."

"So no funnel cakes. Richter's Insurance Agency beat us to it. And no kettle corn because that's what Hesselmeyer's fruit stand always does. We've got to come up with something by the end of the week or we're doomed." Janie rolled a bit of pasta on her fork. "Did I mention this is really good, Cal?"

"Why not sell books?" Lars turned back to Docia. "I mean, that's what you do, right?"

"Right." Docia's voice was dry. "I'm sure a booth selling books would be a big hit at an outdoor holiday festival."

"Okay, if books don't work, what does?" He helped himself to more pasta. Janie was right—it was really good.

"Food," Docia intoned, counting off on her fingers. "That's the biggest thing. After that, crafts—there'll be tons of crafts people from all over the state."

"Which means we can't sell crafts since we can't possibly compete with the pros. And we can't sell books. So we're back to food again." Janie reached for another piece of bread.

"Candy canes," Wonder suggested. "Gingerbread men."

"*I'm* doing gingerbread men," Allie snapped. "You're supposed to be helping me."

Wonder winced. Lars had a feeling gingerbread wasn't the major problem between them at the moment.

"Dog biscuits," Cal said flatly, pushing back from the table.

Everyone at the table stared at him, including both dogs.

Cal walked to the stove, where he heaped more pasta onto the platter. "People buy gifts for their pets at Christmas. Home-baked dog biscuits could be just what they're looking for. Even if they're just for stocking stuffers."

"Dog biscuits." Docia frowned, thoughtfully. "Where would we find recipes?"

Janie shrugged. "The Web? I'll bet there are lots out there. And Cal could check them to make sure they were okay."

"Sure." Cal slid the pasta-laden platter back on the table. "Dog biscuit recipes should be easy enough."

"Maybe cats too," Janie chimed in. "Cat biscuits."

Pete stared at her. "There's no such thing."

"Well, there should be." Janie nodded at Docia's cat, who sat on the bookcase examining the two dogs for possible weaknesses. "Nico would eat them, wouldn't he, Docia."

"Probably. He eats everything else that comes his way." Docia gave Cal a stunning grin. "Thanks, Doc, I think you've got it."

"Anytime, ma'am." Cal bent down to kiss her ear, ruffling Daisy's hair as he did.

Lars told himself he didn't feel old and grumpy and unloved. Still, he wished Daisy would give him a hug.

"You know, we could do books, too," Docia mused. "Stuff about pets. Kids books. That kind of thing. Buy your dog a biscuit and your kid a copy of *Old Yeller*."

Wonder gave her a surprisingly wistful look. "I read that when I was a kid. Begged for a golden lab until my folks found out I was allergic to dogs."

Allie narrowed her eyes. "You're not sneezing now."

Wonder shrugged. "Neither of these dogs have any hair to speak of."

"It's not the hair, it's the dander," Cal explained.

Docia glanced down at Cal's dog. "Do Chihuahuas have dander?"

"Everything has dander." Cal reached to scratch the greyhound's ears. "It's just dry skin flakes."

Janie grimaced. "Okay, officially *euww*. I don't want to talk about this during dinner."

Docia nodded. "I'm with you." She glanced down at Daisy again, then back at Lars, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "Tell us about Mrs. Carroll and Jack, Dais."

Daisy glanced up at her, chewing on a carrot stick. "I'm gonna marry Jack."

"Right. What does Mrs. Carroll say about that?" Docia cocked an eyebrow.

"She says okay. But he's not old enough. I'll marry him when I'm five." Daisy checked the table for new snacks.

"Is Mrs. Carroll nice, Dais?" Janie sounded deceptively innocent.

"Yes, ma'am." Daisy nodded, reaching for another piece of bread. Docia redirected her hand to another carrot stick.

"Is she pretty?" Docia's eyes were glittering again.

"I guess. Can I have a cookie?" Daisy stared up at Lars.

"Did you have any normal food?"

"Yes, Daddy," Daisy said patiently.

"Okay, then."

Lars watched Daisy grab a chocolate chip cookie the size of a saucer. *Please, please, please let the subject of Jessamyn Carroll be closed.*

Fat chance. "What do you do at Mrs. Carroll's house all day?" Janie lifted Daisy and her cookie into her lap.

"Play with Jack and color and play games on the computer. And clean the cabin sometimes."

"The cabin?" Janie glanced at Lars.

"The guest house. She manages the B and B."

"Oh." Janie shrugged. "Well, maybe you can pick up some housekeeping skills. Not that you'll need them since you'll be the CEO who hires people to come in and clean her house."

"What's a CEO?" Daisy asked, pushing the rest of the cookie into her mouth.

"Somebody who runs a company," Pete explained. "The big cheese."

Daisy frowned at him. "We don't eat cheese. We have soup. And Mrs. Carroll feeds Jack with her..."

"Daisy!" Lars sat up abruptly.

Daisy stared back at him wide-eyed.

"We talked about this," he said flatly. "You remember what I told you."

"But she..."

“No, Daisy!” Lars felt his ears getting hot. Everybody at the table was staring at him.

Daisy’s eyes began to pool. “It’s just her boobies!” she blurted. “You said there was nothing wrong with boobies.”

The silence in the room was so complete Lars could hear the sound of the Chihuahua’s toenails clicking across the living room. He took a deep breath, very carefully not looking at anyone in the room. “Mrs. Carroll is nursing her baby. Daisy and I discussed it. I thought the subject was closed.”

He chanced a quick glance around the table. Wonder blinked at him. Allie was biting her lip. Pete’s face had turned magenta and Cal had a hand clapped over his mouth.

Docia swallowed hard, her lips trembling with the effort not to laugh. “He’s right, Daisy. There’s nothing wrong with boobies.” Her voice shook a little on the last word. “It’s just that we don’t usually talk about them at dinner.” She closed her eyes, pressing her lips together hard.

“Well,” Janie muttered, “maybe on special occasions.”

The general hysterics took about ten minutes to settle back into the occasional snicker. Lars let his chin sink onto his fists on the table. Gee, parenthood was fun.

Chapter Five

Even after several days, Daisy still beat Lars to the front door in her eagerness to get to Jessamyn Carroll’s house. “What’s the rush?” he asked, taking a firm hold on her hand before she could dash outside.

“I wanna see if Jack’s grown any,” she explained. “He might be bigger.”

He buckled her into her car seat. “Babies grow slowly, Dais. You probably won’t see much difference.”

She gave that observation the contempt she obviously felt it deserved. He wondered how long this particular fad would last before she moved on to her next obsession. After all, last week it had been stuffed turtles.

At the B and B, Jess gave him a quick smile before shoos Daisy into the house. “Has she had breakfast?” she called over her shoulder.

Lars felt a quick pinch of irritation. “Of course.”

Jess nodded. “Good. She can help me feed Jack. C’mon Daisy, he’s waiting.” And the door swung shut behind her.

He trudged back to his car, feeling oddly depressed about going to his office alone.

Midway through the morning, between appointments with a realtor who wanted some (preferably cheap) tax help and a prospective fruit stand owner who wanted a business plan, Mrs. Suarez leaned in his door. “Do you have time for a walk-in?”

Lars shrugged. “I guess so. The next client isn’t due for another forty minutes. Send him in.”

The man who stepped into his office a moment later looked to be in his late forties. His blue suit was a little tight for his slightly pudgy frame, and he wore a bolo tie with a large silver longhorn at the top. When he removed his tan Stetson, his graying hair ringed a significant bald spot, with a few strands brushed across for effect. His chin bulged over his collar, not quite to double but no longer exactly single.

Lars disliked him on sight.

“Mr. Toleffson,” he boomed, “I’m Lorne Haggdorn. Down from Oklahoma City. Pleased to meet you, sir.”

Lars shook the man’s extended hand dutifully. Haggdorn wore a gold pinkie ring with a dull green stone. “What can I do for you, Mr. Haggdorn?”

Haggdorn settled into the chair opposite the desk, then rested his ankle on his knee so that Lars could see his elaborately embroidered cowboy boots. The toes were so sharply pointed he almost winced.

“I’m checking out some possibilities here in Konigsburg.” Haggdorn leaned back into his chair. “Looks like a pretty successful little town.”

Lars nodded. “Generally, yeah. The Merchants Association can give you more information about that.”

Haggdorn’s eyes narrowed. “I wanted to check the place out for myself. See what kind of services the town had. I may want to move some business down here.”

“What kind of business are you in, Mr. Haggdorn?” Lars tried to sound like he really cared.

“Land development.” Haggdorn waved a hand in the general direction of Main. “Understand that’s big around here. Lots of opportunities.”

Lars nodded. “Also lots of people already involved. It’s a very competitive market.”

Haggdorn shrugged. “Always is. So how do you like the town, Mr. Toleffson?”

“Fine. It’s a good place to live.” Lars considered giving Haggdorn the standard Konigsburg pitch, then decided to leave it to the Merchants Association.

Haggdorn’s expression sharpened. “How’s the accounting business?”

“No complaints.” Lars wondered idly if Haggdorn was a potential competitor trying to size him up.

“So you have a wife? Kids? What’s this place like for families?”

Lars took a breath. “I have family here, yes. So far as I know the schools are good.”

“What about child care? Any daycare centers around?”

“There’s a daycare center near the highway. Wee Care.” Haggdorn looked too old to have kids in daycare, but maybe he had a young trophy wife. Sort of like Sherice. Lars managed not to grimace.

Haggdorn nodded. “That where you’ve got your kids?”

Lars felt a prickling up his spine for no reason he could exactly identify. "I looked into it, yes."

"Young kids then?" Haggedom's lips spread in a grin that didn't seem to reach his eyes. "Boys or girls?"

"I have a daughter."

"And this daycare place is good?"

"It looked good to me." Lars ignored the slight stiffness in his shoulders. "You should talk to them directly, though. I'm sure they'd show you around. Are you also looking for accounting services, Mr. Haggedom?"

He'd seldom seen a client he wanted less than Lorne Haggedom. But discussing business felt better than discussing Daisy.

"I might. If I decide to move down here, that is." Haggedom fiddled with his bolo tie, staring out the window behind Lars's desk.

"What kind of service would you be looking for? Business plan? Taxes? Financial planning?"

Haggedom shrugged. "All of that, I imagine. Haven't decided yet. You do mainly business accounting, right?"

"Mainly."

The prickling up Lars's spine was more persistent. Something felt profoundly wrong about Lorne Haggedom, beyond the bad combover and the gaudy boots. "When you do decide what you're looking for, I'll be glad to give you an idea of what the costs would be. Let me know when you're ready."

Haggedom's eyes narrowed again, making him look a little like a life-size Pillsbury Doughboy. "I'll do that. Any other information you can give me about the town?"

Lars leaned back in his chair. "I like it, but it's not for everybody. People do keep track of each other in small towns. It wouldn't be a good place for anybody who wanted privacy. Or who didn't like other people poking into his business."

For a moment he and Haggedom stared at each other in silence. Then Haggedom's lips slid into another sour grin. "I'll keep that in mind, then. Nice talking to you."

Lars stood, but managed not to shake Haggedom's hand. "Stop by again. Let me know if you decide to stay."

"Oh, I'll be staying." Haggedom turned toward the door. "You can be sure of that."

Lars watched him walk past Mrs. Suarez's desk, wondering what exactly Haggedom would be staying for.

By the beginning of their second week together, Jess had figured out how to get Daisy to cooperate—use Jack shamelessly.

Daisy had taken him over as her consort and her partner in crime, although those crimes were at a pretty rudimentary level, given that he could only crawl. With Jack's limited mobility, Jess wasn't overly worried about Daisy's plots, but she didn't leave them alone together for more than a few minutes at most.

Now Daisy sat next to Jack's playpen, in the middle of the guest cabin's living room. She wiggled her fingers through the mesh, grinning while Jack giggled helplessly.

"Great audience, kid," Jess muttered. "Who knew you were this easy to please?" She gave one last swipe of her sponge over the sink, then rinsed again.

"Are we done?" Daisy piped.

"Almost. I've got to run the sweeper and then we can go back home." Fortunately, the couple who'd had the cabin at the beginning of the week had looked to be in their late sixties, which may have limited any tendencies toward carousing and thus cut back on the need for cleaning.

Daisy's brow furrowed. "Jack doesn't like the sweeper. It's too noisy."

"Do you want to sit with him?" Jess cocked an eyebrow in Daisy's direction. This was a new thing—Daisy sitting in Jack's playpen like a miniature convict.

"Perhaps that would be best," Daisy intoned, then pulled herself to her feet.

Jess blinked at her. Sometimes the kid seemed like two going on forty. However, since she apparently spent most of her time around adults, except for Jack, Jess figured she had a right to some weird speech patterns.

"Okay, in you go." Jess slid her hands under Daisy's arms and lifted her in with Jack. He immediately grabbed a couple of handfuls of her hair, crowing in delight.

Daisy freed herself by pushing his hands away. "Not now, Jack. Maybe later."

Jess bit her lip, telling herself that Daisy hadn't necessarily heard that phrase before her parents' divorce. Still, it seemed appropriate.

Or not. One thing Jess had had to accept over the past two weeks—Lars Toleffson was one good-looking man. She was reminded of that fact every time he dropped Daisy off or picked her up. He was impossibly broad-shouldered, even in the business suits he usually wore. His hair was the color of strong coffee, and his eyes were like molasses. Just looking at him made her feel hungry.

But looking was all she was doing. She was definitely not in the market for any kind of hook-up, even the very temporary kind. And a temporary hook-up with the man who was paying her to look after his daughter didn't seem like a smart thing to do. Not to mention that Lars Toleffson hadn't seemed even slightly interested in her in a carnal way.

Probably too tired. Lord knew she was, and Jack wasn't even walking yet. Jess switched on the vacuum sweeper, then checked him to see if it inspired any panic. Jack, busy handing his blocks to

Daisy, seemed not to notice.

“We could get Jack a dog,” Daisy chirped over the noise of the sweeper. “From my Uncle Cal.”

“Your Uncle Cal?” Jess was vaguely aware that there were other Toleffsons in town, but she hadn’t met any of them. She hadn’t met much of anybody beyond Mrs. Carmody, the owner of the Lone Oak. Not that she wanted to meet people. It was best not to draw any more attention to the two of them than she had to. “What does your Uncle Cal do?”

“He’s a veteran,” Daisy explained. “He fixes sick dogs.”

“Veterinarian,” Jess corrected absently.

“And Uncle Pete puts bad people in jail,” Daisy continued. “And Aunt Docia and Aunt Janie have books.”

“What kind of books?” Jess ran the sweeper around the couch.

Daisy shrugged. “All kinds. In the shop.”

Okay. Bookshop. She’d seen a bookshop on Main—maybe that was the one. “Do you have any other uncles and aunts here in town?”

“Well...” Daisy’s brow furrowed. “Uncle Erik, but he doesn’t come to dinner.”

“He doesn’t?” Jess turned off the sweeper, wrapping the cord back around the handle again. “Why’s that?”

“‘Cause he’s real busy, Daddy says.”

“What does he do?” She began to gather up the cleaning supplies again, sliding the vacuum sweeper back into the closet.

“He’s a policeman. He’s got a gun. He’d show it to Jack.”

Jess wasn’t sure exactly what to say about that, since *not in this lifetime* didn’t seem polite. “Maybe when he’s older. Are you ready to go back home now?”

“Yes ma’am.” Daisy stood and lifted her arms.

Jess scooped her up high in the air, then let her down gently. “There you go! Air Daisy, in for a landing.”

Daisy giggled, then picked up the tote bag of sponges and dust cloths, while Jess lifted Jack into the backpack, fastening the strap around his waist.

“Can I ride in the cart?” Daisy bounced toward the front door.

“If there’s room.” Jess folded the playpen one-handed, then carried it outside to the large yellow wagon she used to tote cleaning supplies. She suspected the wagon was the true attraction for Daisy in their morning cleaning excursions—that and Jack, of course.

Now she helped Daisy climb inside, then settled the backpack more comfortably onto her own shoulders.

“Can Jack ride with me?”

Jess shook her head. “Not enough room. He squirms around.”

“I’d hold him.”

“I know.” Jess piled playpen, tote bags and miscellaneous dust cloths behind and around Daisy, then picked up the wagon handle. “Maybe sometime when we don’t have so much to carry.”

Daisy looked like she might try the pooling eyes thing, but once Jess turned toward the road and began pulling the wagon, she settled back against the wagon rail, half-singing one of her songs.

Jess trudged up the dirt road that led from the guest cabin to her home, listening to Daisy’s variations on Old MacDonald that seemed to include an improbable assortment of animals and animal sounds, although the unicorn sounded a lot like a donkey. Somewhere a cardinal chirped in the pecan trees, as the wind rattled the leaves around them.

Surprisingly cool for early November. Jess resolved to put a sweater on Jack next time they came to the cabin and to ask Lars Toleffson to bring a heavier jacket for Daisy tomorrow. She glanced up at her cabin and stopped short.

A man was walking across her front porch, peering in the front windows.

Jess stood frozen at the point where the road branched off to the guest cabin. Her heart hammered. She could turn around. Clearly the man hadn’t heard them yet.

“I need to go,” Daisy demanded, her voice piping across the open meadow.

The man looked up, then stared straight at them.

Jess took a deep breath. Too late to run, and where would she run to, anyway? She raised her head, straightening her spine, and resumed her trudge toward the front porch.

“Mrs. Carroll?” the man called when she still was a few feet up the road.

She stopped again. “I’m Jessamyn Carroll.”

The man’s smile broadened and he stepped off the porch, walking toward her. “Lorne Barrymore. Glad to meet you.”

Jess watched him approach. He was maybe forty-five or so, slightly paunchy, collar too tight around his chin. His hair had receded to a graying ring around the outside of his bald spot, but he’d combed a few strands across.

Lorne Barrymore extended his hand. He wore a gold ring with a green stone on his puffy little finger. After a moment, Jess lifted her hand to shake his.

“Glad I caught you.” Barrymore grinned again. “Thought maybe you were out.”

“No, I’m here.” Jess wondered if there was any way she could get by him and get the children into the house. She could turn and run back to the cabin with Jack, but not with Daisy. And what good would it do to hide there when he’d already discovered where she was?

“Who are you?” Daisy’s face slid into a modified scowl.

“Well, hello there.” Barrymore turned toward her. “What’s your name, little girl?”

Daisy pushed her lips together in a tight line, regarding Barrymore with narrowed eyes. “I’m not little.”

“What can I do for you, Mr. Barrymore?” Jess leaned down and helped Daisy out of the cart, then slipped an arm around her shoulders to keep her close.

“Well, now, I heard you were somebody who offered child care in your home.” Barrymore gave her an even wider smile, the kind supposed to make her feel more relaxed, no doubt. “I’m interested in making arrangements for my kids. We’re thinking of moving down here to Konigsburg.”

Barrymore’s grin was bright, but it didn’t seem to go very far. His eyes were uninvolved. Jess felt a quick chill up her spine. “Sorry. I’m not licensed to look after children.”

Barrymore’s grin hardened. “So both of these are yours?”

“Both of them stay with me,” she temporized. “I can keep two children without a license, but I wouldn’t want to try to look after any more. I don’t have the time.”

“But you’re looking after these two, right?” Barrymore glanced down at Daisy again.

“Sorry, I can’t help you.” Jess took hold of the wagon handle again, keeping her arm around Daisy. She began walking toward the cabin, forcing herself not to hurry.

Barrymore walked alongside her. “It’s a shame you’re not taking any other kids. Both of these kids look well cared for.” He glanced down at Daisy again, his smile still wide. “You having a good time here, sweetheart?”

“I’m not your sweetheart.” Daisy stuck out her lower lip. Jess felt like applauding.

“Like I say,” Barrymore continued as if Daisy hadn’t spoken, “I need something reliable for my own kids. I’d be willing to pay. Maybe more than these kids’ families are paying you.”

“I don’t need any more money, Mr. Barrymore.” Jess hoped her nose wasn’t growing as she spoke. “And I can’t take care of any more children beyond these two.”

She climbed the porch steps, pushing Daisy slightly ahead of her and leaving the wagon behind. Barrymore climbed the steps behind her. She stopped for a moment, resting her hand on the door. Her cell phone was in her pocket. She could always threaten to call Daisy’s uncle the cop.

Barrymore gave her one last smile, his gaze darting around the porch. “Well, suppose I give you my card. Then you can call me if you change your mind. And what’s your number here?”

“I won’t change my mind, Mr. Barrymore.” Jess raised her head, staring straight at him. Always better

to meet threats head on. "I'm not interested."

Barrymore shrugged. "Too bad. Don't suppose you could recommend anybody else in the area."

She shook her head. "Sorry."

"I need to go!" Daisy blurted. "Right now!"

"We have to go now. Emergency. Goodbye, Mr. Barrymore." Jess unlocked the door, pushing Daisy ahead of her, then closed the door behind her.

She pushed the bolt across, wondering if Barrymore could hear her on the front porch. And wondering if the windows were all locked too. "Okay, Daisy." Jess turned back toward the bathroom. "Let's get you set up."

"Okay." Daisy followed her down the hall. "I didn't like him. He wasn't nice."

"No, he wasn't," Jess muttered, pushing open the bathroom door.

Lars came to pick up Daisy a little early so that he'd have time to drop her off at the bookstore. Docia and Janie wanted her to try out their new children's reading nook, giving Lars another rare opportunity to have a beer with his brothers at the Dew Drop.

Daisy galloped toward him after Jess Carroll opened the door. "Daddy! We cleaned the cabin and a nasty man wanted to know my name. Are we gonna see Aunt Docia? Jack has a new tooth."

She bounced away from him before he could stop her, heading back toward the baby's room. "Daisy, grab your backpack and your teddy bear," Lars called. He figured she'd also say goodbye to Jack, which meant another five minutes at least.

He turned toward Jess, trying to keep his voice neutral. "A nasty man?"

Jess sighed. "Come in, please. I need to talk to you about this."

Lars sank onto the couch as his chest clenched. "Is she all right?"

Jess's forehead furrowed. "What? Of course, she is. Nothing happened—I would have called you if it was anything serious. A man was hanging around here when we got back from cleaning the guest cabin. He claimed he was looking for child care for his children. I told him I wasn't interested and took the children inside."

Lars let out a breath, trying to unclench. "So everything's okay?"

"Not exactly." She leaned forward. Her face looked oddly pinched, as if she were angry. Lars looked at her more closely.

Frightened. He'd bet good money that Jess Carroll was frightened about something.

“Did you tell anyone here in town I was taking care of Daisy?”

Lars shrugged. “My brothers and sisters-in-law. My receptionist. Nobody else. But they might have mentioned it to other people, particularly at work.”

“Somehow this man got the idea I was in the child care business.” She tried to smile, but her lips trembled slightly when she did.

“Did he give you his name?”

“Barrymore.” Jess pressed her lips together, thinking. “I think he said his first name was Lawrence. No, Lorne. Lorne Barrymore. Is that someone you know?”

Lars felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand. “Lorne Barrymore. What did he look like?”

“Late forties. Thinning hair. Sort of pudgy. And he had a gold pinky ring with some kind of green stone.” She narrowed her eyes. “Do you know him?”

He exhaled slowly. “Not exactly. Somebody who looked like that came to my office earlier today. Only he called himself Lorne Haggdorn.”

“What did he want?”

“He claimed he was moving to Konigsburg and wanted an accountant.” Lars shrugged. “He asked about the town. Business prospects. Schools. Child care.”

He wasn’t sure it was possible for Jess Carroll to get paler, but he thought she just had. “Child care,” she murmured.

“I didn’t give him your name,” he said quickly. “I didn’t even give him Daisy’s name. However he found out she was here, he didn’t get it from me.”

She pressed her fingers against her lips, blinking. “Shit.”

Lars was still trying to figure out why Jess Carroll would be frightened of Lorne Haggdorn. The guy came across as a jerk and possibly crooked, but he hadn’t been particularly threatening. At least, not when he was asking about accountants.

“Look, it may not be anything, but I’ll check with my brother. Pete’s an assistant county attorney. If he thinks it’s a problem, we’ll go to the police.”

Jess managed a rather tremulous smile. “I thought your brother was a policeman. That’s what Daisy said. If I couldn’t have gotten rid of Barrymore on my own, I was going to call him.”

The clench was back in Lars’s chest. “That’s another brother. Erik. He’s a part-time Konigsburg cop.”

She sat still for a moment, then sighed. “Okay. I’ll leave it to you, I guess.”

He watched her run the tip of her tongue across her lips. She had a nice mouth, particularly when she smiled. All of a sudden, he really wanted to see that smile again. He felt a wave of anger at Lorne

Haggedorn, a.k.a. Barrymore, for taking it away.

He leaned forward, fighting the impulse to take her hand in his. He didn't want her worrying about him along with Haggedorn. "Look, if anything frightens you, if you need to get in touch with somebody—you've got my cell phone number. Just call me, no matter what it is. I can be out here in ten minutes."

Jess blinked at him. For a moment, her lips trembled as if she might cry. Then suddenly her expression closed off again. Her lips spread in a faint smile. "Okay. I'll hold you to that. But it probably won't be necessary."

Lars nodded. "Probably not."

He watched her for another moment. Her eyes were the color of sea foam, clear and deep.

Okay, enough. If he was waxing poetic about the color of her eyes, it was past time to go. "Daisy," he called, "are you ready?"

"Yes, Daddy." Daisy padded back to him, her backpack over her shoulder. "I said goodnight to Jack." She turned to Jess. "Can I have a hug?"

Jess knelt beside her, spreading her arms, her mouth sliding into a grin that showed the twin dimples in her cheeks as she pulled Daisy in.

Lars felt his throat constrict as he watched, while some other parts of his anatomy did the opposite. He resolutely ignored the whole thing. He had no intention of walking into the Dew Drop with a hard-on.

Lydia Moreland would never have admitted to anyone that she was waiting for a call. She didn't wait on other people—other people waited on her.

With Smythe, though, she had no choice. The contractor was in the driver's seat—she was along for the ride. And to pay for the gas, of course. Judging from the first expense statement she'd received from Westerman, a lot of gas was involved.

When her special cell phone rang around five, she picked it up immediately. Then she waited out two more rings. It wouldn't do to let Smythe know how much she needed the information.

"Yes?" she murmured into the cell.

"Good. You're there. I was afraid I'd have to leave a voice mail. And this isn't anything you'll want recorded." Smythe still used the electronic distortion device. Even so the voice sounded faintly amused again, as if he knew exactly what Lydia had been up to.

"That won't be necessary," she snapped. "Do you have anything to report?"

"I've found your daughter-in-law. She's living in a small town in Texas." Smythe's voice now sounded matter-of-fact, even slightly bored. Like he hadn't just dropped a hand grenade into her afternoon.

“What town?” she gasped. “Where?”

“A town. Before I tell you anything more, we need to discuss what the next step should be.”

Lydia pictured the mythical Smythe leaning back in a chair, smiling. She always saw him as a dangerously civilized man, rather like James Mason in the fifties. In reality, of course, she had no idea what he looked like—or even if he was a man. The voice sounded like a robot.

“There’s nothing to discuss. I’ve already told you what I want you to do. Give me the name of the town and send me another bill.” She used the voice that had proven effective over the years with bankers and lawyers, underlings who still had some limited power of their own.

Smythe chuckled. “That attitude won’t work with me. I have the information and you need it. We’re negotiating here, Mrs. Moreland. What do you really want?”

She pressed her fingers against her eyelids, trying to force back the migraine she knew was developing. “I want my grandson. Safe and sound. In my home.”

“But not your daughter-in-law?”

“Certainly not!” she snapped.

“It’s not certain at all. She’s the child’s mother. But possession is possession, and I imagine your lawyers can distract her once you’ve gotten hold of her son.”

She pressed her lips together to avoid cursing. Barrett’s slut of a wife probably would try to get the child back—she hadn’t listened to reason before. Lydia would have to make sure she didn’t have the opportunity. “What is it you want, Smythe? More money? I do need the name of the town, but I don’t necessarily need it from you.”

“No,” he agreed. “Of course, I could just as easily inform your daughter-in-law that you’re onto her. Give her time to take off again.”

Lydia’s head began to pound. She ran her fingers along her forehead. “All right, I repeat—what do you want?”

“I’ll deliver your grandchild. In your specified condition. In return, you’ll pay me five hundred thousand. Once the money has been deposited in an account I’ll specify, I’ll bring you the child.”

“That’s outrageous!” she blurted.

“No, Mrs. Moreland, that’s cheap. I could have asked for a million. Clearly, the child is worth that much to you.”

She sat listening to the silence for a moment, considering her lack of options. “If I’m going to take your offer, I need a way of getting in touch with you. No more of this waiting for your call.”

After another moment, Smythe sighed. “All right, I’ll give you a number where you can leave a message. Tomorrow.”

Lydia assumed that meant he'd buy a throw-away cell phone for that purpose. She didn't particularly care what he did as long as it worked when she needed it to work. She rubbed her eyes again. "All right. I accept your deal."

"Wonderful." Smythe sounded vaguely amused again. "I'll be in touch."

Chapter Six

Lars slid into the booth at the Dew Drop a moment before Cal dropped onto the other side. Wonder and Pete were already in place, squinting into the darkness of the bar. No beers were on the table.

"No barmaid?" Lars glanced back at the bar where Ingstrom was doing his usual desultory cleaning job.

"Two barmaids." Pete sighed. "Good ol' Ruby and a new recruit. They just haven't been around yet."

As Lars watched, Ruby appeared at the bar with a tray full of empty beer bottles. Ingstrom said something, and she sneered in reply. Instead of the plunging neckline from last time, she wore a bright blue T-shirt. The picture on the front looked like a smashed hamster.

"What's with the T-shirt? That drawing looks like an obscenity."

Wonder shrugged. "It's supposed to be a drawing of the Dew Drop. Mrs. Ingstrom designed it. Ingstrom figured it would class the place up if he had the barmaids wear matching T-shirts."

Pete peered toward the bar. "Covering up Ruby would definitely class up any place. However, the T-shirts were probably not his best choice."

"What'll it be?"

Lars glanced up guiltily, expecting to see Ruby glowering down at them. Instead, the girl who huddled next to the table was considerably smaller. Her bright blue T-shirt enveloped her from shoulders to mid-thigh. Her very black hair had what looked like a streak of magenta along the side, and silver balls rimmed the outer edges of both ears. She also had a spike through her right eyebrow. Her name tag read *Dahlia*.

"Spaten," Wonder croaked.

"Lone Star." Pete gestured to himself and Lars. "Two."

"Dos Equis." Cal smiled at her. "You're new here."

Dahlia shrugged her thin shoulders. "Yeah. That all you want?"

Cal nodded, his smile fading.

She turned and scuttled back toward the bar.

Wonder shook his head. "Amazing. A woman immune to the famous Toleffson charm."

Cal shrugged. "I'm not trying to be charming, just friendly. Being a barmaid at the Dew Drop doesn't strike me as anybody's first job choice."

“Given the amount of metal she’s got embedded in her head, the Dew Drop may have been a step up from whatever she was doing before.”

“Still.” Cal turned toward Lars. “So what’s new with you? Haven’t seen you since the last family dinner.”

Lars might have imagined it, but he had the feeling they were all trying hard not to snicker. “Okay, zip it. Jesus, would you just forget about the damn boobies?”

The guffawing had begun to settle down by the time Dahlia reappeared with the beers.

“Eight bucks,” she muttered, placing the beers on the table in no particular order.

“Got it covered.” Pete slipped her a ten, then waved off the two singles she tried to hand him. “Keep it.”

“Big spender.” Wonder arched an eyebrow as Dahlia slipped away again.

“Maybe she’ll spend it on food,” Cal murmured.

“Here’s hoping.” Pete picked up his bottle, pushing the other Lone Star toward Lars. “So, I repeat, what’s new with you?”

Lars took the beer, letting it dangle from his fingers. “Actually, I need to talk to you in a sort of semi-professional capacity.”

Wonder grabbed his bottle and slid off to the end of the booth. “C’mon Calthorpe, this sounds boring beyond belief. I’ll challenge you to two out of three on darts.”

“You’re on.” Cal followed him through the tightly packed tables toward the back room.

Lars blinked. “That was fast.”

“That was self-preservation.” Pete swallowed some Lone Star. “Wonder has a low capacity for serious stuff. Besides, I think he’s trying to convince Cal to have Docia work on Allie. He’s already tried with me and Janie.”

“No progress on the proposal?”

Pete shook his head. “Stupidest proposal in history, but normally I think she’d make allowances for it being Wonder. Maybe she’s decided it’s time for him to step it up a little.”

Lars took one last glance at Wonder before he disappeared into the back room. He stood maybe five ten, slight love handles, thinning brown hair, horn-rims. Stepping it up didn’t seem likely. “Maybe she just wants him to stop being a jerk.”

“In that case, she’s out of luck. So what’s the problem you wanted to talk about?” Pete leaned back again.

Lars pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m not sure there is one. Just... weirdness.”

“Okay, what’s the weirdness?”

“This morning a guy named Lorne Haggdorn came to my office. Said he was going to relocate his business to Konigsburg and was looking for accounting help. Then he started asking about what the town was like, and he ended up asking a lot of questions about child care and my kid.”

Pete narrowed his eyes. “Why would that qualify as weird? Aren’t most parents concerned about child care?”

Lars shrugged. “Part of it was his attitude, which was sort of, I don’t know, shady or something. But the rest of it comes later.”

“What’s the rest of it?” Pete leaned back again, picking up his beer.

“This afternoon when Jess got back from cleaning the guest cabin with the kids, a guy was snooping around her cabin. When he saw her, he gave her a big song and dance about looking for child care. Asking her if she was looking after kids. Daisy said he was, and I quote, ‘a nasty man’.”

Pete leaned forward quickly. “Did he say anything to Daisy? Try to touch her?”

Lars shook his head. “Not that kind of nasty. He was mainly concentrating on Jess. She didn’t tell him anything, but she said she had a hard time getting rid of him.”

“And you think it’s the same guy?”

“I know it’s the same guy. He said his name was Lorne Barrymore, and Jess said he had a pinky ring with a green stone. So did Lorne Haggdorn.”

Pete stared down at his hands, frowning. “It doesn’t sound like he’s done anything illegal. Just...unsettling.”

“I know. But it worries me. And it upset Jess.”

Pete gave him a quick look. “Jess?”

“Okay, Mrs. Carroll.” Lars pinched his nose again. “Don’t give me a hard time. She’s doing a good job. Daisy’s happy. I don’t want her to be bothered.”

“You think this is about Daisy?”

“I don’t know what it’s about. It could be anything, but I don’t like the idea of this guy hanging around where my daughter is staying.”

“Right.” Pete leaned back again. “The thing is, I can’t do much to help you with this. It isn’t at the county attorney level. You know who you need to talk to, bro.”

Lars took a deep breath, then blew it out. “Yeah. Erik.”

“You could talk to one of the other cops, but from what I’ve seen over there, Erik’s about the best they’ve got. Him and Nando Avrogado.”

“Okay. Maybe I’ll go talk to him tonight, while it’s still fresh in my mind.”

Lars and Pete stared at each other for a moment. Lars was willing to bet they were both thinking the same general thing, remembering some time when they were little and Erik had done something that hurt. He had a lot of those memories. So did Pete. So did Cal. They were all trying to get beyond it, but it hadn’t happened yet.

“Janie still wants to meet her, you know.” The corners of Pete’s mouth edged up. “So does Docia. You can only hold the two of them off for so long.”

It took Lars a moment to remember what woman they were talking about. Then his shoulders began to tense. “She’s a nice woman, but she’s my daughter’s babysitter. That’s it. Whatever else they’re trying to stir up isn’t going to happen.”

Pete moved his bottle through the wet ring on the table. “You mean not with her? Or not with anybody?”

Lars sighed. “I’m trying to raise my daughter, Pete. That’s all I’ve got time for.”

“Any word from the former Mrs. Lars Toleffson lately?”

“She called a few days ago. Usual stuff.”

“Which is?”

“Complaints about money. How she doesn’t have enough and how I owe her more.” Lars peeled a strip from the label on his bottle, crumbling it between his fingers.

Pete shook his head. “She signed the agreement, Lars. It’s not that easy to get a settlement amended.”

“She’s just rattling my chain. She knows I don’t want her anywhere near Daisy, and she figures threatening me over Daisy is always good for a few bucks. But we both know she doesn’t really want custody.” Lars moved his shoulders, trying to loosen them. “Anyway, I’ve got enough on my plate with the fallout from the divorce. I don’t need any other women in my life, believe me.” Not to mention that he still didn’t trust his ability to choose a woman who wouldn’t turn out to be the second coming of Sherice.

Pete shook his head. “Sherice shouldn’t be the end of your life, bro. You need to get out there again. Look at Cal and Docia. Hell, look at me and Janie.”

“Okay, both of you hit the jackpot.” Lars picked up his beer again, then set it down. “Look, Pete, I know Janie means well, but if you could get her off this matchmaker kick, I’d appreciate it.”

Pete’s mouth spread in a slow grin as he leaned back against the booth again. “You want me to control Janie? And Docia? Seriously?”

Lars didn’t figure that question really rated an answer. He picked up his beer again and drained half of what was left. At least he could walk to the police station from here. No way did he want his brother Erik to arrest him for DWI.

Jess sat at her window, watching the darkness gather beyond her front porch. She should have been working on her last few changes to the Synchronicity site while Jack dozed on his blanket. Instead, she sat watching the woods, waiting for something to happen and thinking about running.

They'd done it before. She knew just how she'd go about doing it now. Load anything she couldn't replace into the Honda. Tuck a sleeping Jack into his car seat. Get into the driver's seat herself and take off without ever looking back.

She wasn't even sure the Morelands and their hired trackers knew about the Honda. She'd bought it at a used car lot somewhere in Tennessee on the way down, trading in her old Buick. If she'd been lucky, whoever the Morelands had on her trail hadn't figured out what she was driving yet, let alone where.

The odds were the Moreland family had nothing to do with Lorne Barrymore, of course. He was probably just some local creep, playing some kind of game whose rules only he knew. Maybe he was a garden-variety stalker.

Jess shivered. Why exactly was that idea supposed to reassure her?

She leaned back in her chair, closing her eyes, seeing Barry in the hospital again during those awful last days. *Keep away from her, sweetheart. She won't let anybody get in the way of whatever it is she wants. And when she's done, she throws you away like so much trash.*

She thought of Michelle, who'd been her best friend, then her only friend, then nothing, someone who wouldn't return her calls. Michelle in the ladies' room at work. *Look, I'm not supposed to tell you this, but they're under a lot of pressure about you and your job. It's coming from the top, Jess. Watch your back.*

And Lee, who was, well, hard to say what Lee had been exactly. Although she knew what he'd tried to be. His voice on the phone, sounding almost apologetic. *Look, Jessamyn, they've got more juice than either of us. Just give her what she wants.*

What she wanted was Jack. And Jack she would never have, not so long as Jess was still able to keep two steps ahead of her.

She blew out a breath. Probably they ought to leave Konigsburg. Tomorrow, if not sooner. But she'd felt so comfortable here. Almost safe. Even though she'd been careful not to do too much in town, not to let too many people see her. Except for Lars Toleffson.

She still wasn't sure what he'd been offering when he'd said she could call him if she got frightened. She didn't think he was coming on to her. But she'd felt...something. Some kind of vibe between them.

Which was another reason they should probably hit the road. Soon.

The shadows of the oaks and pecans had spread two-thirds of the way across the small meadow in front of her cabin. No one was in the guest cabin tonight. Just her and Jack, out here in the back country. Or what passed for the back country two miles from Main Street.

Jess rubbed a hand across her face. Maybe Daisy was right. A dog might be a nice idea, preferably one that combined the qualities of Lassie, Rin Tin Tin and the Hound of the Baskervilles where intruders were concerned.

Jack gurgled in his sleep and Jess looked down at him. One small hand was tucked beneath his cheek. Jess felt the familiar constriction somewhere around her heart.

Not the Hound of the Baskervilles then. But definitely a breed that would stand up for Jack no matter what. And one that could make a lot of noise.

The shadows outside were entirely too quiet.

Lars studied the Konigsburg police station building. He didn't think he'd ever been here before. Light streamed through the window into the small lot where a single police cruiser was parked.

Pete and Janie were taking Daisy on to their house for this week's family dinner. Lars figured it wouldn't take him long to talk to Erik and join them there. Assuming he could get himself to open the door and walk in.

Since Erik had moved to Konigsburg, a couple of months after Pete and Lars had moved in themselves, the four of them had managed to develop a polite, if distant, relationship. When Lars saw Erik on the street they nodded to each other. When Daisy was with him, she gave Erik the same hug and kiss she gave her other uncles, and Erik accepted it happily enough.

But polite or not, Lars doubted they'd ever be close. Not after all those years of Erik the nightmare bully, of Pete trying to defend his little brothers against his older one, of Lars and Cal finally growing big enough to fight back themselves, although they frequently got beaten up just the same.

He knew Erik had reformed, that he'd done his best to make up for what he'd once been, even that he tried to stay out of their way so they wouldn't feel they had to talk to him if they didn't want to. Lars even knew he should want to. But he didn't much.

He sighed, shoving his hands into his pockets, and walked up the steps to the glass station door.

Erik was sitting at a desk behind the front counter, typing at a computer keyboard. So far as Lars could tell, he was by himself. He glanced up when Lars walked in, his expression becoming blank. "Hey, Lars."

"Hey." Lars stood inside the doorway, trying to decide how to begin.

Erik waved at the end of the counter. "Come on around and sit. You want some coffee?"

"Sure," Lars lied. He'd had two beers at the Dew Drop, and coffee was the last thing he wanted. On the other hand, it gave him something to do while he figured out a way to explain things to Erik.

Erik set a Styrofoam cup on the desk in front of him, then dropped back into his desk chair. "What brings you here?"

Lars sipped the coffee. It wasn't half bad. "I've got a problem, and I thought you might be able to help me with it."

Erik leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk in front of him. “Okay, tell me about it.”

Lars took a breath and launched into the story, wondering if it sounded as ludicrous as he was afraid it did. When he got to the part about Jess Carroll and her unwanted visitor, Erik held up his hand.

“Did she ask him to leave?”

“I’m not sure.” Lars frowned. “She told him she didn’t want to take care of his kids, and then she went inside her house. Does it make a difference?”

“If she told him to leave and he didn’t, you might be able to make a case for trespassing, or for harassment. Tell me the rest of it.”

Lars did, fairly quickly, and Erik leaned back in his chair. “You’re sure it was the same guy?”

Lars nodded. “I’m sure. There can’t be that many pudgy balding guys named Lorne with pinkie rings running around Konigsburg.”

Erik sighed, staring up at the ceiling for a few moments. “Any idea what this is all about?”

“None. It’s just...troubling.”

“Yeah. Troubling is right.”

Lars rubbed the back of his neck, trying to loosen the knots in his muscles. “Is there anything I can do? Swear out a complaint or something?”

Erik shrugged. “I don’t see anything you’ve got a legal right to complain about here. The guy apparently used a false name with at least one of you, but that’s not illegal, as long as he didn’t try to get anything from you.”

“And the questions? The way he tried to find out about us?”

“Again, not illegal unless he uses the information for some criminal purpose. Besides, neither of you told him anything, right?”

Lars nodded. “Right. The more he asked, the more both of us backed off. So there’s nothing we can do?”

Erik stared at the ceiling, thinking. “I can’t arrest him—like I say, he hasn’t done anything illegal that I can see. I can talk to him if I can locate him. Try to find out what’s going on, why he’s in town. You have any ideas on that?”

Lars shook his head. “I suppose it could be something connected to Sherice, but I don’t know what. It’s not like he can find out anything from me or Jess that would affect the custody agreement.”

“Any chance Sherice might like to grab Daisy?” Erik’s voice was surprisingly calm.

Lars felt as if he’d been kicked in the chest. He took a couple of deep breaths. “It wouldn’t get her anything. She doesn’t have legal custody and she’s not about to hide out anywhere if she wouldn’t have access to her money. And I’d make sure she ended up in court if she tried it—preferably with extensive

coverage in *The Des Moines Register* that would blow her chances to pick up a rich new husband.”

Erik nodded slowly. “All the same, you might want to warn your babysitter to keep an eye out. She sounds like a pretty sharp woman.”

“She is.” Lars took another breath, trying to calm his racing heart. “I’ll do that.”

He stood, suddenly anxious to get to Pete’s house. It made no sense to be worried, but he wanted to see Daisy anyway. “Thanks, Erik.”

“I haven’t done anything yet.” One corner of Erik’s mouth edged up a little more than the other, giving his smile a slightly off-center look. “I’ll get on it tomorrow, though.”

“Thanks anyway. I’ll talk to you again later.” Lars opened the door, then paused briefly. Erik had returned to his computer keyboard in the empty room.

For an odd moment, Lars wondered if he ever got lonely there by himself. *We should do something about this—all of us*. Lars took a breath and then blew it out. They should, but they probably wouldn’t.

Then he turned and started hiking back up the street toward the rest of his family.

Chapter Seven

On Monday, Jess had the whole morning to work on Web sites while the kids played since the cabin was already clean and the next guests weren’t checking in until early afternoon. She’d had two uneventful weekend days with no sign of Lorne Haggdorn/Barrymore hanging around her front steps.

Still, she kept looking out the front window every now and then, checking to see if anyone was headed her way. Not that they would be, of course. But still.

While there was no sign of Lorne Barrymore, what she saw when she looked out the window at mid-morning was almost as unsettling. A valkyrie was striding across her meadow.

The woman had to be at least six feet tall. Jess considered herself to be a tall woman at five ten, and at one point in her life she’d been in very good shape, at least athletically. The valkyrie, on the other hand, was in the kind of shape that probably stopped all conversation when she entered a room, at least among the men. Her bright red hair was mostly held up on top of her head by a plastic banana clip, although strands had begun to come loose and float around her face. She wore blue jeans and a cambric shirt that looked butter soft. And her expression seemed to indicate she was not a woman to mess with.

Jess opened the door as she reached the front porch, and Daisy rocketed through beneath her arm. “Aunt Docia!” she shrieked. “Come meet Jack. We’re playing blocks. You can help.”

The woman caught Daisy up around her waist, half-tossing her into the air. “Hey, pumpkin! It’s good to see you.”

She turned to Jess, tucking Daisy neatly under one arm and extending her hand. “Hi. You must be Jess. I’m Docia Toleffson, Cal’s wife, Daisy’s aunt.”

Jess took her hand a little warily, wondering why Docia Toleffson had taken it upon herself to visit her niece in the middle of the morning.

Docia didn't seem to notice, maybe because Daisy had squirmed out of her arms and was pulling her across the room as soon as she stepped inside the door. "C'mon, Aunt Docia. Come see Jack."

Jack had crawled halfway off his blanket, trying to catch Daisy when she'd run away. Now he sat back on his haunches and grinned up at Docia Toleffson, hopelessly in love once again.

Lordy, at this rate, the kid was going to have his heart broken multiple times by the time he was ten.

Docia knelt beside him, her lips spreading in a soft grin. "Hi, Jack," she murmured. "Aren't you a sweetie!"

Jack giggled, reaching dimpled fingers toward her face.

"Careful," Jess cautioned. "He loves hair and I don't think he's ever seen anything quite like yours before."

Docia slowly moved her forehead close to Jack's, pulling loose the banana clip to let her scarlet hair hang free. "You like redheads, Jack?"

"Jack likes everybody," Daisy sang.

Jack grabbed handfuls of hair on either side of Docia's face, chortling in delight, then pulled her closer.

Docia leaned forward, pursing her lips. "Boy, you are one strong baby!"

Jess winced. Nobody ever seemed to believe that Jack could pull hair as hard as he did. She knelt beside Docia, loosening Jack's fingers. "C'mon, kid. You've had your fun. Go play blocks with Daisy now."

Reluctantly, Jack let go, then settled back on his rear again, watching as Daisy began to pile wooden blocks in front of him.

Docia grinned at her. "Boy's got quite a grip! Probably a major career in tug of war." She stood, brushing her hands on her knees.

Jess took a deep breath and tried to remember how to be a hostess. She hadn't done it for over a year. "Would you like some coffee? Or did you want to take Daisy somewhere? Mr. Toleffson didn't mention anything about it this morning, but I could call him. I'm sure it would be all right."

Docia shook her head. "I'd love to take Daisy with me, but I can't. I'm due back at the bookstore in ten or fifteen minutes. I just wanted to meet you since I've heard so much about you."

"Oh?" Jess stared at her, trying not to hear alarm bells. What was Lars Toleffson saying? And to whom?

"Daisy talks about you and Jack all the time," Docia explained. "You're her main topic of conversation these days."

Jess wondered if she looked as much like a moron as she felt. "Daisy's terrific. She's great with Jack. I think he's in love."

Docia chuckled. "Those Toleffsons tend to do that. People are always falling in love with them. I should know." Her smile became a little crooked. "We're so glad Lars decided to settle up here, finally. Now Daisy's got a whole pack of uncles and aunts to spoil her."

Jess felt a quick pang. Jack wouldn't ever have that. No uncles to play with him. No grandparents to fuss. Just his mother, who was doing her best to make sure the only family Jack had left never got their claws into him.

"Are you from around here, Jess?" Docia raised a questioning eyebrow.

Jess shook her head. "We're from back east. But we haven't lived there in a while." *Good wishy-washy answer*.

"No family nearby?"

Jess shook her head again. "What about you?"

"My mama and daddy live in San Antonio. Pete's wife Janie is actually from Konigsburg. The guys' parents are in Iowa but they're talking about moving down here since everybody else in the family already has."

"That's nice," Jess murmured absently.

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" Docia's eyes narrowed a little, then she grinned as she turned back to watch Daisy and Jack. "Anyway, we've got lots of relatives all over the place what with Toleffsons and Kents and Duprees."

Jess suddenly made the connection. "Is your husband the veterinarian?"

Docia nodded. "He's a partner in the clinic over on West. If you have any pets, he's your man."

"I don't, but..." Jess watched Jack pick up a block, pushing it toward Daisy. "Well, I was thinking about maybe getting a puppy. I mean, we're sort of isolated out here. But I don't know what kind of dog to look for, what with Jack and Daisy."

"Cal could help you. He's always got puppies and kittens he's trying to place so they won't have to go to the pound in Kerrville."

"Maybe I'll talk to him."

"So if you don't have any family around here, what are you doing for Thanksgiving?" Docia glanced back at her.

"Helping out with the tourists here—I think we've got a full house. Isn't that the busy season in town? I know the cabin's booked all weekend."

Docia nodded. "Right, the beginning of the nightmare that is the Christmas shopping season. But surely they won't need you on Thanksgiving Day. The guests will have their own plans, right?"

Jess's wariness rose again. "Maybe. I guess so. I hadn't really thought about it."

“Good.” Docia nodded decisively. “You can come have Thanksgiving with all of us. Daisy will love having Jack around and you can have some adult time.”

“Oh, but...no. I mean, it’s your family,” Jess stammered.

Docia waved a hand. “There’ll be people who aren’t family, too. A couple of them, anyway. Please. It would really be great if you came. Daisy would be so happy.”

Jess stared at Jack as he played on his blanket, trying to ignore just how much she suddenly wanted a day where she had a family too.

Having a family could be dangerous. The Morelands took advantage of families. And friends. “I don’t know...”

“Come on,” Docia wheedled. “It’ll be fun. We’ll make you an honorary Toleffson.”

Jess felt small fingers close around her hand and looked down to see Daisy’s huge brown eyes staring up at her. “Please, Mrs. Carroll. Jack’ll like it.”

Jess closed her eyes for a moment. Daisy was absolutely right. Jack probably would like it.

“Okay.” She sighed. “We’ll be there.”

Janie Dupree Toleffson glanced up as Docia walked through the front door of Kent’s Hill Country Books. “So? Did you meet her?”

“Yeah. Daisy ran out and dragged me into the house. Ms. Carroll didn’t have much choice about it.” Docia pulled off her jacket and dropped it behind the front counter.

“So?” Janie’s forehead furrowed. “What do you think? What’s she like?”

Docia shrugged. “Quiet. Good with kids. Sort of reserved, but that might have been because this perfect stranger descended on her out of the blue.”

“I should have gone with you.”

“Right.” Docia stepped out from behind the counter and pushed a cardboard paperback display slightly closer to the wall. “That’s all she’d need—the two Toleffson brides showing up on her doorstep trembling with curiosity. That wouldn’t be too disconcerting.”

“Pete’s still worried about Lars.”

“I know. So’s Cal.”

“It just seems like...” Janie waved her hand. “Shouldn’t he be over this by now? I mean Sherice is history, thank god. So shouldn’t he be able to move on to better things? It’s not like we’ve been trying to fix him up with losers or something.”

“I don’t think he wants to be fixed up.” Docia squinted as she studied the display. “Maybe he wants to find somebody on his own. Besides, Cal thinks he’s still shell-shocked. I mean, he made the mother of all bad decisions when he married Sherice. Cal says it was the only impulsive decision Lars has ever made. You know what he’s like.”

Janie nodded. “A really sweet guy, but a little...conventional. Somebody who weighs his options and goes for safe.”

“Right. Cal says he’s always been the one brother everybody counted on to be sane and responsible and sort of predictable.”

“Lord knows Pete isn’t.”

“Neither is Cal—well, not exactly.” Docia’s grin faded slightly. “So here you have this very responsible guy who makes this one really irresponsible choice for a bride and has to live with the consequences for the rest of his life. It’s going to take him a while to start trusting his own judgment again.”

Janie snorted. “It’s not like he’s going to choose another Sherice. He’s smarter than that.”

“You know that and I know that. But I’m not sure Lars knows that. Or anyway that he believes it.”

“So he’s going to become a monk?” Janie shook her head. “That’s not going to help him or Daisy.”

Docia started to move another display, then stopped. She always rearranged things when she was anxious, and she usually ended up having to put everything back later.

“So getting back to Jessamyn Carroll. Is she pretty?” Janie leaned against the counter. “I’ve never seen her close up.”

“She’s nice looking. Not a knock-out, but after Sherice, knock-outs probably don’t do much for him. Blonde, green eyes, good figure.” She paused, chewing her lip as she studied the display again. “How’s the traffic been this morning?”

“Slow. About usual for this early in the week. How are the dog biscuits coming?” Janie widened her eyes, trying to look innocent.

Docia groaned. “Don’t even mention dog biscuits to me. Cal and I have baked up about twenty dozen of the things over the past two nights. If they don’t sell, we’ll be feeding them to Pep and Olive for the next five years.”

“How do you want to wrap them?”

Docia gave her a slow grin. “That’s your department, toots. Cal and I baked, you and Pete can wrap. I’ve got some red and green cellophane and twist ties. And stickers.”

“Stickers?” Janie rolled her eyes. “I haven’t played with stickers since I was ten.”

“Welcome to middle school. We’ve only got a couple of weeks until the festival.”

Janie grimaced, then stood to check out a tourist in a turquoise sweat suit with appliquéd autumn leaves.

Docia watched the tourist's considerable rear end as she exited the store. "Jess Carroll also has the cutest baby in the world. Bar none. Jack. Daisy's absolutely besotted, and she should be."

She looked down at Janie, almost defiantly.

Janie met her gaze. "It'll happen, Docia. It's just biology."

"Yeah." Docia blew out a breath. "Unfortunately, I never was much good at science."

"Honey, don't worry." Janie grinned. "You both have the right equipment."

Docia felt her cheeks heating up. "Janie, for heaven's sake, we've got customers."

"Yep." Janie's grin was unrepentant. "So you think Jess Carroll might be interested in Lars?"

"Who knows?" Docia pushed the display to the left again, only half-thinking about it. "I did ask her to Thanksgiving, though."

"Did you? Cool! Wonder if Lars will be happy about it."

Docia shrugged. "My guess is he won't be *un* happy." She nudged the display again.

Janie stepped around the counter and removed Docia's hands from the cardboard. "You've moved that thing three times now. It looks just fine where it is."

"Does it?" Docia narrowed her eyes. "Maybe. I need to reorganize the storeroom anyway."

She turned toward the back of the shop, hearing Janie's faint sigh as she left.

For the second time in less than a week, Lars managed to have a beer with his brothers at the Dew Drop. Daisy had demanded to be taken to see Docia and Janie, and her aunts had swooped her away to what they called the "children's book nook".

Now Lars sat at the same booth where they always sat, taking an occasional sip of his beer and watching the ebb and flow of Konigsburg males, all still trying to adjust to the presence of Ingstrom's barmaids.

Terrell Biedermeier hunched on his barstool, holding his beer protectively against his chest. Lars had the feeling he was trying very hard not to glance at Ruby's tattooed shoulder immediately to his left. On Ruby's other side, Ken Ferguson had a terrific view of her cleavage reflected in the mirror above the bar. Lars figured it was only a matter of time before Ruby flattened him. He just hoped she did it during one of his own infrequent visits to the bar. The entertainment value alone would be worth the price of a couple of beers.

Wonder dropped onto the booth beside Pete, frowning in Cal's general direction. "So? Any luck with Docia?"

Cal shook his head. "You're on your own with this one, Wonder. The women all think you got yourself into this hole with that lame-brained proposal, and you need to dig yourself out. Docia said she's not going to talk to Allie about it until Allie brings it up herself. And if that happens, I wouldn't count on her being on your side."

Wonder rested his chin on his hands, the corners of his mouth drooping. "Terrific. All I ask is for somebody to run a little interference, and this is the thanks I get."

Pete shrugged. "Tell her you're sorry. Beg her pardon. Give her a ring. Tell her you're nuts about her. How hard can that be?"

Wonder closed his eyes, sighing. "You have no idea."

"Nope, I don't." Cal waved in Dahlia's general direction. "Telling the woman you love that you love her seems like a pretty straight-forward deal."

"Thanks, oh great and powerful wizard," Wonder snapped. "I should have come to you earlier."

"Yep, you should." Cal gestured toward the table as Dahlia approached. "Two Lone Stars, a Spaten, a Dos Equis and a crying towel for the dentist."

Dahlia narrowed her eyes at him, then turned on her heel.

"The ring idea has some merit, though." Wonder looked thoughtful. "Maybe I'll go over to Logsdon's jewelry store and see what he's got. Prove my gravitas, as it were."

Pete blew a raspberry. "Wonder, the ring will only work if it comes accompanied by an apology and a declaration. You cannot buy yourself out of this one."

"Then again, maybe I'll buy her a frying pan," Wonder mused. "Last time we were in Austin, she got all misty-eyed over an All-Clad twelve-inch skillet."

Cal shook his head. "Man, you are on the verge of becoming pathetic."

"On the verge?" Pete scoffed.

"Look, you're going to have to beg her pardon. And I do mean beg." Cal reached out to take the beers as Dahlia returned to the table, then dug into his pocket. "Anybody got a five?"

Lars dropped a five into his outstretched palm, while Pete and Wonder dropped in singles to make nine.

"What about you?" Wonder turned to Lars. "Want to take your turn giving me a kick in the pants?"

Lars picked up his beer. "Are you actually asking me for romantic advice, Wonder? Seriously?"

There was a moment of silence at the table. Lars watched Wonder's usually pasty complexion turn faintly pink. He actually looked better embarrassed.

"Holy crap," Pete muttered.

Lars blinked at him, then realized he was staring at the door. He turned to see a familiar silhouette heading across the Dew Drop in their general direction.

Beside him, Cal tensed, then blew out a slow breath. "Hi, Erik."

Erik stopped next to the table, removing his Stetson. "Evening."

Pete slid over, wordlessly. After a moment's hesitation, Erik sat beside him, then turned toward Lars. "I found your guy. Or I found where he was earlier, anyway."

Cal frowned. "What guy?"

"Later." Lars leaned forward. "So what did he say?"

Erik shook his head. "He wasn't there. He's registered at the Elite Motel out on 16. Lorne Haggdorn, right?"

"That's what he told me. Has he gone?"

"Not that I could tell. The motel clerk said he hadn't checked out, but he didn't know where he'd gone or when." Erik shrugged. "I'll keep an eye out for him now I know where to look."

"Did the clerk know anything about him?"

Erik gave him a dry smile. "The clerk looked to be about fifteen or so. I had to get him to unplug his iPod so he could talk to me. My guess is he wouldn't know Haggdorn if he tripped over him."

"Who's Haggdorn?" Cal asked again. "What have I been missing?"

Lars sighed. "Long boring story. Thanks, Erik."

Erik shrugged. "No problem."

"You want a beer?" Dahlia stood next to the table, a pencil stuck behind one metal-studded ear, her gaze locked on Erik.

Lars glanced at him again. Erik looked like all the rest of them. Tall, broad, dark hair, dark eyes. Only he looked sort of weathered, like he'd been dragged down a long dusty road for a while.

Erik shook his head. "No, thanks. I'm on duty."

Dahlia narrowed her eyes, as if she'd just noticed the Konigsburg Police patch on his shoulder for the first time. "Sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for." Erik pushed himself up from the table, then turned back to his brothers. "Good seeing you."

All three of them nodded back, sort of like a collection of king-size bobble heads.

Erik started back toward the door, but Cal leaned after him. "Hey, Erik."

Erik paused. “Yeah?”

“You doing anything for Thanksgiving? Dinner’s at my house.”

For a moment, Lars thought he saw a smile playing around Erik’s mouth. Then he slid his Stetson back on his head. “I’m on duty, but I’ll see if I can drop by.” He turned again and walked toward the door, nodding at Dahlia as he left.

Dahlia stared after him, her jaw slack.

“Damn,” Wonder murmured, studying her. “Maybe I should take lessons from the four of you.”

Pete tipped his bottle to his lips. “Wonder, just apologize, okay? And tell her how you feel about her. This whole thing is getting way out of hand.”

Wonder sighed. “A ring. Or maybe a skillet.”

Cal closed his eyes, shaking his head. “I wash my hands of you.”

Chapter Eight

The cool air on the back of Jess’s neck woke her. She checked the clock on the computer—nine-thirty. She’d fallen asleep at her desk again, something she’d already done a couple of times over the past week. There were only a few changes left to make on Synchronicity. It would take an hour or so, assuming she could stay conscious that long. She stood, yawning. Must be an open window somewhere.

And suddenly she was wide awake, frozen in place, her heart pounding. There were no open windows in her house in November. She knew that for a fact.

At least none that she’d opened herself.

She reached behind her desk for the baseball bat she’d begun keeping there after Lorne Barrymore’s visit. Was it Barrymore? Why would he come back at night? Jess started inching toward the hall that led to the bedrooms.

Shadows cloaked the dining room and the kitchen—the only light she’d left burning was in the living room, and it reflected dimly over the dining room walls. Jess moved carefully along the side of the room, narrowing her eyes to see into the faint light. Cool air brushed across her face from the open window.

One mystery solved. She knew damn well she hadn’t left the dining room window open when she’d started working on the site. She tightened her grip on the bat, moving closer to the bedrooms.

The bedrooms where Jack was sleeping.

She felt a quick surge of panic, making her throat clench. *Stop it! You don’t have time for this.* Cool air from the window played along the back of her neck. She closed her eyes for a moment, gathering herself together, then moved into the hall as quietly as she could.

Darkness enveloped her again, more total here. None of the light from the living room reached this far. She fumbled her hand along the wall, trying to find the light switch.

The blow to her shoulder sent her stumbling backward. Jess squawked in surprise and pain as the bat slipped from her fingers onto the floor with a thump. A shadowy figure brushed past her, shoving her hard against the wall as it did. Jess clawed at a sleeve, feeling muscle and bone underneath. The intruder jerked away, backhanding her hard across the face.

Sparks danced in front of her eyes, but she lurched to her feet again, turning back toward the dining room. "Son of a bitch," she gasped, stumbling after the dimly moving shadow until she heard a thin wail behind her.

"Jack," she whispered. "Oh, Christ, Jack!" She turned and ran back down the hall toward the bedrooms.

The door to Jack's room was closed. Jess pushed through, muttering, "Please be all right, please, please, please." In his room, Jack clung to the side of his crib, his wails increasing as he saw her. She scooped him into her arms, fighting back the wave of nausea roiling through her stomach.

She sank to the floor, holding him against her chest, feeling his breathing calm to a series of gasping sobs. "It's okay," she murmured, rubbing his back. "It's all okay." She leaned her forehead against the crib rail, trying to catch her breath, knowing she was a fool and a fraud.

Things in Konigsburg, Texas, had never been less okay, at least not for the Carroll family.

Lars knew he should go to bed. It was after ten. He had to get up at six tomorrow, if Daisy didn't get him up sooner than that—as she probably would. Nothing in the report he was writing had to be done tonight.

Still he kept doggedly hitting keys. He was going to finish one thing before he went to bed. Even if it was so boring he was ready to doze on top of his keyboard.

The buzz of his cell phone jolted him back to consciousness. He glanced at the number. Jess Carroll.

Jess Carroll? At this time of night? *Please, please, please don't have a sick kid that will make me send Daisy to Wee Care.* The thought of the logistical nightmare that scenario would involve made his blood run cold. He hit the connect button. "Yeah?"

"Mr. Toleffson? Lars?"

Lars frowned. Her voice sounded muffled, scratchy. Oh lord, maybe she was the one who was sick! That was worse—adults took longer than kids to bounce back. Daisy could be in Wee Care for a couple of weeks. "What's up, Jess?"

"You said..." Lars could hear her breathing. She sounded as if she'd been running. "You said if I was frightened or upset about something, I could call."

Lars felt ice drip down his spine. "What's wrong, Jess? Is someone out there? Did you hear something?"

"Someone...broke in." She took a deep breath. "I fell asleep at my desk. He was in the hall." Another

deep breath. "Look, I'm sorry. I should have called the police. I didn't mean..."

"Are you all right?" Lars gripped the phone so tightly his fingers tingled. "Is Jack okay?"

"We're okay. Just a little...shaken up, I guess. I'll call the police now."

Lars closed his eyes. "Do that. I'll be there in ten or fifteen minutes, as soon as I can get Daisy over to my brother's house."

"No, that's okay, you don't have to..."

"Yes, I do," Lars cut in. "I'll be there in a few minutes."

Fortunately for all concerned, Daisy could sleep through just about anything, including being bundled up in a quilt and dropped into the arms of an astonished Pete.

"I'll be back," Lars promised.

"Right." Pete gave him a dry semi-smile. "Just leave her with us overnight. And tomorrow morning you can tell me what the hell's going on."

Lars pulled into the clearing at the Lone Oak right behind a Konigsburg cop car. He wasn't altogether surprised to see Erik get out. It was that kind of night.

Erik nodded at him, unsmiling. "You know anything about this?"

"Probably less than you do." Lars started walking across the meadow, trying to keep from running. "Jess said somebody broke in."

"You're thinking Lorne Haggdorn?" Erik raised an eyebrow as he paced along at Lars's side.

"I don't know. Maybe. At this point, I don't know what I should be thinking."

Erik raised his fist to knock on the door. "What you should be thinking is, my brother is a cop and I'll let him handle this."

Lars blew out a slightly irritated breath. "Right. Believe me, I've got no intention of getting in your way here."

Or he hadn't until he saw Jess Carroll's face when she opened the door. One cheek was bruised, showing dark red against the dead-white pallor of her face. Her skin looked paper thin, as if it might crack. She held Jack tight against her chest, her arms wrapped around his sleeping body.

She looked at Erik and swallowed hard, blinking. Then she glanced at Lars.

"It's okay," he blurted. "This is my brother Erik. He's a cop."

Erik gave him a look that said volumes about his current assessment of Lars's IQ.

"Come in, please." Jess stepped back. "I'm sorry, I'm just sort of disorganized right now." She walked ahead of them into the living room, sinking onto a rocking chair. Lars didn't think she'd loosened her grip

on Jack since he'd stepped inside.

Erik sat on the couch, pulling a notebook out of his jacket pocket. "Can you tell me what happened, ma'am?"

Jess closed her eyes, as if she were gathering herself together. Then she looked up at Erik. "I fell asleep at my desk after I put Jack to bed. When I woke up, I felt cool air on the back of my neck. I went into the dining room to check and the window was open."

"You didn't leave it that way, I guess." Erik glanced at her as he wrote.

Jess shook her head. "No, I didn't. I started down the hall to Jack's room and somebody...hit me." She swallowed hard again. "He thumped my shoulder so that I fell back against the wall, and then he took off. I tried to catch hold of him, but he got away from me. That's when he did this." She pointed toward the bruise on her cheek.

Lars stared at her, caught between irritation and shock. "You tried to catch hold of him? For god's sake, Jess! He could have had a knife, or a gun."

"I know." She pressed her fingertips to her forehead. "I wasn't thinking, I guess."

"Can you describe him?"

Erik's voice sounded remarkably calm under the circumstances. Lars felt like snarling.

Jess shook her head. "I didn't really see him. It was just a shadow. And after he hit me, I went down. I didn't see him leave."

Lars's shoulder muscles clenched. *After he hit me.*

"Did he go back out the window?"

"No." Jess swallowed again. "He left the front door open."

"Okay." Erik flipped over a new page. "Tell me what you do know. Was it a man?"

Jess started to nod, then stopped. "I thought so," she mused. "But I guess I'm not sure. It could have been a woman as easily as a man. But she had a hell of a punch." Jess ran her fingers over her cheek.

"When you grabbed him, what did you grab?"

"His arm. That's how he could shake me off."

"How was he dressed?"

Jess blinked. "I couldn't see him."

"I know," Erik said patiently, "but what did it feel like to you when you grabbed him? Leather jacket? Denim? Bare skin?"

Jess shuddered. "No. It was a jacket. Some kind of leather. I felt some metal studs on the sleeve."

Erik nodded, writing in his notebook. "Okay, any idea of general size? Tall, short, heavy, skinny, like that?"

"I was on the floor." Jess shook her head. "I can't give you any idea of height, sorry. The arm wasn't fat, but there were muscles."

"Did you see the silhouette when he headed down the hall?"

Jess closed her eyes, thinking. "Yes. But he was all bundled up. I can't tell you much about him."

Erik leaned back against the couch again, his gaze meeting Jess's. "Could it have been Lorne Haggdorn?"

Jess glanced at Lars, her eyes widening.

"I asked Erik to check Haggdorn out," he explained. "I didn't know if he'd done anything illegal."

"He hadn't then." Erik shrugged. "If he did this, he's definitely crossed the line."

Jess sighed, shaking her head. "I can't say one way or the other, to tell you the truth. It could have been him, but I don't know for sure. I just had one glance at him before he was gone."

"Right." Erik pushed himself up from the couch. "Show me where it happened."

Lars extended a hand to Jess as she struggled to her feet. "Let me take Jack, so you can show him."

Jess stared at him, her eyes wide.

"It's okay. I've held a baby before. I won't hurt him."

She stood rooted for a moment longer, her eyes full of panic. Then she nodded, her expression becoming blank. "Sure. Okay, thanks."

Lars gathered the baby into his arms, the warm body sprawling against his chest, then watched as she followed Erik.

Erik paused at the entrance to the hall, reaching for the light switch. "Down here?"

Jess nodded. "It was just around the bend. The light from the living room doesn't reach that far."

Erik switched on the light, illuminating the hallway, then knelt to look at the carpet. "That where it happened?"

Lars squinted and saw a series of slight scuff marks on the carpet surface.

"I guess so. Yeah, it must have been." She pointed to a mark on the baseboard. "I scuffed my shoe there when I went down."

Erik pulled out his cell phone, pointed at the hall, and began clicking. He glanced back at Lars. "Didn't think to bring my camera, but I can download these."

Lars shifted Jack to his other shoulder. "Could you trace the guy this way?"

Erik's look showed he'd just revised his already-modest estimate of Lars's IQ downward by a couple of points. "No, Lars, they're just scuff marks. Not footprints."

Beside him, Lars saw the corners of Jess's mouth edge up slightly. Terrific. Erik was amusing her. On the other hand, a smile was a smile. And it was a hell of a lot better than her expression had been in the living room.

Erik stood again. "Did he take anything out of any of these rooms?"

Jess shook her head. "I don't think so."

"So what's down this hall? What was he after?"

Jess's slight smile disappeared abruptly. "Bedrooms." Her voice was faint. "Nothing special."

Erik glanced back at her. "You keep any money in there? Jewelry?"

Jess shook her head again. "My purse was next to the desk. And I don't have any jewelry to speak of besides my rings."

Lars glanced at her hand. A plain gold wedding band with a small diamond engagement ring.

"When Barrymore was here, did he see this hall?"

"No. He never got inside the house."

"Had the intruder gotten into any of the rooms down here?"

It didn't seem possible for Jess to get any paler, but Lars thought she just had. She reached one hand to the wall beside her, as if she were steadying herself. "No. All the doors were closed."

"Right." Erik nodded slowly as he wrote another note. He turned back toward the living room again, herding Jess and Lars in front of him.

"Okay. I'm going to write this up as breaking and entering. If you find anything missing, let me know. And if anything else happens call me right away." He pulled a card out of his pocket, writing quickly. "That's my cell. And that's the number for the station. If you call there and nobody's around, it'll be forwarded to whoever's on duty."

Jess nodded, licking her lips. "Thank you. I'll put it with my phone."

Erik glanced at Lars, then shrugged. "That's about all I can do tonight. But you keep in touch, Ms. Carroll. And keep your eyes open. Take care now." He settled his Stetson on his head again and left.

Jess turned to Lars, extending her arms, and his heart rate abruptly speeded up. It took him a moment to remember he was still holding Jack splayed against the front of his shirt. He gathered the sleeping baby into his arms and handed him to his mother.

Jack muttered in his sleep, then settled back against Jess's shoulder.

"Was he awake for all of this?"

"Most of it." Jess looked down at her son, chewing on her lower lip. "The noise woke him."

The lamplight caught the gold of her hair, glowing in the dimness of the living room. She glanced up at him again, her eyes a deep green in the shadows, her lips pressed into a thin line.

The wave of arousal caught him off guard. He swallowed hard. At that moment, he wanted nothing more than to pull her into his arms, taste those lips, make her smile again.

Jack whimpered.

Right. The logistics of seducing a woman carrying a baby in her arms hadn't occurred to him. Lars closed his eyes. He was way too old for hormonal attacks, and he was clearly losing his mind.

"Lars?" Jess's voice was soft. "Is everything okay?"

He blew out a breath. "No, it's not. We've got some crazy shit going on." *And some of it's between us.* Lars told his gonads to give it a rest.

"I know. Thank you for coming out here. It helped to have somebody I knew." She glanced around the room again.

He really should be going. Lars knew it, but somehow he couldn't seem to get his feet moving. "Would you like to stay somewhere else tonight? My brother and sister-in-law live in this weird house with eight or nine bedrooms. They could put you and Jack up."

"Is that Docia and her husband?"

Lars blinked at her. "You know Docia?"

"She came by the house." Jess shifted Jack to her other shoulder. "She said her husband could help me find a puppy. Sort of a junior watchdog."

Lars nodded, feeling a little dizzy. His family was already two steps ahead of him, as usual. "Yeah, Cal could probably find you something. He runs this kind of pet adoption service on the side. So Docia came out here?"

"She wanted to see Jack. I guess Daisy's been telling her about him."

Right. Daisy would. Thus providing Docia with the perfect excuse to check Jess out. He was only surprised Janie hadn't come with her. That would probably happen later.

"Docia and Cal live out on the edge of town. Pete and Janie live next door to me. And the offer's still open. I could even bunk with Pete and Janie and you and Jack could take my house."

Jess shook her head. "No, that's okay. We'll stay here. I've made sure all the windows are locked now, and I'll lock the door behind you."

Lars looked up at the dining room window—a square of dark night, showing nothing beyond it. It seemed amazingly fragile. “You’re sure you won’t be nervous?”

“Of course, I’ll be nervous.” Jess rubbed her hand across Jack’s back. “But I won’t let him drive me out of my own house. I’ve got a job to do out here—some guests will be showing up for the cabin tomorrow.”

Her hands tightened on Jack again, her jaw becoming taut. Another quick jolt of desire hit Lars. *Terrific*. Now he was getting turned on by her determination. Way past time to go.

“Okay,” he mumbled. “Call me if you need me. I’ll bring Daisy by later tomorrow so the two of you can sleep.”

Her smile turned dry. “Jack’s sleeping fine. I’m the one who’ll probably sit up all night.”

Lars paused in the doorway. “Offer’s still open. You can have my house.” *And me*. He gave himself a mental headbutt. *Totally inappropriate, Toleffson*.

“Thanks.” She gave him another half smile. “I appreciate it.”

Lars backed out the door, trying for a friendly farewell grin. *Way, way, way past time to go*. The last thing he saw was Jess, framed in the doorway, Jack slack in her arms, as the door closed.

Lars headed slowly back up the drive, his gaze darting over the dark shapes of live oaks and cedar in the mini-forest that surrounded the cabin. Near the entrance to the highway, he saw a dim shape alongside the road. Adrenaline coursed through him before he realized it was a Konigsburg police car. He rolled down his window.

“Everything okay?”

Erik glanced at him. “Yeah. Thought I’d keep watch for a while. Just see if anything develops. I’m off-duty in another hour, and they can always call me if something comes up back at the station.”

Lars stared at him a moment, then shook his head. “So what do you think? Burglary?”

Erik shrugged. “That would be the easiest explanation.”

“But...”

Erik shrugged again. “But she doesn’t strike me as the most likely target. Something feels off here. You have any idea what your lady friend’s hiding?”

Lars thought about telling him Jess wasn’t his lady friend, but decided to skip it. “No. But you’re right. Something’s behind this, and I don’t know what it is.”

“If you think of anything...” Erik leaned back against his seat.

Ice slid down Lars’s spine again. A series of unpleasant possibilities flashed through his brain—robberies gone bad, thieves falling out, even kidnapping. Was Jack really Jess’s son? Was there any way he could find out? He nodded. “Yeah. I’ll let you know.”

Assuming that it wasn't something that would get Jess Carroll thrown in the slammer.

Lydia suspected the call was supposed to wake her up. Other people were asleep at five in the morning. She'd been waking at four since before she'd turned sixty.

She picked up the cell on the second ring. "It took you long enough," she snapped. "I've left four messages."

"I do have things to do, Mrs. Moreland. Things relating to your grandson. Surely you'd rather I concentrate on them than spend my time on the phone with you." The contractor's electronic voice sounded less amused than annoyed this time.

Good. She had no intention of amusing anyone. "I want a report on your progress."

"My progress is my business." The voice was definitely annoyed now. "I'll contact you when I've accomplished my objective."

"Oh please—your progress is very much my business." She took a sip of her coffee. The conversation was becoming amusing from her point of view, at least. "It involves my grandson. I want to ensure his safety."

There was a lengthy pause on the other end of the line. For a moment, she wondered if the contractor had had the temerity to hang up on her. If so, that last expense check would be stopped immediately.

"You want to ensure your grandson's safety," the voice murmured. "Am I to assume you don't feel the same way about his mother?"

Lydia's breath quickened. Her fingers tightened on the handle of her coffee cup. She knew precisely what she was being asked. "His mother's safety is her own affair," she said carefully. "I have no interest in it one way or the other."

"In fact—" the voice had taken on that irritating touch of amusement again, "—if his mother were to meet with an accident of some kind it would simplify things for you greatly, wouldn't it?"

She swallowed hard. She really hated being this explicit, particularly on a cell phone. "I believe his mother has no living relatives. The Moreland family would, of course, assume responsibility for the child should anything happen to his mother."

She heard a brief puff of breath, perhaps a chuckle, perhaps not. "Very well, then. I think we understand each other Mrs. Moreland."

"Perhaps we do." She took a deep breath. "I'll expect another progress report tomorrow."

After a moment, she realized she was speaking to empty air.

Chapter Nine

Jess spent what was left of the night on Jack's floor, pretending she could sleep curled up in a blanket on the rag rug. Sometime in the early morning she slipped into a sort of semi-conscious state that was as much like sleep as she could get under the circumstances.

You could be sleeping in Lars Toleffson's house, with Lars and Daisy right next door.

Her shoulders tightened. She'd come as close to trusting Lars Toleffson as she'd come to trusting anyone over the past two years. But trust wasn't something she gave easily these days. Better to be untrusting if it kept Jack safe.

A combination of sunlight on her face and Jack's excited squeals woke her at seven-thirty. Jack was clearly delighted to find his mother stretched out on the floor beside his crib. Giggling, he stretched his hands between the rails, trying to touch her face.

Jess pushed herself to her feet, straightening out the kinks in her back and legs. "Morning, kid. Nice to see at least one of us has no ill effects from last night."

He pulled himself up on the crib rails and reached for her urgently.

"Okay, okay," she muttered, yawning. "Let's get you some breakfast."

A hour later, she'd managed to wash her face and run a comb through her hair. Jack was in his "greet the day" mode. His face scrunched in concentration as he crawled across the living room floor, reaching for a sunbeam.

Jess checked quickly to make sure she'd removed any low-lying items that had gotten misplaced the night before. The length of his reach seemed to increase daily.

She'd just moved a stack of *Wired* past issues to a slightly higher shelf when she heard a car in the drive. Lars and Daisy.

She took a deep breath. At the moment she wasn't sure she had enough energy to cope with Jack, let alone Jack and Daisy together. But it wasn't like she had a lot of choices.

"Morning," she sighed as she opened the door.

Daisy galloped past her, backpack bumping against her rear. Lars stepped inside. "Slow down, Daisy. Don't run into Jack."

"I won't," Daisy sang, ignoring both of them as she dropped to the floor.

Jack grinned at her and stretched toward her curls. Daisy feinted left, grabbing a handful of Legos.

"So." Lars narrowed his eyes. "You look like you could use a few more hours of sleep."

"And you don't look like you have any you could spare." Jess stifled a yawn. "I'm hoping Daisy and Jack will both take a long nap this afternoon."

Lars nodded absently. "I wouldn't count on it. Daisy's revved up. Are you really interested in a puppy?"

"Yeah. Very interested. Particularly one that could make a lot of noise." From the corner of her eye,

Jess noted that Daisy had dropped the Legos and turned toward her father.

“Okay. Let me take you and the herd to Cal’s place this afternoon. I can tell him we’re coming.”

“A puppy!” Daisy’s voice rang out. “We’re getting a puppy!”

“Settle down,” Lars said automatically. “Ms. Carroll *may* be getting a puppy. And you have to show Jack how to treat it. You know what Uncle Cal says.”

“No pulling ears or tails,” Daisy repeated mechanically. “No screaming. No chasing.”

“No squeezing,” Lars added.

Daisy nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“All right then.” Lars turned back to Jess. “Would that work?”

“Sure, I guess. What time?”

“Around four, if Cal’s free. We’ll probably both be ready for a break by then.”

Jess was ready for a break by one. Daisy was bubbling with excitement both at the possible puppy and the trip to see her uncle. Jack fed off her mood and was burned out and cranky by lunchtime. Neither of them wanted to go down for a nap. Jess read what seemed like the complete works of Dr. Seuss before Jack dropped off and then another round of Winnie the Pooh to anesthetize Daisy.

Then she fell across her own bed and slept until Jack roused her a couple of hours later.

Lars pulled into her driveway at ten after four. “Cal says to come on over. He thinks he’s got just what you need. Of course, with Cal that could mean anything from a Shih Tzu with eczema to a timid Great Dane.”

Jess raised an eyebrow. “You want me to follow you in my car so you won’t have to carry the dog?”

Lars shrugged toward his SUV. “I’ve carried worse, believe me. Let’s all drive together. It’ll be simpler. Trust me—Daisy will want to ride with the dog no matter who’s driving.”

“And Jack will want to ride with Daisy. Okay, let me switch his car seat over to your car.”

Jess wondered if Lars would need to tie Daisy down—she was almost ready to fly when they reached the clinic parking lot. But once they stepped inside the large, open waiting room, she seemed to remember what her father had told her about behaving herself in the clinic.

“Hi, Mrs. Rankin,” she trilled to the woman in purple scrubs behind the front counter.

Mrs. Rankin grinned, pushing a strand of brown hair out of her eyes. “Why Daisy Toleffson, I do declare. You’ve grown two inches since you were in last month.”

“No, I haven’t.” Daisy looked offended. “I’m little. I play on the slipper slide.”

Mrs. Rankin glanced at the plastic play set tucked in a corner of the waiting area. “Of course you do,

sweetheart. You're just the right size."

"Hey, Lars."

Jess blinked. The man who walked through the door to the clinic area looked like a bearded, long-haired version of Lars Toleffson, just as the cop last night had looked like a rugged, several-years-older version of Lars Toleffson. Were they brothers or clones?

Lars turned toward her. "Jess, this is my brother Cal. Cal, Jess Carroll."

"Nice to meet you, Dr. Toleffson." Jess shifted Jack slightly so she could shake his hand. "You have a lovely clinic."

"Thanks." Cal Toleffson reached down to ruffle his niece's hair. "It's not all mine, though. I'm a partner with Horace Rankin, Bethany's husband."

Behind the counter, Bethany Rankin had turned her attention to Jack. "Hi, there, sweetie. What's your name?"

"That's Jack," Daisy announced. "I'm gonna marry him."

"Well, I can see why." Bethany gave him a brilliant smile. "Hello Jack. Aren't you a cutie pie?"

She stretched out her arms just as Jack made a lunge for her hair, grabbing double handfuls of brunette. Bethany leaned forward, laughing.

Jess pulled his fingers away. "Behave yourself, kid. You can't go grabbing hair with everybody you meet."

"May I?"

Jess turned to see Cal Toleffson extending his arms and smiling.

"He may go for your beard," Jess cautioned.

"No problem. So did Daisy." Cal swept Jack up to his shoulders and began walking back toward the animal area again, motioning for them to follow.

Jack grabbed double handfuls of coffee-colored curls, crowing with delight.

Cal seemed not to notice. "I've got a couple of possibilities for you, a puppy and a mature dog. Sometimes mature dogs don't work out with young children, but this one might be okay."

He swung open the door to a room lined with wire pens. Only two of them held dogs. Cal leaned toward first one, trying not to bump Jack's head.

"Here." Lars stepped forward and swept Jack off his brother's shoulders. "You and Jess can look at the dogs. I'll take care of the kids." He put his hand on Daisy's shoulder, pulling her back so that she wouldn't rush the cage.

Jess felt a tightening in her throat. Would Barry have been as gentle with his son, if he'd ever had a

chance to hold him? Probably, but of course he'd never had that chance.

Cal unfastened the cage, swinging open the door. A black mostly-cocker spaniel wandered out, looking up at Cal expectantly. "This is the mature dog. Bon Bon."

Lars shook his head. "Geez, Cal, why do these dogs always have names like that? Don't any of your clients name their dogs Shep or Lassie?"

Cal ignored him. "Bon Bon's owner had to go into a rehab center after she broke her hip. She asked me to find the dog a good home. She's very gentle, not too active, calm. A baby probably wouldn't bother her."

Bon Bon turned her huge chocolate eyes in Jess's direction. She looked ready to cry.

"Can I pet her?" Daisy piped.

Cal nodded. "Gently, Dais. Let's see how she feels about you."

Daisy managed to keep her usual exuberance down to a slight bounce as she approached.

Cal put his hand on her shoulder. "Let her sniff your hand first."

Daisy stretched her hand to the dog. Bon Bon sniffed her fingertips a bit suspiciously, then gave her palm a quick swipe with her tongue.

Daisy giggled.

Bon Bon looked vaguely affronted, but she allowed Daisy to stroke her head, glancing up at Cal with long-suffering eyes.

Cal shrugged. "Like I say. Calm. Sort of placid. Not likely to jump all over anything."

Jess stared down into Bon Bon's melancholy eyes again, wondering if she'd regard a prowler as just one more speed bump in her road of life. Somehow she couldn't imagine the dog protecting Jack from anything more threatening than an éclair. "What's the other dog like?"

Cal shooed Bon Bon back into her pen, then walked a little further down the room. "It's a young dog, just past the puppy stage, so it's a little more, well, energetic." He unfastened the pen door.

The moment the door was open, what looked like a black-and-white spotted ball seemed to roll out. The dog managed to land with its feet on the floor, then promptly flopped over on its side, righted itself again, and started galloping in Daisy's direction, yelping ecstatically.

Cal reached down and grabbed its collar. "Whoa! Pull yourself together, pup."

The dog's feet looked to be about the size of dinner plates, out of all proportion to its relatively short legs. Its ears flopped around its head as it shook itself. Its ultra-long tail thumped against Cal's leg.

Cal scratched its ears and the dog settled, closing its eyes in bliss.

"What kind of dog is it?" Jess ventured.

“Mostly blue tick coonhound. He’s got the snout and the ears and the feet. The body’s a little heavier than most hounds, though. Probably some lab in there somewhere. These days there usually is in any mix.”

The dog turned toward Jess, giving her a doggy grin and yipping.

“Can I pet him?” Daisy cried.

“If I can get him to stand still long enough.” Cal knelt beside the pup, pressing down gently on his rear quarters. “C’mon, pup, sit.”

Lars raised an eyebrow. “Doesn’t this one have a name? Lord Ainsley Pupworth or something?”

“This one’s the last of a litter from Dick Coverdale.” Cal held the dog firmly in place. “His prize blue tick got out of her pen and got busy. Dick wanted them out of his sight.”

Daisy approached carefully, her hand extended. “Nice doggy.”

The puppy sniffed at her fingers and then pulled urgently against Cal’s hand, whimpering.

Daisy leaned closer.

The pup’s head shot up and he began licking her face enthusiastically. Daisy pulled back, lips quivering.

Jess held her breath, waiting to see how Daisy would react. Beside her, Jack squirmed in Lars’s arms reaching eagerly toward the pup.

After a moment, Daisy leaned forward again, earning ecstatic doggy kisses all over her cheeks. She threw her arms around the puppy, burying her face against its neck. “Oh, sweetie,” she cried, “I love you.”

Beside her, Jess heard Lars sigh. If she ended up with Bon Bon, she had a feeling the Toleffsons would soon be adopting a blue tick hound.

She chewed her lip. Bon Bon was probably a very nice dog. She’d make some retiree a great companion. On the other hand, the blue tick was going to be a major pain in the rear until he settled down. But Jess was absolutely certain he’d stick to Jack like glue.

“We’ll take him,” she said.

“Great.” Cal stood, towing the blue tick back to its pen. “He’s had all his shots, and you can bring him back when he’s a little older to get him neutered. That’s all part of the adoption.”

“What’s the fee?” Jess did a quick mental review of her cash on hand.

Cal shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. I just want him to have a good home. Have you had dogs before?”

“When I was growing up. My dad raised Weimaraners.”

Cal grinned. "Okay. So you've got hound experience. That's good."

"Yeah, once upon a time I even knew how to do basic obedience training. I may have to bone up on the essentials, though."

Beside her, Jess was suddenly aware of Lars watching her. Maybe she shouldn't have mentioned her dad. *Don't talk about the past. Keep the personal information to a minimum.* "Any advice about how to get him used to Jack? And vice versa?"

"Get him set up in his own area, with his own bed. He's already house trained, thanks to Armando, our night guy with a lot of time on his hands. Do you have a fenced yard?"

Jess nodded. "Not a big fence, but it's got one."

"Well, if his barking bothers Jack, you can put him outside while Jack's sleeping. But a lot of babies get used to the barking fairly quickly."

"Okay." Jess bit her lip, thinking. "You know, we might not be able to take him until tomorrow. I didn't remember to pick up a pet crate before we got here. Or dog food."

Daisy stared up at her with wide eyes. "We could take him home, couldn't we, Daddy? Uncle Cal could give us a box."

Cal grinned at Lars's stricken expression. "I'll loan Mrs. Carroll a crate, Daisy. Your dad can bring it back sometime. And we've got dog food here."

Jess collected a collar and leash, immunization tags and a sack of dog food, then let Cal and Lars wrestle the pup into the crate. Once inside, he pressed his nose against the door, whining piteously.

Daisy knelt beside the crate. "Oh, sweetie, don't you cry. You won't have to stay in there forever."

"But he does for now," Lars said briskly, picking up the crate in one hand and grabbing Daisy's hand in the other. "Come on, everybody, let's head out."

Jess picked Jack up, reaching for the bag.

"Let me help you with that." Cal swung a giggling Jack back onto his shoulders and headed for the door. "Any idea what you're going to name your pup?"

Jess sighed. "Sweetie. What else?"

Cal laughed, ducking through the door as Jack squealed happily.

Jess gathered up her purchases and hurried after them. She wasn't sure just when she'd become part of the Toleffson parade, but it seemed harmless enough.

Pete was already at the Toleffson booth in the Dew Drop with Wonder when Cal walked in. "So? What

do you think of her?"

Cal slid onto the bench across from him. "Jesus, what kind of jungle tom-tom do you have, anyway? The woman just left the clinic fifteen minutes ago."

Pete waved a dismissive hand. "Lars told me about it at breakfast. You know about the burglar, right?"

Cal nodded. "Lars told me about it after he told you. That blue tick pup may not be able to do much more than bark, but he'll sure do that."

"Here's hoping it doesn't come to that." Pete signaled across the room in Ruby's general direction. She gave him a look that would have frozen a lesser man to stone.

Wonder shook his head. "How long is Ingstrom going to keep trying? Ruby alone should have killed off his business in under a week."

"Consider the entertainment value," Cal muttered as Ruby stomped their way.

"Whaddaya want?" she snarled.

"Dos Equis, Spaten, and Lone Star." Pete gestured around the table. "The same thing we have every night."

Ruby turned her back on them and stalked away in the general direction of the bar.

Wonder grimaced. "Don't bait her, for god's sake. Who knows what she might do to the beer."

"Hard to do anything to sealed bottles." Pete turned back to Cal. "You're evading the question. What did you think of this Jess Carroll?"

Cal shrugged. "Nice. A little reserved. Young mother with a young child. What else can I tell you? Most of my time was spent trying to keep Daisy from bonding with the blue tick."

"Did you find out anything about her? You know Docia and Janie are both going to ask."

"Sure." Cal leaned back in the booth. "Her father raised Weimaraners and she used to do obedience training. Do not ask me where or when, because that's the extent of my knowledge."

Ruby stalked back, unloading the beers onto the table with a sound like a rifle shot. "Six bucks. Plus tip."

Pete narrowed his eyes at her.

Ruby didn't blink.

Pete sighed, tossing an extra fifty cents on top of his two dollars. Wonder and Cal did the same.

"Big spenders," Ruby snarled, stomping back toward the bar.

Pete turned back to Cal. "You think Lars is interested in her?"

For one dizzying moment, Cal thought he was referring to Ruby, then his brain clicked into gear. “If you mean romantically, I don’t know. They seemed...comfortable with each other.”

“‘Comfortable’ doesn’t tell me much, Calthorpe.”

Cal twisted the top off his Dos Equis. “What is this, high school? You sound like a cheerleader trying to find out who the quarterback is boffing.”

“Very funny.” Pete took a swallow of his Lone Star. “I have to face Janie tonight, who heard the whole burglar story when Lars came to pick up Daisy this morning. She’s going to want more than ‘comfortable’, believe me.”

“Yeah, well, I have to face Docia, and I don’t have anything more to tell you, Pete. She seems like a nice woman.”

“Maybe we could embroider it a little bit. What was the thing about obedience training?”

“Is that Erik?” Wonder peered through the gloom of the Dew Drop.

Cal turned, looking over the top of the booth. Erik sat at the far side of the bar, wearing jeans and a flannel shirt. He had a glass of something on the table in front of him.

“Is he drinking?” Pete’s voice sounded heavy.

“Probably not. Looks like soda to me, although I suppose he could have something in it. He’s been pretty straight about the whole twelve-step thing, though.”

Wonder sucked in a breath. “Holy shit.”

Cal turned again. Someone else had sat at Erik’s table, but he couldn’t quite see who it was in the middle of the shifting crowd.

“Geez, look at that!” Pete breathed.

Two bodies moved out of the way so that Cal could get a better view of the table. Dahlia the barmaid sat opposite Erik, sipping from her own glass. In the dim light of the bar it was hard to tell, but Cal could swear she had more studs in her ears than usual.

He fought to keep from grinning. He didn’t want Erik to think he was laughing at him—their relationship was already shaky enough. After a moment, he turned back to Pete.

“Okay, now you’ve got your solution. Tell Janie about this. Trust me, it’ll take her mind straight off Lars and Jess Carroll.”

Chapter Ten

Sweetie was elaborately grateful to be free of his pen. He was elaborately grateful for his cardboard box bed in the utility room near the back door. He was elaborately grateful to be served his dinner of kibble, after which he took up residence beneath Jack’s high chair, busily cleaning off the bits of Jack’s food that reached the floor. Sweetie was elaborate, period.

Jack whooped and chortled, delighted with the dog. When Sweetie barked at a passing grackle, he stared wide-eyed for a moment, and then decided that was delightful too, beating his hands on his high chair in appreciation.

After dinner, Jess took them both outside for Sweetie's evening cavort, holding Jack's hands so that he could stand and watch. Sweetie obediently took care of his business, and she offered up a silent prayer of thanks to Armando, the night man with too much time on his hands and a gift for toilet training. Maybe she'd try to get him to work with Jack when he hit two.

Assuming they were still in Konigsburg when Jack hit two and not running for cover somewhere else.

She settled the dog into his towel-lined box in the utility room, between the dryer and the back door. "You're sleeping here, Sweetie," she explained, hoping he'd buy in. Sweetie thumped his tail on the floor, chewing on a rawhide toy Lars had bought him.

After both Sweetie and Jack seemed to have settled down, Jess dragged her sleeping bag and foam pad into Jack's room, placing herself between the door and the crib. She'd made sure all the windows were latched, with nail stops pounded into the sashes to hold them closed. The doors were bolted and Sweetie was bedded down at the back.

But still. She drifted off to sleep listening to Jack's gentle breathing.

She spent most of the next day keeping Daisy and Jack from overwhelming Sweetie with love, and keeping Sweetie from licking Daisy and Jack over every inch of exposed skin. She left the dog in the back yard when they went to clean the cabin, even though Daisy and Jack both raised beseeching gazes as Sweetie set up a mournful howl.

"He's all right," Jess explained. "We'll only be gone for an hour or so."

When they returned, Sweetie greeted them as if he'd been abandoned for weeks. His tail wagged so hard Jess wondered how he could walk. He whimpered at Jess, snuffled Daisy and licked the remains of Cheerios off Jack.

She herded the three of them inside for lunch. Apparently, she'd just acquired a third child.

When Lars arrived to pick up Daisy that night, she wanted to bring Sweetie home for a sleepover. Lars discouraged her gently but quite firmly.

"Everything okay?" he asked from the doorway.

Jess nodded. "We're doing fine. Sweetie was a great idea."

"All right then. I guess we'll take off." His gaze darted around the room once more, as if he were looking for threats. Then he gathered Daisy into his arms and headed for his SUV.

The evening was a repeat of the night before, except that Sweetie dozed next to the rocking chair while Jess nursed Jack, apparently exhausted from his long day of being a blue tick pup. He seemed perfectly happy to settle into his box in the utility room afterward, leaving Jess to totter off to her own bed an hour later.

Sweetie's barking woke her at three a.m. She knew the time because she looked at the clock in the

dining room as she headed for the back of the house.

“C’mon, dog,” she muttered. “You were okay last night. Don’t start this now.”

Sweetie’s baying and whining sounded like hounds on the scent. Jess wondered if he’d cornered a mouse or if there was a possum in the backyard. If Sweetie got this excited over wildlife, they were in for a long winter.

“Sweetie,” she called softly. “Knock it off. You’ll wake Jack.” She stepped into the utility room, flipping on the light switch.

Sweetie stood with his paws braced on the back door below the knob. His head was thrown back as he bayed a long string of ululations, sounding like he’d treed a family of raccoons.

“Sweetie,” she called again. “Stop it now. Be quiet.” She reached for the dog’s collar to drag him back from the door, then stopped, staring.

In the backdoor’s screened glass window, directly above the deadbolt, was a neat round hole, about four inches across. Just enough room for a hand to slide through soundlessly.

The breath left Jess’s chest as if she’d been punched. She staggered backward, putting out a hand to steady herself.

Sweetie dropped to the floor again and clicked toward her, whimpering.

She tried to pull her breath back into her lungs, her gaze fastened on the black circle of night in the glass. Then she fumbled for the switch beside the door, sending light pouring into the back yard.

The empty back yard.

She stared into the darkness, trying to see if anyone was there beyond the outer edge of the yard light. She closed her eyes for a moment, pressing her lips together tight to stop the trembling. Trying to make herself think.

Call Lars. *No*. It was three a.m. He’d be asleep. Call Erik. He might be asleep, too. Call the police. Call someone. Tell them...what?

Someone wants my baby. Lydia Moreland wants my baby.

No one would believe in a random burglary now. She’d have to tell them the whole story. But they probably wouldn’t believe that one either. She hardly believed it herself. And they’d probably call the Morelands to check her out.

But if she was right, it wouldn’t be a surprise. If she was right, Lydia already knew where she and Jack were living.

For a moment she thought again of throwing her things into the car, grabbing Jack and Sweetie, heading down the road to... Where?

Colorado? New Mexico? Louisiana? Oklahoma? Was there anywhere in the country where Lydia couldn’t find them, now that she’d picked up their scent?

Sweetie whimpered again, pushing his head against Jess's hand.

"It's okay," she mumbled mechanically. "We'll be okay."

She turned and walked back into the dining room, Sweetie at her heels. The baseball bat still rested beside the china cabinet, where she'd put it after the last time the intruder had shown up.

Jess sank into one of the dining room chairs, pulling the bat between her knees. What was she going to do? What should she do? Run away? Stand and fight? How the hell did she stand and fight with a baby and a hound dog pup depending on her?

She closed her eyes for a moment, sucking in a breath. Someone wanted her baby. Lydia Moreland wanted her baby.

Suddenly, she felt a jolt of pure rage in her gut. Damn Lydia and all the Morelands, back to the first shifty-eyed Moreland pilgrim who'd set his greasy foot on American soil. All of them, every one, except for Barry.

"C'mon, Lydia," she whispered. "C'mon, goddamn you. Just you and me. I'm ready for you this time."

Sweetie circled three times, dropped at her feet, and promptly fell asleep.

Lars was running late that morning, but Daisy was raring to go. Apparently, the combination of Sweetie and Jack was well-nigh irresistible.

"C'mon Daddy," she called. "Hurry up."

Lars blew out a breath. They needed to have breakfast, but he had the feeling Daisy would never sit still that long. Sighing, he handed Daisy a granola bar and sent up a silent prayer that Jess would have some extra breakfast food on hand, along with Jack's Cheerios.

At the cabin, Daisy rushed through the door the moment it was opened. "Sweetie," she called, "Sweetie, I'm back."

"Sorry about that," Lars sighed. "You wouldn't happen to have some breakfast..."

He stopped, staring. Jess Carroll looked like she'd gone three rounds with a rabid raccoon and lost. Her face was pale with exhaustion. Her eyes looked like ragged holes torn in paper.

"What happened?" he gasped.

She stared back at him for a moment, her eyes like stormy seas again. Then she motioned for him to follow her. He walked through the kitchen, into what looked like a utility room. Sweetie's bed was pushed against one wall.

Jess pointed at the door. Lars's hands clenched into fists. A perfectly round hole had been cut through

the corner of the backdoor glass, a few inches above the lock.

“Probably a glass cutter.” She sighed. “Sweetie started barking and woke me up. He was gone before I got out here.”

She rubbed a hand across her face, blinking.

Lars swallowed hard. “How long have you been up?”

“It happened at three. So since then, I guess. I couldn’t go back to sleep after that.” Jess stared at the door, her face blank. He wasn’t sure she even saw it. She pressed her hand against her mouth, stifling a yawn.

“Jess,” he said quietly. “You need to tell me what’s going on.”

She shrugged. “Somebody’s trying to get in. I guess they want something from me.”

“Who, Jess?” Lars took hold of her arm, turning her so that she had to look at him. “Who’s after you? What do they want?” He had an overwhelming urge to shake her.

Until he looked at her more closely. Her lips trembled. She pressed her hand to her mouth again, as tears streaked down her cheeks. Her breath caught in a sob.

“Daddy?”

Daisy stood in the kitchen doorway, eyes wide. Lars wasn’t sure she’d ever seen a grown-up cry before.

“It’s okay, sweetheart.” He started back toward the kitchen. “Come on. Let’s make some breakfast for Mrs. Carroll and Jack.”

Jess choked back another sob. “I can make breakfast. You need to go to work.”

Lars shook his head. “Go to bed, Jess. You’re dead on your feet. I’ll watch everything until you wake up.”

“But Jack...”

“Go to bed.” He pushed her gently toward the hall. “It’s okay. I’m here. I won’t let anything happen.”

“Daddy?” Daisy stared up at him. “Are you staying?”

He nodded. “I’m staying. I’ll call Mrs. Suarez and tell her to forward any calls and reschedule my appointments.”

Four hours later, Lars had developed a new appreciation for Jess’s normal routine. He’d underestimated how often babies needed changing and how short a two-year-old’s attention span could be and how much chaos a rambunctious puppy could create in under five minutes.

Mrs. Suarez had agreed to reschedule as many appointments as she could. Fortunately, he hadn’t had any new clients coming in today and the others he could probably fit into the rest of the week.

By noon he was ready to take the whole crew to McDonald's, except he didn't know if Jack could eat anything on their menu. He made soup for Daisy instead and fed Jack some strained turkey that he didn't seem too enthusiastic about. Now all he had to do was get through the rest of the afternoon.

And wait for Jess to wake up.

The questions he needed to ask her prickled at the back of his mind. *Who are you? What are you doing here? What did you do before you came to Konigsburg that's following you and Jack around now?*

Do I need to be afraid for my daughter?

After lunch he bundled Jack and Daisy into Jack's room, lowering the baby into his crib and getting Daisy into a sleeping bag he'd found on the floor of the room.

Had Jess been sleeping there? Why was she sleeping in her baby's room?

He read them a story from a picture book of fairy tales. Jack drifted off, and Daisy's eyes were drooping.

"Where's Sweetie?" she mumbled.

"He'll take his nap while you do," Lars murmured in her ear. "You'll all be fit and ready to go in an hour." He just hoped he was too.

When he stumbled back into the dining room, he found Jess sitting at the table, a pile of papers spread out in front of her.

"Are they asleep?" she asked.

He nodded, dropping into the chair beside her. "We've got an hour or so."

"Okay." She took a deep breath, then let it out in a gusty sigh. "I guess you need my life story. Or part of it, anyway. I'll tell you what I can."

Lars swallowed, ignoring the tightness in his chest. "Go for it."

"My husband's name was Barry. Barrett Moreland. That's our wedding license." She handed him an official-looking sheet of paper with a state seal in one corner. "And that's Jack's birth certificate. I figured by now you might be wondering if I was a kidnapper or worse."

He blinked at her. "I didn't..." But of course he had. At least it had crossed his mind.

Jess shook her head. "It doesn't matter. I can find the card from Barry's funeral too, if you need it. I really am a widow. I didn't want to drag you into this, but it looks like I may have to. At least for some of it." She sighed again, rubbing a hand across her face. "I'm not sure what all to tell you about us."

"Where are you from?"

"Most recently, Belle View, Pennsylvania. Before that Indiana."

“Was your husband from there, too?”

“Yes. His family lives there.” Her expression was guarded suddenly.

“How did you meet him?” Lars settled back in his chair.

“In a bar.” She gave him a rueful grin. “Barry loved to tell people that. He was a recovering alcoholic, so it made an impression. I’m a Web developer, but I had a friend who owned a restaurant. I used to tend bar for him sometimes. Barry came in one night, drinking soda since he wasn’t doing booze anymore.”

Lars tried to remember all the things he was going to ask. Suddenly, his mind was a blank. “Was this in Pennsylvania?”

“Right. Belle View. I worked for an ISP there.”

“ISP?”

“Internet Service Provider. I was one of their techies.” She sorted through the papers on the table in front of her. “That’s Barry.”

Lars stared at the picture of the two of them. Barry looked older by a few years, or maybe just more worn out. But his smile was warm, and the affection in his expression as he looked at his wife seemed genuine. “You made a nice-looking couple.”

“Thanks.” She took the picture back again, staring at it for a moment. “He wasn’t drinking when we met. He’d already quit. But the drinking had hurt him—a lot.” She tucked the picture back in the stack of papers. “He had heart problems. I think he’d always had them, but being an alcoholic didn’t help. He told me when I married him I was getting a wreck, but I didn’t care. He was such a sweet man.”

She raised her gaze to Lars again. “I didn’t know who he was when we first met. The name Moreland didn’t mean much to me. I knew the Moreland family was a big deal in Belle View, but I figured Barry must be some poor relation. He didn’t look like a millionaire.”

Lars raised his eyebrows. “Was he?”

Jess shrugged. “Once upon a time, he may have been, but he’d burned through most of it. The Morelands own a large part of Belle View. Plus they’ve got a company that employs a lot of people in town. They’re a very powerful family, at least in Belle View, Pennsylvania. Of course, it’s a fairly small town.”

“But your husband wasn’t powerful himself?”

Jess shook her head. “The family tied up the rest of his money in trusts when he was drinking to keep him from blowing it all. Barry never bothered trying to get the money back. He said his mother would want him to move in with the family again, and that would have killed him within a year. He got a job as a counselor in a rehab facility, so he had the salary and health benefits there. And I had my salary and benefits at NewTech.”

“Wait.” Lars raised his hand. “You’re telling me that your husband was a wealthy man on paper, but the two of you lived on your combined salaries?”

She nodded. "He'd walked out on his family for good. His mother controlled his trusts, but he wouldn't let her use it to control him. It didn't bother me. Like I said, I thought he was some distant Moreland relation. By the time I found out who he really was, I was already in love with him. I would have married him regardless."

"How long were you married before he died?"

Jess nudged the papers with her index finger. "Two years, more or less. Barry didn't even get to see Jack—I was eight months pregnant when he died. He left what money he had to Jack and me, but all the family money was tied up in those trusts and I couldn't have touched it without going to court, which I couldn't afford. Other than that, he only had a few thousand he'd managed to squirrel away, plus a little insurance. Before he died, he warned me not to get involved with anyone connected to the Moreland family."

He frowned. "Why not? You were a new mother. You needed help."

"Not from them." Her voice was tight. "Barry found a lawyer before he went into the hospital the last time. And he tried to protect me and Jack in his will, but nobody fights off the Morelands for long. At least not in Belle View."

"Did they know about you and Jack? That your husband had a wife and son?"

One corner of Jess's mouth edged up. "They found out. Barry's big brother came to the funeral. When he saw me in my maternity dress, he turned purple. Two days later I had lawyers knocking on my door."

"Offering you what?"

"A deal I wasn't supposed to refuse. I was supposed to move to the Moreland family 'compound'. In return they'd take over the care and feeding of my child-to-be-named-later, assuming, of course, that the child's DNA matched the Moreland bloodline."

"He wanted a paternity test? Even though you'd been married to his brother?" Lars forced his hands to unclench.

"Of course." Jess's voice was dry. "Money was at stake. They couldn't take the chance I'd try to pass off some bastard child as pure Moreland stock. I told them to shove it. A few weeks later I went into labor."

"And I'm guessing they showed up at the hospital."

"Right again. Only this time it wasn't the lawyers. This time it was Lydia Moreland herself. Barry's mother. The Ice Queen."

Jess pinched the bridge of her nose, closing her eyes. "I had Jack in the room with me, sleeping in his crib. She looked at him like he was an alien species. Then she told me that he was a Moreland, even though I clearly wasn't, and Morelands should be raised as they'd always been raised, by Morelands to be Morelands. She told me she'd send a car to collect us when I was released from the hospital, so that we could go straight to the compound. So that we wouldn't set foot in the townhouse where I'd lived with Barry. She didn't even bother asking me what I wanted. That was a given."

“And you told her to shove it, too.” The corners of Lars’s mouth edged up.

“That I did. Maybe I should have been more diplomatic, but I had hormonal issues. Besides, I’d just lost my husband and had a baby. I was entitled.”

Lars took a deep breath. “So what did they do to you? I assume they didn’t just let it go.”

“Allow a non-Moreland to go one-up on the Moreland family?” Jess shook her head. “Not on your life. First they got me fired.”

“How did they do that?”

“Like I said, they’ve got a lot of influence in Belle View. Plus they were major investors in NewTech, the company where I worked. I didn’t know that when I married Barry—chances are he didn’t either. But they didn’t stop there. They also got two of my best friends fired.”

Lars stared at her. “Why? What good would that do them?”

“It showed everybody at NewTech I was poison.” Jess stopped, staring down at her hands. “It showed them that being friends with me was a dangerous choice. I never heard from most of the people I knew there again. I didn’t blame them.”

Lars closed his eyes for a moment. Sherice apparently had nothing on the Moreland family. “Okay. Then what?”

“There was this guy—Lee. I knew him from work. He came over a couple of times with pizza, commiserating with me. He was basically the only person who was still talking to me at that point, and I appreciated it. Then one night he showed up drunk and I wouldn’t let him in. He stood outside yelling until the neighbors called the cops.”

“Was he related to the Morelands?”

“Not exactly. The next day, a woman from Child Welfare showed up at my door. She said they’d had reports that I was endangering my child through my associations. She interviewed me for over an hour and she inspected the house. She even sat and watched me with Jack, just to make sure I wasn’t some kind of abusive parent.” She closed her eyes. “It scared me more than anything else they did—the idea that they could take Jack away from me.”

“So the guy wasn’t a random jerk?”

She shook her head. “He called me a couple of days later and apologized. He said he’d been paid to make trouble, but he was sorry about it. I guess even thugs have their limits. Someone from the Morelands’ security division had hired him. The same guy also called Child Welfare on me.”

Lars massaged the back of his neck, trying to ease the tension in his shoulders. “Was that when you left?”

“No, I still thought I could wait them out, plus I was pissed. But then they got me thrown out of my townhouse.” She sighed. “I should have seen that one coming, but I didn’t. The manager said there was a clause in the lease that gave them the right to terminate if my behavior disturbed other tenants, and Lee banging on the door was enough to justify them. I asked for some time so I could find another place.

They gave me two days to vacate.”

Lars’s shoulder muscles began to cramp. He flexed his hands again, trying to relax them. “So you’re telling me your in-laws deliberately put a mother with a new baby out on the street with no source of income.”

Her lips formed a thin line. “Now you’re getting a sense of the full Moreland treatment. I was supposed to come to them. Chastened. Ready to be a good, dutiful daughter-in-law. Ready to turn Jack over to them.”

“What did you do instead?”

Jess shrugged. “I took off.”

Lars fought down the impulse to grin. Totally inappropriate. “Of course you did. How?”

“I went to the bank and withdrew all the money from my checking account. Also the savings account that had the money Barry had saved. He’d managed to get the account changed to my name before he went into the hospital.”

Lars glanced down at the photograph again, Barry Moreland’s care-worn face. “Sounds like Barry knew what was coming.”

“Barry knew his family. After a few weeks, I did, too.” She squared the papers again, frowning slightly. “I figured they might have somebody watching the house, so I parked the car in the garage the night before my final two days were up and loaded everything I wanted to keep—which wasn’t much, believe me. At two in the morning, I put Jack in his car seat and drove south. Nobody followed us.”

“Did you think they would?”

“Absolutely. I’d already seen what their security guys could do. Plus they’ve got lawyers out the wazoo. Getting somebody to watch the house and me would be no problem at all. They probably caught hell when they found out we were gone.”

“Why did you come down here to Konigsburg?”

She smiled. “My dad was from Marble Falls and he talked about the Hill Country all the time. He liked Konigsburg. I figured it would be a good place to head for. But I didn’t come straight down.”

“Why not?”

“I wanted to make sure anyone who tried to trace me would have a tough time. I traded in my car in Tennessee and got that Accord I’m driving now. I deposited most of the money in Dallas and opened a checking account at the same bank, only I pay for everything with cash that I withdraw on my debit card. I take care of bills online and the address I gave the bank is a P.O. box in San Antonio. A couple of times a month Jack and I take a trip and withdraw some money from an ATM somewhere in Texas. If they try to trace me through the bank account, I figure they’ll have a hard time.”

Lars felt slightly dizzy. It was all making a strange kind of sense. “But now you think they’ve found you?”

Jess’s eyes turned bleak. “Yeah, I’m betting on it. Somehow they managed to trace me here. One

break-in might be random, but nobody else would keep trying to break in repeatedly once they saw how little I have worth stealing. They're after Jack. Nothing else here is worth anything. Barrymore or whatever his name is must be working for Lydia Moreland."

"But she's got no right to Jack. If she kidnapped him, you could go to the police. She wouldn't be able to keep him."

"Don't bank on it." Jess ran her fingers through her hair. Even tousled, it looked like old gold. "I don't know how she'll do it, but I know she'll try. And like I said, lawyers out the wazoo."

He stared at her. The prickle at the back of his neck had become full-blown ice down his spine. "You can't stay out here, then. Neither of you."

She sighed. "Lars, we've been through this before. I have a job here. I can't do it anywhere else. And I can't afford to live anywhere else. I'm rent-free here, and Mrs. Carmody throws in some salary." Her jaw hardened. "And I'll be goddamned if I'll let Lydia Moreland drive me out of another town."

Silence stretched between them for a moment, but he was the one who blinked. "Okay. Let's call Erik, for now. He needs to see the hole in the window before we board it up."

Chapter Eleven

Erik stared at the hole in the glass panel for a good five minutes before he said anything. What he finally said was "Interesting."

"Interesting?" Lars tried not to grind his teeth. He'd been hoping for something more like an offer to call in the Texas Rangers.

Erik nodded. "He took the glass with him—must have used a suction cup to keep it from falling through. Standard burglar stuff. Wonder how he got back here?"

Lars followed him out into the fenced back yard, fending off Sweetie as the dog danced around their feet. "There's a gate."

"Locked with a padlock and chain," Erik pointed out. "Looks like it hasn't been opened in a while."

"So he climbed the fence?"

"Probably. It's not too tall. Looks around six feet." Erik walked along the perimeter of the yard, studying the wire mesh of the cyclone fence. "Looks like he didn't leave anything behind, though."

"You expected him to?"

Erik shrugged. "Not really. Cool customer. Got away clean even with this blue tick baying at him."

Sweetie bounced enthusiastically at Erik's side, then galloped around the fence sniffing at the base.

Lars watched him, hoping against hope he might find something. "They'll be back."

Erik leaned back against the trunk of a backyard pecan. "You know something you're not telling me, Lars?"

Lars nodded. "It's a long story, and Jess is the one who should tell you, but it's nothing illegal. At least not on her part. She's got some shitty people after her, though."

Erik narrowed his eyes. "Why don't you give me the short version and then I'll pick up the details from her when she finishes with the kids."

Jess was inside giving Daisy and Jack their post-nap snacks. She seemed happy not to have to follow Erik's investigation of her yard.

Lars stared down at his feet, then back up again. "She's a widow. Her husband's family is hot stuff in Pennsylvania. They're trying to kidnap her son."

Erik blinked at him. "Well, that was short, all right. But not exactly what I was expecting to hear. Someone's trying to kidnap her baby?"

"That's what Jess thinks, and I'm inclined to agree with her. Not much here worth stealing, and Haggedom kept asking all those questions about children." Lars gazed around the fence one more time, wishing Lorne Haggedom had at least left the seat of his pants on the jagged wire at the top.

"Well, shitfire." Erik sighed. "You just exceeded what little the Konigsburg Police Department can do for you. We can handle burglary. Kidnapping goes to the Rangers. Or the Feds. Thing is, though, you don't have enough to call them in yet."

"I know. All we've got now is suspicion and two attempted break-ins. I guess the Rangers couldn't help us much unless somebody were to actually grab Jack. Which I'm trying to keep from happening."

"You talked to Pete yet?"

Lars shook his head. "I just found out all about it this afternoon."

"Talk to him, then. He may have some ideas about what else you could do. I'll write up another report on this as an attempted burglary and suggest we send patrol cars by here on a regular basis." He shrugged. "Who knows? Olema might listen to me for once."

Claude Olema was the current Konigsburg chief of police. Apparently, Erik didn't think much of his competence. Neither did Lars.

"I want her out of here, Erik, but she won't go. You think she's safe? You think Daisy is?"

Erik stared off at the far side of the yard. "During the daytime she's probably okay. This place isn't all that isolated. There's a lot of traffic on the highway, and guests coming and going. Night's another story. There's a lot of trees and brush around here. Tell her to put the blue tick outside in the back yard at night. At least he might keep anybody from climbing over the fence again."

Lars nodded slowly. "I'll see what I can do."

The back door burst open and Daisy galloped toward them. "Sweetie! Did you miss us?"

Lars sighed. "Looks like discussion time is over."

“Board up her utility room window. Call Pete. And keep your eyes open.” Erik tipped his Stetson.
“Afternoon, Miss Daisy.”

Daisy glanced at him briefly, then continued her gallop.

Lars hated to break it to him, but to Daisy, the blue tick was more interesting than either of them at the moment.

Jess wasn't sure who Lars was calling on his cell while she went searching for something she could use to cover the window in the utility room door. Daisy had promised to stay close to the house with Sweetie, and Jack was bouncing happily in his jumper seat under Lars's semi-watchful eye.

She found a piece of pine plywood in the garage that looked big enough, then picked up a hammer and nails from the workbench. Lars walked in as she started to hammer the first nail into the corner.

“Here,” he said, “let me do that. You can take over kid duty for a while.”

He took the hammer from her hand, positioning a nail in the other corner. “I called my brother Pete,” he explained between hammer blows. “Erik thought we should talk to him, and I think it's a good idea. Pete can at least give us some idea of the legal options. He's an assistant county attorney.”

“What legal options?” She glanced out the open door, watching Daisy and Sweetie chase each other back and forth across the yard. “All I've got are suspicions. Well-founded, maybe, but nothing more than that.”

Lars shrugged. “You've also got what happened to you in Pennsylvania. If nothing else, I'd say you've got a pattern. Anyway, it won't hurt to talk to Pete. The more people who hear your story, the better.”

“You're right, I guess.” She sighed. “I've spent the last few months trying to stay under the radar, but it looks like the Morelands found me anyway.”

He gave the plywood one last tap. “Erik also said you should put Sweetie out in the yard at night. If you really mean to stay out here, that is.”

Jess stared at him. “Well...”

“Well, what? You want to move into town? You can take my house. The offer's still open.”

She shook her head. “No, I don't want to take your house. But I've been thinking about options. Maybe I should reconsider the whole idea of staying in Konigsburg. It might be easier for everybody if Jack and I just went somewhere else. I mean somewhere away from Texas.”

Lars took his hands away from the plywood and stood watching her. She could hear the sound of Daisy's laughter from the yard. It had taken a couple of hours for her rage at Lydia Moreland to wear off. A couple of hours to recognize how few resources she had for fighting back against the Morelands and their hired guns.

“We could head for another state, somewhere with no family connections. I mean, maybe they found me because my father was from around this area.”

“And if that wasn’t it?” His voice sounded tight. “If they actually found you some other way, some way they could use again? You’d be somewhere where nobody could help you. Where nobody knew what was going on. If they grabbed Jack, it might take you days to convince anyone. By then he could be somewhere in Pennsylvania—or maybe even somewhere outside the country.”

Her throat constricted. For a moment, she worked on breathing. “I wouldn’t let them do that. I’d be careful.”

“You mean you weren’t careful this time?” He shook his head. “C’mon, Jess, let us help you. You need people on your side.”

She took another deep breath, fighting back the tears that stung her eyes. “You don’t know the Morelands. You don’t know what they’re capable of.”

He shrugged. “No, I don’t. But I know the Toleffsons pretty well. And, trust me, we’re capable of a lot on our own. Come on—let’s get the kids ready to go to town.”

These days, going anywhere took a lot of organization, not to mention discussion. Jess finally convinced Daisy that Sweetie would be much happier staying in the back yard than riding in the car. Jack wasn’t pleased about cutting short his jumper chair session, but he finally stopped fussing when Jess had him changed and supplied with Cheerios. They piled into Lars’s SUV, Daisy and Jack in their matching car seats in the back, Jess up front with Lars.

“Is there a place for the kids to play while we talk to your brother?”

He gave her a dry grin. “Yeah. The bookstore. Janie can park Daisy in the children’s book section and Docia can look after Jack.”

“Did they agree to that?”

He shrugged. “They will.”

Jess managed not to groan. She had a feeling the other Toleffsons might not be as eager as Lars to sign on to all of this.

Janie Toleffson turned out to be a petite brunette with a wicked grin. She smiled at Jess, tickled Daisy and let Jack grab a lock of her hair.

“I’ve heard about you, kiddo,” she cooed. “You’ve got a thing for hair, right?”

Jack giggled, kicking his feet in his baby seat.

“We need to talk to Pete. Can we leave them here for a little while?” Lars asked.

Janie frowned slightly. “To Pete?”

“It’s okay, Janie. Nothing serious.”

Jess hoped Janie didn't recognize the tightness in his voice.

"We can take care of them." Docia leaned forward, lifting Jack from his seat. "Take as long as you need. We can get acquainted."

Jack reached for Docia's bright red curls, his eyes wide with wonder. For the moment, he seemed to have forgotten Jess altogether. Jess told herself she didn't really feel jealous, just a little left out.

Pete Toleffson's office was in the county courthouse two streets over. The wide reception area was empty except for a single secretary laboring through what looked like an insanely complicated spreadsheet on her computer.

She waved at Lars, said, "Go on in, he's waiting for you," then returned to her keyboard.

The man at the desk in the inner office was another Toleffson clone. This one had shorter hair than Cal Toleffson and fewer frown lines than Erik Toleffson, and he was slightly shorter than Lars when he stood. Otherwise the four of them could have made a nice matched set for some lucky girl.

Jess bit her lip. Where the hell had that thought come from?

"Sit down, please." Pete Toleffson gestured to the couch at the side of the room. "Tell me this story from the beginning so I can try to sort it out. Lars told me some of it over the phone, but there's a lot I'm not clear on."

Lars shrugged. "There's a lot *we're* not clear on, but we can try."

"Shut up, Lars," Pete Toleffson said gently. "It's Ms. Carroll I want to hear from."

Telling her story once to Lars had made it easier for Jess the second time. But the story still seemed to wind around precariously. Pete Toleffson said nothing as she spoke, jotting notes on a legal pad, his expression impassive. By the time she'd finished, Jess was fairly sure he didn't believe a word she'd said. Not surprising, of course. In his place, neither would she.

"So," he intoned, tapping his pencil on the pad, "the family name is Moreland. The place is Belle View, Pennsylvania. And your husband's name was Barrett."

She nodded. "I have my marriage license and Jack's birth certificate. I'm sorry—I didn't think to bring them along."

Pete shrugged. "I don't need them. Yet. The question is, what do you want me to do about this? What do you think I can do?"

Jess pressed her lips together. It was nothing she hadn't expected. In fact, she'd been surprised Lars thought they had any chance of getting the law to pay attention.

"They're trying to kidnap her baby, Pete." Lars's voice sounded loud in the empty room. "We need some help here."

"Somebody may be trying to get to Ms. Carroll's son, Lars," Pete said patiently, "but you've got no proof of that. All you've got at the moment are two failed B and Es. You can't really take it to the Rangers yet, let alone the Feds."

“So I have to wait until they take Jack before anyone can do anything about it?” Her throat felt tight. “I’d rather leave Konigsburg.”

Pete raised his hands, palms out. “Whoa. Both of you slow down. I’m not saying you’re helpless, just that we can’t treat this as an attempted kidnapping, even though that’s what it may turn out to be. You need to think about other ways of fighting this.”

Lars leaned back marginally. “Such as?”

Pete turned to Jess. “Such as a protective order against your former mother-in-law.”

Jess frowned. “You mean a restraining order? I thought restraining orders were against stalkers or abusive husbands.”

“Usually they are. But here you could say your in-laws are jeopardizing you and your child. It’s supposed to be for physical violence rather than psychological abuse, but you could argue that your mother-in-law’s actions led you to fear for your safety.”

“Do you think the judge would buy that?” Lars sounded dubious. “Besides, I thought restraining orders didn’t work all that well.”

“They don’t do a great job of keeping psychos at bay. But the thing is, your mother-in-law and her family would be served with a notice of your filing. So she’d know you were onto her. That might be enough to make her pull back. Assuming she and her family are the ones behind all of this.”

The corners of Lars’s mouth turned up in a slow grin. “Sneaky. I like it.”

Jess tried to smile, too. *Assuming she and her family are the ones behind all of this.* She’d already figured out that Pete Toleffson didn’t entirely believe her. She hardly believed it herself. Life would be so much easier if it weren’t true.

But it was. Jess remembered Lydia Moreland’s cold blue eyes. Somehow, she didn’t think she’d regard a protective order as a warning. She’d probably see it as a call to arms.

And, according to Barry, Lydia had a tendency to smash presumptuous people flat.

The sky had darkened by the time Lars brought Jess back to the Lone Oak. Driving down the dirt road to the cabin, he understood exactly what Erik had been talking about. Too many trees. Too much brush.

Too dark. Way too dark.

Jess opened the door in back to pick up Jack’s car seat. Lars had a feeling she was deliberately avoiding his gaze. “Thanks so much, Lars. This really meant a lot to me. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She hoisted Jack’s seat into her arms and started for the front door.

"Hold it." Lars stepped out of the SUV, pausing long enough to unhook Daisy and grab her hand. "We'll go in with you."

Jess shook her head. "That's okay. We can handle it."

"We're going in." Lars gave her a level look. "You're not walking into that cabin alone."

For a moment, she looked uncertain, licking her lips nervously. Then she shrugged. "Okay. It shouldn't take long."

It didn't. The cabin seemed empty, but he checked the closets and the garage just to be sure. In the backyard, Sweetie whined piteously, scratching his paws against the back door to be let in.

Daisy gave him her best Hallmark Child imitation. "Can I stay with Sweetie? He's lonesome."

"He's hungry," Lars corrected. "And he has Jack and Mrs. Carroll to keep him company."

"But Mrs. Carroll can't stay with him." Daisy stuck out her lower lip.

He stopped for a moment, glancing back at Jess. "I hadn't thought of that before. 'Mrs. Carroll'? You weren't Mrs. Moreland?"

She shrugged. "It's my maiden name. I didn't feel like using Moreland after Barry died."

Daisy was clearly uninterested in the details of Jess Carroll's life. "But Daddy..."

"No, Daisy, we're going home."

Lars recognized the signs. Daisy's lower lip was thrust forward, her hands resting on her hips, a dangerous glint in her eyes. Hurricane Daisy was picking up steam.

"Hey, sweetheart." He reached for her hand. "We need to get out from under Mrs. Carroll's...ah...feet." His ever-active subconscious had obligingly provided him with a quick picture of what it might be like to be under Jess Carroll in the right circumstances. Lars swallowed hard. *Not appropriate, Toleffson.*

He glanced back as they reached the doorway. "Look, Jess. Pete actually told me you and Jack should stay with him and Janie. I said I'd ask you. Any chance?"

Jess shook her head. "The guest cabin's rented tonight with another couple coming in for the weekend. I need to be here. We'll be fine. Honest. People will be around. And I'll keep Sweetie in the back yard tonight."

"Sweetie?" Daisy's voice rose as she remembered her primary complaint.

Lars lifted her quickly for a hug. "C'mon, Dais, you can have a hamburger for supper. We'll go out."

Daisy's lip trembled as she considered the offer. Then she sniffed. "Can we bring some to Sweetie?"

"Maybe." Lars started moving for the door. "We'll see."

The last thing he glimpsed was Jess Carroll's grin as she closed the door behind them.

Daisy wasn't too happy with him when he took her to the Coffee Corral instead of McDonald's, but the owner's wife fussed over her enough to make up for it. Lars wasn't even surprised when Cal and Docia came in a few minutes later and joined them at their table.

"Okay." Docia leaned forward, elbows on the table. "Janie's wheedling the whole story out of Pete even as we speak. Cal doesn't know the whole story, so I can't wheedle. I'm at a disadvantage here. Your turn."

Lars thought about saying it wasn't his story to tell, but he didn't think that would stop Docia. And the more he thought about it, the more convinced he was that a lot of people needed to be aware of what was going on at the Lone Oak B and B. Maybe it would help them head off the Moreland family.

He put Daisy at the next table with a placemat to color, and gave them the best summary he could of the story he'd now heard twice.

Docia wasn't nearly as objective as Pete. "They got her tossed out of her house?" Her voice began to rise dangerously. "They tried to take her baby?"

People at the next table turned to look. Cal put his hand on her arm. "Keep it down, Red, I doubt Jess wants this all over town just yet."

Docia lowered her voice, but her eyes flashed dangerously. "What the hell kind of people are these Morelands, anyway?"

Lars rubbed the back of his neck. "I haven't even gotten to the really troubling part yet. The Konigsburg part."

"Oh god," Docia groaned. "Of course, there's more."

She stayed quiet while he ran through the rest of it, her brows drawing together into a ferocious scowl. When he'd finished, she spread her fingers on the table in front of her. "Goddamn. Goddamn it all to hell!"

Daisy looked up at her, blinking.

"Go on coloring, sweetheart," Docia muttered. "Your Aunt Docia's just a little bummed."

Cal shook his head. "She shouldn't be out there by herself. That blue tick's a game little pup, but he's not enough to keep out someone who's determined to break in."

"Jess says she needs to stay so she can manage the B and B. Pete and I both tried to get her to move to town, but she wouldn't budge."

"We've got to do something." Docia's voice shook. "We can't let this... *thing* happen." She glanced at Daisy, who was coloring something with a lot of bright green.

"We're working on it." Lars sighed. "For now, I think the best we can do is just keep an eye on things. Look out for suspicious characters. Particularly Lorne Haggedom."

"Lars, honey, it's the Christmas shopping season," Docia cracked. "The whole freakin' town is full of suspicious characters."

"Yeah, well, until Jess changes her mind, that's the best we can do. At least Erik said he'd try to make sure the patrol cars swing by more often to keep track of things."

Cal shook his head. "There are times when I still can't feature Erik as a cop. Did you know he's dating Dahlia?"

"Dahlia? The barmaid?" Lars blew out a breath. "Okay, that's it. One too many news flashes for the day. Daisy, have you finished your hamburger?"

"Yes, sir." Daisy added one more scrape of green to the upper right corner of her placemat so that the entire surface looked like bad lime sherbet.

"Let's go home." Lars stood. "Daddy's got a lot of work to catch up on, not to mention sleep."

Chapter Twelve

Jess was dragging by nine o'clock, struggling to keep her eyes open. She did manage to check all the windows and the front and back doors before she staggered off to bed. She also made sure Sweetie had food and water in the backyard. The dog gave her a mournful look and even managed a tiny shiver, but the temperature hovered in the fifties and Jess wasn't impressed.

She considered sleeping in her own room, but in the end she couldn't do it. She needed to be close to Jack. Besides, she was so tired she knew she'd fall asleep no matter where she was, even if it was a foam rubber pad that managed to squash down to nothing on the nursery floor.

The next morning a cardinal's chirp woke her, and she checked her watch. Seven. At least she'd managed to get a full nine hours of sleep.

Miraculously, Jack was still sleeping himself. Jess rolled up the sleeping bag as quietly as she could and slipped out the door to the hall.

Sunlight poured through the dining room window. The cardinal still cheeped in one of the backyard trees.

Jess leaned a little further out, checking the backyard. Sweetie lay fast asleep next to his food and water. Otherwise, the yard seemed empty and quiet.

Behind her, she heard Jack mutter some morning sounds. "Okay, kid," she called, "I'm on my way."

Fifteen minutes later, Jack was in his high chair, daintily picking up individual Cheerios. Jess filled his sippy cup with apple juice and glanced out the window again.

Sweetie hadn't moved.

Jess stood very still for a moment, then placed the sippy cup on Jack's tray. "Here, lovie, drink up and try not to toss it too far. Mama's got to check on something."

She slipped through the kitchen to the utility room with its blocked backdoor window, telling herself

there was no problem. The door banged behind her as she threw it open.

Sweetie raised his head slowly, squinting in Jess's direction, then dropped back again.

Jess knelt beside him. She could see vomit in the grass near the dog's feet, and flecks of it still dotted his mouth. "Damn," she whispered. "Damn, damn, damn. Sorry, Sweetie, I should have seen this coming."

Back in the house she pulled her cell phone out of her purse. She had no idea what time the clinic opened, but surely they had an emergency number. She grabbed the card Cal Toleffson had given her and dialed.

A man's voice answered. "Rankin Animal Hospital." He sounded slightly sleepy.

"My name is Jess Carroll," she blurted. "I adopted a dog a couple of days ago, and I think he ate something bad during the night. He's been vomiting and he's lying down."

Immediately, the voice wasn't sleepy anymore. "Can you bring him in, ma'am? The sooner the better."

"Right." Jess looked around for the crate they'd borrowed from Cal. "I'll be there as soon as I can get him in the car."

She grabbed the crate and headed to the back yard. Behind her, she heard Jack begin to fuss. She knew he was picking up on her own anxiety, but she couldn't do anything about that right now.

Sweetie raised his head again as Jess hurried toward him. "C'mon Sweetie," she murmured. "Let's get you some help." She gathered the largely limp puppy into her arms and placed him in the crate, then closed the lid.

Back in the kitchen, Jack had moved from fussing to full-blown distress. Jess set the crate next to the door, and pulled Jack from his high chair. She wrapped him in a blanket and carried him outside to the car, rubbing his back.

"Please, Jack, don't make more trouble for Mama," she begged. "Things are tough enough already."

Jack stared at her curiously, then smiled as she put him into his car seat. *Oh good*, he seemed to say, *we're going for a ride!* At least he was easily amused.

Jess ran back to the house and swung the crate into her arms, locking the door behind her. As she placed it on the back seat, she heard a car turn down the drive.

Lars's SUV pulled into view as Jess hurried around to the driver's side. She heard his car door slam. "Jess?" he called. "Trouble?"

She paused, turning. "Sweetie's...sick. I'm taking him to the clinic."

She heard Daisy's wail of distress from Lars's car, followed by Jack's wail from her own. *Terrific. Dueling babies.*

"We'll follow you," Lars called, as she closed her door.

The parking lot at the clinic was almost empty, so Jess could park at the front. She started unbuckling

Jack as Lars pulled in beside her. "I'll take the kids," he called. "You get Sweetie inside. I called Cal on the way here."

Jess grabbed the crate handles and ran toward the entrance. A dark-haired man in scrubs held the door open for her. "You're the one who called, right? Come on—let's get him set up. Dr. T's on his way."

Cal walked in five minutes later, after the aide, Armando, had already lifted Sweetie out of his crate and onto the examination table.

Cal ran his hands over the dog's body, watching Sweetie wince. "Oh man, pup, you definitely ate something." He turned to Jess. "Any idea what?"

Jess shook her head. "I found him when I got up, lying out in the backyard. He'd been vomiting. The only food I gave him was a bowl of the kibble I bought here."

Cal nodded absently, checking Sweetie's mouth then the rest of his body. "If I had to guess, I'd say something like acetaminophen. It can be toxic to dogs. I don't suppose you gave him any?"

Jess shook her head again, more vehemently this time. "No, absolutely not. He was healthy when I went to bed last night."

"Okay. I'll send a blood sample to be tested, but I'm going to go with acetaminophen. We'll need to give him some medications and rehydrate him with intravenous fluid. And he'll need to stay here, probably for a few days."

"Will he be all right?" Jess thought of Daisy's anguished face.

Cal nodded. "Probably. Looks like you got him here fast, and that's the most important thing."

He turned back to Armando, giving him a series of instructions that might as well have been in Urdu as far as Jess was concerned. Armando gathered Sweetie up gently, carrying him through a door in the back of the examination room.

All of a sudden, Jess found herself collapsing into a chair behind her, as if her legs could no longer bear her weight. She pressed a hand to her mouth, fighting back sobs that made her throat ache.

Cal knelt in front of her, handing her a paper cup of water as he patted her shoulder. "Drink this. Take it easy. It's going to be okay now."

No it isn't. Jess swallowed a gulp of water. "He was supposed to protect us, but I didn't protect him. He was poisoned, wasn't he?"

Cal nodded. "I'd guess so. When he recovers you can train him not to take food from strangers. Think of this experience as sort of like aversion therapy."

"I shouldn't have put him outside." Jess stared at the paper cup in her hand. "I should have left him in the house. It was just...we thought it would keep people out of the backyard."

"Obviously, somebody else thought so too." Cal watched her for a moment, then took the cup out of her limp fingers. "Jess, you should think about staying in town with one of us. It's not safe out there. And you've got Jack to think about too. Docia and I have a spare bedroom you'd be welcome to."

Jess took another in a series of deep breaths. "Thank you. I know it's getting dangerous. I'll try to figure something out."

"If you change your mind, call me. Or Docia. Hell, now that I think of it, you could even stay at Docia's father's place back in the hills. He's got enough security to throw James Bond for a loop."

Jess stood, trying hard to smile. "Do you have a tissue? I think I need to wipe my face before I see Daisy."

"Right. She's liable to assume the worst, infant drama queen that she is." Cal handed her a box of tissues, then opened the door to the waiting room after she'd given her face a quick scrub.

Daisy stood beside her father's chair, her eyes the size of quarters. The moment she saw Jess, her lower lip began to tremble. "Where's Sweetie?" she whimpered.

"Sweetie's getting some medicine," Jess said briskly. "Your Uncle Cal helped him, but he needs to stay here in the hospital until he feels okay again."

Tears began to slide down Daisy's cheeks. "Is he gonna die?"

"Nope." Cal picked her up and kissed her on the forehead. "He's sick right now, but we'll fix him up, Dais. Have you had any breakfast?"

Daisy nodded, sticking out her lower lip.

Lars turned toward Jess. "Have you?"

Had she? Jess tried to remember. "Maybe not. Too many things happened at once. I'll fix myself something when I get back home."

There was a moment of silence as Cal and Lars both stared at her.

"We'll be all right." Jess swallowed. "Although I'll understand if you don't want Daisy to be out there."

"Goddamn it, Jess!" Lars snapped. "It isn't safe for you or Jack either."

Daisy stared up at her father, eyes back to quarter size again. Jess wondered if she'd ever heard Lars swear before. She'd be willing to bet not, or at least not since the divorce. "I'll think of something, Lars."

He rubbed a hand across his jaw, then sighed. "Okay. You take Daisy back with you. See if you can find whatever it was Sweetie ate. And by the way, you're having guests for dinner, which I'll supply."

Jess frowned. "The guests or the dinner?"

"Both." Lars headed for the parking lot, shaking his head.

Lars spent the morning clearing work off his desk and trying not to think about Jessamyn Carroll Moreland. She was either the bravest woman he'd ever met or the dumbest. The jury was still out on which.

He also called his brothers and his sisters-in-law to let them know what had happened. All his brothers, including Erik.

The news about Sweetie had already traveled. Even Erik knew, although Lars wasn't sure exactly how he'd found out.

"I'm on night duty tonight," he explained. "I'll drop by after I get on, say around seven or so. You think you'll still be there?"

"I can almost guarantee it," Lars muttered through clenched teeth.

Erik chuckled. "Okay, then. Any chance you can talk Ms. Carroll into moving back into town?"

Lars's shoulders tightened. "That I can't guarantee, but I'm working on it."

He called the Coffee Corral late in the afternoon and ordered a box of fried chicken with all the fixings. Al Brosius, the cook, promised him French fries, green beans and some passable apple pie. Lars wondered if he'd have to force-feed Jess.

She was looking a little thin. Hell, she was beginning to look almost transparent. Probably because she didn't sleep more than a couple of hours a night and kept forgetting to eat when she was awake. He needed to do something about that.

At five he closed down his computer and said goodnight to Mrs. Suarez, then swung by the Corral and picked up the box of food. He was tempted to grab a six-pack at the Stop and Go, but he wasn't sure Jess drank.

He wasn't sure of much about her, he realized. At the moment, he also wasn't sure what he was going to say. Maybe a calm, reasoned discussion of all the reasons she needed to get the hell out of that house as soon as possible.

And if she didn't buy it, maybe he'd just throw her over his shoulder and toss her in the SUV. A move that would be complicated by the fact he'd have to also put Daisy and Jack into their car seats.

Kids were hell on romance.

Romance? He only half-raised an eyebrow this time. *Yeah. Romance. Deal with it.* His interest in Jess Carroll had stopped being platonic a long time ago.

Lars pulled down the drive to the cabin and stopped. A row of cars was parked in front. Cal's SUV sat next to Pete's Acura near Jess's Accord. Rounding out the line-up was a Konigsburg patrol car.

Well, crap. Kids weren't the only thing that was hell on romance. Lars pulled in beside Cal's car, grabbed his box of food, and walked into the cabin.

He shouldn't have bothered with the fried chicken, that much was obvious. Jess was putting a large bowl of soup on the table, while Docia and Janie finished setting up a tray of cold cuts and Kaiser rolls. He

could smell something delectable from the kitchen, which probably meant somebody had taken the time to swing by Allie Maldonado's bakery, praise the lord.

"Oh good, you're here." Docia gestured toward the box of chicken. "Give me that and I'll get a plate for it."

"Where's Daisy?"

"She and Jack are out back with your brothers. I'm not sure what they're doing, but I haven't heard any squeals, so I assume they're okay."

Jess gave him a somewhat tight-lipped smile.

Not my fault, ma'am. I didn't invite them—I swear.

In the backyard, three Toleffson males prowled around the edge of the fence, two of them—Cal and Pete—with children propped on their shoulders.

Daisy squealed a hello and then went back to pounding on Cal's head. Lars figured it served him right. "What exactly is everybody doing here?"

Cal shrugged as much as he could with Daisy sitting on his shoulders. "Showing our interest and support?" He wagged his eyebrows beneath Daisy's assault.

"Butting in," Lars muttered between his teeth. "Meddling."

"That too. Docia and Janie decided on a pre-emptive strike. Also dinner. They think Jess needs a break."

"She does." Lars sighed. "This isn't it."

He wandered across the yard toward Erik. "So what are *you* doing?"

Erik glanced up. "Looking for whatever poisoned the dog."

Lars checked Daisy. He didn't think she'd heard.

"Guys?" Pete called.

Erik ambled in his direction, with Lars right behind him. Pete nodded toward something in the grass beside his foot, and Erik leaned down.

A dried-out hamburger patty. With a couple of bites out of one side.

"Smart dog," Erik rumbled. "He didn't eat much."

"Lucky dog." Cal walked up behind them. "You can still see the Tylenol tablets."

Erik and Lars knelt on either side. Sure enough, he could see white flecks throughout the reddish-brown meat.

“Probably tasted like crap.” Cal shrugged Daisy to his other shoulder. “But he only had to eat a little to get sick.”

Lars glanced at Erik. “Any point in saving this?”

“There’s always a point.” Erik’s mouth was a grim line. He pulled out his cell phone again and snapped a couple of pictures of the patty. “Let me see if Ms. Carroll has some sandwich bags.”

Pete sighed, swinging Jack up onto his shoulders again. “I have to say, this changes things. At least for me.”

Lars watched Cal gallop Daisy to the other end of the yard, then turned back to Pete. “How does it change anything?”

“Up until now, I figured you might have just a garden-variety burglar. Not too bright, if he thought your lady friend had anything worth stealing, but nothing special. I thought maybe the two of you were overreacting. But no burglar would go to this much trouble unless she’s hiding a cache of diamonds.”

Lars managed not to snarl. “She’s hiding her son.”

Pete nodded. “Right. I admit—I wasn’t entirely sold on her story at first. Whole thing sounded a little too dramatic. And after a while, you learn domestic problems usually have a lot of angles. But now I’m buying in. We still don’t have any way to stop these people, though, unless they actually make a grab for the baby. Which nobody wants them to do.”

“There’s a comfort,” Lars snapped. “At least you don’t want them to go through with the kidnapping.”

Pete grimaced at him, then began strolling back toward the house. “Give me a break. I told you—I’m buying in. I’m just trying to figure out what the hell we can do now.”

Jack giggled as Pete picked up his pace a little. Lars tried not to be pleased at the drool running down the baby’s chin and pooling in his brother’s hair.

“We need to get her out of here and into town.” Lars rubbed the back of his neck. “That has to happen before anything else.”

“All that does is make them safe for now.” Pete lifted Jack down from his shoulders as he reached the back door, grimacing at his damp palm. “It doesn’t take care of the long-term problem.”

“I’ll settle for now, believe me.”

The door opened and Jess leaned out. “Dinner’s on the table.”

Jack cooed delightedly, reaching for her, and she gathered him into her arms. For a moment she stood in the doorway, rubbing her nose against the baby’s cheek. A willowy Madonna with eyes like jade. Then she looked up again, tucking Jack against her shoulder. Her gaze met Lars’s before she glanced away.

“C’m on, kid,” she murmured. “Let’s go eat.”

Pete stood beside Lars watching them go. After a moment, he sighed. “Okay, let’s settle for now.”

Lydia Moreland didn't entirely hate the contractor. Not yet, anyway. But she did find his attitude more than a little annoying. She expected daily reports, but no matter how many messages she left on the voice mail number he'd given her, he never contacted her immediately.

That meant she had to bring her special cell phone with her to the office, which not only wasn't convenient, it wasn't safe. Preston had been known to walk into her office unannounced, no matter how many times she'd warned him not to.

Sometimes she didn't know quite what to make of Preston. He was certainly a more satisfactory son than Barrett had been, but sometimes he seemed entirely too...self-contained. Particularly lately.

She didn't think he'd really disapprove of her efforts to find Barrett's slut of a wife and retrieve her grandson. After all, he'd been at the funeral. He knew what she was. But sometimes Preston seemed less interested in Moreland affairs than he should be. In spite of all Lydia's efforts, he didn't entirely understand the ramifications of letting outsiders into the family.

For that reason alone, Lydia preferred to keep her interactions with the contractor private. Having to explain oneself, even to one's son, could be quite annoying.

As it happened, the contractor's call finally came through when she was getting ready for bed. She'd just pulled on the new silk La Perla nightgown she'd bought in Philadelphia when she heard the cell phone.

By now she was beyond waiting out more than two rings. Besides, there was always the chance the contractor would hang up. She clicked the connect button. "What's happened?"

"What makes you think anything has?"

She pressed her lips together, fighting back her immediate response. If they got into another of these silly games, she'd never find out what she wanted to know.

"I hoped something had," she snapped. "Perhaps I should have asked what you had to tell me."

"Yes," the contractor drawled, "that would have been better."

Lydia closed her eyes, drumming her fingers on the night table. She was paying for this insolence. "What do you have to tell me?" she muttered.

"Your daughter-in-law has picked up some local allies, although they may not know who she is. I've developed some counter-measures. I should be able to make good on our agreement within two weeks."

Lydia balled her hand into a fist, telling herself not to shout. "You've already had considerable time and money to achieve that goal. You're telling me you're still not ready to deliver my grandson?"

"Kidnapping is a tricky business, Mrs. Moreland. Even though you have basically given me permission to murder your daughter-in-law in the process." The contractor's mechanical voice hummed in her ear.

Her throat tightened dangerously. "How dare you!"

“How dare I what? Say it out loud?” The contractor chuckled. “All right, Mrs. Moreland, here’s your chance. Would you rather I not kidnap your grandson? Do you forbid me to harm your daughter-in-law even in passing?”

Lydia licked her lips, listening to her pulse thunder in her ears. She didn’t think she could manage to say anything, even if she’d wanted to.

“Mrs. Moreland?” The contractor’s voice was brisk. “Still there?”

“I’m here,” she croaked.

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line. Lydia could picture the bastard smiling at her distress. “Good. Let’s have no more pretense, shall we? I’ll call you when I have something to report.”

The click in her ear sounded exactly like a rifle shot.

Chapter Thirteen

Jess found dinner an interesting experience. Up until now, she’d seen the Toleffson brothers only in pairs, where they seemed large but not overwhelming. When all four of them were in the same room, *overwhelming* didn’t begin to describe the feeling.

She tried to study them without being too obvious. They were all well over six feet, but it looked like Erik was the tallest. Pete was maybe the shortest, although in this case *short* was definitely a relative term. Cal and Lars seemed to be about the same size.

All of them had the same broad shoulders and muscular bodies, whether they wore uniforms or denim shirts or, in Lars’s case, a navy blue knit shirt that set off his dark eyes.

That was another thing they all had—eyes the color of strong coffee, or maybe molasses. Dark hair, too, with lengths ranging from Cal’s shagginess to Erik’s almost military clip.

They took their plates to the living room, where they sat on the couch and loveseat or, in Cal’s case, sprawled on the floor.

Or rather three of them did. Erik sampled some of the cold cuts and carrot sticks, then wrapped some fried chicken in a napkin and headed for his cruiser. His brothers nodded goodbye as he walked through the room.

Jess frowned. There was something between the other three and Erik, but she didn’t know them well enough to decipher it. And it certainly wasn’t any of her business.

At her seat at the dining room table, she fed Jack a couple of slices of deli turkey that she’d chopped into bits, along with a few spoonfuls of pureed squash. Jack gave her an enthusiastically orange grin.

After everyone had finished first and second helpings, Docia stood and clapped her hands. “Okay, everybody into the dining room. Time for peach cobbler *à la mode* and discussion straight.”

Jess couldn’t say she was surprised. This hadn’t struck her as a social visit. So now the fun part would start. She lifted Jack out of his chair, wiping his face and hands, and placed him in her lap.

“All right.” Docia stood at the end of the dining room table, her hands on her hips. “Now you’ve been fed. So now you get to start in on the real work of the evening. What are we going to do about this situation?”

“What situation?” Pete raised an eyebrow, but Jess had a feeling he was just jerking Docia’s chain.

So did Docia. “Oh, knock it off. You know very well what. We can’t let Jess deal with this alone. And we can’t let anything happen to either Jess or Jack. So what’s the plan?”

Pete turned to Jess. “The easiest solution is the one we’ve all been suggesting ever since this problem started—move into town. We all have space for you at our houses, and you’d be welcome.”

“Like I said before, you can take my house,” Lars cut in. “Daisy and I can move in with Pete and Janie.”

Jess sighed. “The problem with that is the same one I’ve had all along. I have a job to do here, and I can’t do it in town. Mrs. Carmody isn’t here for me to consult, but when I took over as manager, I agreed to live on the premises. If I’m in Konigsburg, I can’t do that.”

Janie shook her head. “Why do you need to be out here? What do they need you for?”

“Emergencies. If the toilet backs up in the middle of the night, I’m supposed to either unblock it or call a plumber.”

“Have you done that?” Janie looked like she was trying not to grimace.

“Not the toilet, no, but I’ve had to call the cable guys and electricians. And I’ve had to mop up a disaster when some couple mistook the whirlpool for a hot tub and tried to do a few things that the tub wasn’t designed to accommodate.”

Jess shuddered at the memory. The guy had been wearing a towel when she got there and it had definitely not demonstrated his hunk status.

“Maybe you could leave your cell phone number with the guests,” Janie began, and then stopped. “But that wouldn’t work, would it? You still might have to come out here in the middle of the night to take care of the problem. And this Haggern person might have your phone number.”

Jess felt a drip of ice down her spine. She hadn’t thought about the possibility of Barrymore/Haggern calling her out after midnight.

Lars leaned forward, his gaze catching hers. “What do you want, Jess? How can we help you? What do you need us to do?”

Jess bit her lip. Something in his voice made her throat tighten. She stared back into his deep molasses gaze. “Help me make it safe to be here. Show me what to do. I’m always trying to take care of things after Haggern’s done something to us, or tried to do something. Show me how to make it so he can’t even try.”

Pete ran a hand across his jaw. “You could put in an alarm system, but you’d have to get Mrs. Carmody’s okay. They’re not cheap, and I have a feeling she wouldn’t be too excited about paying a lot of money for something like that.”

“Netta Carmody?” Docia shook her head. “Sorry, not a chance. Netta’s got the tightest fists I know of. Besides, getting in touch with her at this time of year would be a bitch. She’s off on her world cruise, right?”

Jess nodded. “Right. To the South Seas and Japan. She told me she wouldn’t be back until January. Which is another reason I can’t quit my job here. It wouldn’t be fair to her.” Of course, if she and Jack took off in the middle of the night for parts unknown, Mrs. Carmody would be out of luck. Jess pushed that thought aside a little guiltily.

Janie sighed. “That’s probably the first time the words ‘fair’ and ‘Netta Carmody’ have ever been associated. But I understand what you’re saying.”

“The main problem, as I see it, is that you’re alone out here,” Cal mused. “I could probably find you a watch dog, but after what happened to Sweetie, you’d need to keep it in the house. And I’m not sure how that would work with Daisy and Jack.”

“Thanks, but I really don’t want another dog.” Jess managed a tight smile. “I would like to take Sweetie back when he recovers, though, if that’s okay.”

She glanced at Daisy as she colored a picture in a corner of the room, paying no attention to the nattering of the adults.

Cal nodded. “Of course, you can have him. Believe me, we’ll be delighted for you to have him. He’s starting to get back on his feet again, and he’ll be eating us out of house and home by the end of the week.”

“How big is this place?” Lars leaned forward in his chair, staring around the living room.

“Around two thousand feet.” Jess shrugged. “Why?”

“No, I mean how many bedrooms?”

“Three. Four if you count the little study off the living room, the room with the bower.”

All the Toleffsons were staring at him now. Jess had a feeling they were holding their collective breath.

Lars nodded. “Okay. Daisy and I can move in. Daisy can share Jack’s room, and I’ll take the spare bedroom. That way you won’t be alone out here. And if you get some emergency call from the guest cabin at night, I can go with you. That should keep you safe for the time being.”

“We’re gonna live here?” Daisy piped. “Can I sleep with Jack?”

Jess blinked. The entire room had become very quiet indeed.

“No, Dais,” Lars said gently. “Jack needs to sleep in his crib. We’ll find another place for you.”

Janie gave Lars a very bright smile. “How about if Daisy stays with us? We’ve got all those bedrooms.”

“No!” Daisy cried. “I wanna stay with Jack. Daddy, you promised!”

Lars grinned. "Actually, I didn't. But I'd rather you were with us too, pumpkin."

Daisy grinned back, then picked up another crayon and went back to her picture.

Janie glanced back at Lars, her forehead furrowed. "Do you really think it's safe? I mean, it might be better if we took both Daisy and Jack."

"Or Jack could stay with us," Docia chimed in.

Jess's chest tightened. "No," she blurted. She took a breath as they all turned toward her, then touched her cheek to Jack's silky hair. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be ungrateful, but no, I can't let Jack go. I just can't."

Docia stared down at Jack's baby smile, her cheeks suddenly pink. "I don't blame you a bit, sweetheart."

"Okay, time out, let's have some coffee. And we need to get some of these dishes taken care of." Cal stood, heading toward the kitchen with Docia at his heels.

Jess let them. She figured this was the Toleffsons' party and they could jolly well clean up too.

Pete stepped beside her, smiling down at Jack. "There's one problem with all of this," he said.

Jess wondered if he was referring to the sexual tension she already felt whenever she spent more than five minutes alone with Lars. That was going to make it lots of fun to have him around for extended periods of time.

"It takes care of the situation for now," Pete went on. "But it doesn't solve the ultimate problem with your in-laws."

"I guess I could get the protective order you talked about." Jess shifted Jack so that he wasn't resting quite so much on one of her knees.

Pete nodded. "You should. It might shake something loose. But the guy who's already here may not be affected by it."

"Lorne Barrymore?"

"Barrymore, Haggdorn, whatever his name is. I'd feel a lot better about this if we could find him."

"I thought Erik did find him." Lars leaned forward in his chair again. "Or he found where he was staying, anyway."

"Looks like he's checked out. Erik stopped by to talk to the desk clerk."

"Does that mean he wasn't the one who hurt Sweetie?"

Pete shook his head. "It may mean he knows we're onto him and he's staying somewhere else. Like I say, I'd be happier if we knew where he was."

"So would I." Jess shivered.

“I guess what I’m saying is, just because Lars moves in, that doesn’t mean Haggedorn moves on. He’s got a job to do.”

Jess took a deep breath. “Well he won’t do it here. Not this time.”

Pete nodded. “Not if we can help it, ma’am.” He turned to Lars. “All the same, watch your back, bro.”

“I will.” Lars frowned. “And that brings up another problem.”

“What?” Cal leaned in the doorway, coffeepot in his hand.

“What about tonight?”

The room grew quiet again. Jess chewed on her lower lip. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, Haggedorn took out Sweetie so he could get access to the house. Who’s to say this isn’t the night he planned on breaking in? You shouldn’t be out here by yourself.”

Jess’s heart thudded so hard against her ribs she was sure everyone in the room could hear it. “I...hadn’t thought about that.”

“What do you suggest, Lars?” Cal set the coffee pot down on the table.

“Daisy?” Lars turned toward his daughter. “I think you should stay with Aunt Janie and Uncle Pete tonight. I need to stay out here with Mrs. Carroll and Jack.”

Predictably, Daisy wanted to stay too. And predictably, she wasn’t delighted when Lars told her she couldn’t. She seemed headed for a major, screaming meltdown until Janie pointed out that she didn’t have her pink pajamas or her bunny blanket and thus wasn’t really ready to stay overnight at Jess’s house.

Lars had no idea why that worked—he was just glad it did.

Bolstered by Janie’s promise to help her pack, Daisy reluctantly let Pete move her car seat over to his Acura. She refused to kiss Lars goodnight, thrusting her lower lip forward like a perch on a bird feeder.

“See you tomorrow, sweetheart,” he murmured, as Janie rolled up her window.

Which left him alone with Jess and Jack.

He’d already decided he wouldn’t be an asshole about this. The way to go was to basically ignore any attraction between them.

Right. Like that was really going to be possible.

Jess had gone to put Jack to bed, which gave Lars a brief reprieve. If he’d had to look at those dimples

for five more minutes, he'd have had to touch her cheek, just to see if it felt as soft as it looked.

Blondes. Why did she have to be blonde? You'd think after Sherice, he'd have developed a permanent aversion to any hair color lighter than, say, squirrel. But then Sherice's platinum had never been natural, and he had the bills to prove it.

Jess's dark gold looked more than natural. It looked absolutely right, even when it was slightly spiked, the way it got when she ran her fingers through it.

Lars felt himself hardening, and gritted his teeth. *So not appropriate, you moron. You're here to protect her from the bogeyman, not become a bogeyman on your own time.*

He heard her step in the hall and smoothed his expression into something that might pass for bland as she came into the living room.

For just a moment her gaze caught his before she looked away quickly. "Let me show you the spare bedroom before I do anything else. It's right across the hall from the bathroom so you can wash up if you want to. Unfortunately, I don't have anything like a razor right now." She flushed, biting her lip. "I mean, not that I would have a razor normally, but..."

"That's okay. I'll stop by my place to change before I go to the office tomorrow anyway." Lars started to move into the hall, hoping she'd take the hint.

After a moment, she did. She walked to the end, opening the last door on her right. "In here."

The bedroom had a bed, a chair, and a battered dresser that looked like it had come from a no-tell motel somewhere. A couple of light-colored blouses hung in the otherwise empty closet.

Right. Well, it wasn't supposed to be a weekend at the Ritz, after all.

Jess sighed. "Sorry it looks so bleak. I didn't have any time to fix it up. It just has the furniture that was here when we moved in, like the rest of the house."

Lars managed to push the corners of his mouth up into a fake-hearty grin. "Don't worry—I've stayed in worse. It looks a little like my dorm room at college before my mom got her hands on it." After which it had looked like a warehouse for discarded Toleffson furniture. But nobody could say it was bleak anymore.

"Okay, well, I'll let you get settled." Jess turned and headed back toward the dining room.

Lars wasn't sure what he was supposed to settle since he didn't have anything with him except his wallet, his keys and a pocket knife. He checked the bathroom, which looked a lot more lived in, given the clothes line in the shower that contained Jack's pajamas.

He sighed again, trying to ignore the way Jess's silken nightgown hanging on the door made his groin tighten. He hadn't really wanted a shower anyway.

He could hear the sound of running water from the kitchen. After a moment, he walked back down the hall again.

Jess stood at the sink, stacking a few plates in a dishpan. Lars grabbed a dishtowel off the refrigerator

door handle.

“I thought Cal got your dishwasher loaded before he left.”

“He did. These are just a few leftovers. It’s easier to wash them in the sink.”

Lars took a dish out of her hand, propping it in the drainer on the counter. “Sorry about the way they all descended on you like that. I didn’t ask them to.”

Jess shrugged. “It’s okay. I appreciate their concern. It’s been a while since I’ve been around a big family.”

“You don’t have any relatives?” Lars shook the few remaining drops off a coffee cup and propped it at the side.

“My dad died a few years ago. My mom died when I was little. I’ve got an uncle someplace, but I haven’t kept in touch with him. That’s one of the reasons Lydia could isolate me—no family to step in.”

“Of course, it also made it harder for her to trace you.”

“Right. So there are compensations.” Jess’s voice was dry. She put a couple of glasses into the dishpan.

Lars picked up a plate from the drainer and began drying. “Well, there are lots of Toleffsons around. More than enough, some people in town would tell you.”

“How did you all end up here?”

“Cal came down here first, then Pete and I came down for his wedding, and both of us decided to move down too. After my marriage broke up, that is.” One of the more interesting features of Cal’s wedding extravaganza. Like her morals, Sherice’s timing left something to be desired.

Jess propped the last few dishes in the drainer, watching him dry. “What about Erik?”

“Erik? I guess I forgot about him.” He frequently did. Maybe deliberately. “Erik moved down here about the same time I did.”

“Is there...” Jess rubbed a hand across the back of her neck. “Do you guys have some problem with Erik? I mean, you don’t seem as close to him as you do to each other.”

Lars set the glass down carefully in the cupboard, then reached for a plate. “Erik’s three years older than Pete, which means he’s four years older than me and six years older than Cal. He didn’t much like the competition.”

“Competition?”

Right. She didn’t have any brothers and sisters. “He was sort of the big brother from hell for most of the time we were growing up. He did everything he could to make our lives miserable, even though our parents did their best to keep him off us. Once we grew up enough to defend ourselves, he lost interest. But around then he started hanging out with the limited number of juvenile delinquents in Lander, Iowa, which meant he caused our folks a whole new set of problems.”

He glanced down at the plate in his hands—he'd been drying it for at least five minutes. He set it on the shelf next to the glass. "Anyway, he didn't have a particularly happy childhood, and he tried to make sure we didn't either."

"But you get along now?"

Lars stared down at the dishtowel in his hands. *Did they?* He hadn't really stopped to think about it lately. "Yeah. I guess we do. He's pulled himself together, stopped drinking, got a degree in criminal justice and become a cop. Sometimes it's still hard to believe, but it's true."

"He seems..." Jess picked up a sponge, running it around the sink for a moment. "It's like he's trying to stay out of your way. Helping, but...not in your face."

Lars nodded. "That's a fair assessment. We've still got a lot of landmines to deal with."

"I can understand that, but I appreciate the help he's given me anyway."

Jess took the dishtowel from his hands, her fingers brushing against his palm as she did. Lars wondered if she felt the warmth the same way he did, like a small electric shock traveling up his fingers.

All right, enough already.

He turned and walked toward the living room after Jess. Maybe she'd go to bed. Maybe he would. The worst thing would be for the two of them to sit together.

Jess sat on the couch, and he found himself flopping down beside her. Apparently, he couldn't even trust his own knees anymore.

"So tell me about your husband," he suggested a little desperately. A twenty-minute monologue on connubial bliss ought to cool down his libido.

"Barry? What do you want to know?"

"What was he like?"

Jess shrugged. "A nice guy. He was several years older than me. I guess he'd wasted a lot of time fighting his mother until he decided to just walk out on her. Once he dried out, I think he started believing in himself for the first time. He was the bravest man I'd ever met."

"Bravest?" Lars wasn't exactly sure what her definition of *brave* was. Barry Moreland sure didn't meet his.

"Bravest. Absolutely. He faced the worst in himself, and he was still able to keep going. He learned how to live with all that darkness inside. That takes guts."

Lars took a breath, willing himself not to see any parallels with Erik. "But he didn't fight back when his family jerked him around."

Jess shook her head. "There was no point in that. He wouldn't have won. And he didn't want their money anyway. But I think he stayed in Belle View just to show them he could keep going no matter what they thought of him. That took guts too."

“And you loved him for his bravery?”

“Among other things.” Jess’s brows drew together in a slight frown. “He was a kind man. And he was good to me. And I admired him.”

That might be connubial bliss, but what she was describing didn’t strike Lars as much of a love affair. “That’s...good.”

Jess narrowed her eyes at him. “I wasn’t looking for a big-time romance. That burns out too fast. What we had was better. He made me feel safe, and he understood me. I respected him.”

Terrific. She’d married Mr. Rogers. But who was he to judge? He’d married Cruela DeVil. He raised his gaze to hers again.

She had amazing eyes. They tilted up slightly at the ends, almost cat-like. And they were the color of moss agates, a deep, dark green. A man could get lost in those eyes. A man could drown there.

A man had better get his ass to the bedroom before he did something surpassingly stupid. Lars cleared his throat. “Well, I guess I’ll get to bed. You should too.”

Jess blinked at him, and he felt like groaning. Why did every word sound like it had some hidden meaning?

“I mean...” he started, and stopped abruptly. Jess was maybe two feet away from him. Close enough that he could feel the warmth from her skin. If either of them moved just a couple of inches forward...

It took every ounce of will power he had to stand. “Good night, then,” he murmured.

“Good night.” Jess’s lips moved in a tiny smile. “I’ll lock up.”

“I’ll lock up,” Lars said flatly. “You go ahead.”

Jess gave him one more puzzled look, blinking those gorgeous eyes, then pushed herself up from the couch and headed down the hall.

Lars didn’t know whether to sigh in relief or moan in frustration.

Chapter Fourteen

Lars didn’t get much sleep that night, but it had nothing to do with any outside threats. Around two, he finally willed himself into something close to unconsciousness, only to be awakened at six by Jack’s morning trills.

He stumbled to the kitchen and took the cup of coffee Jess offered, then headed for his SUV. At least he could shower at home. And by then a cold shower sounded like a very good idea.

Fifteen minutes after he walked in his own front door, Janie arrived with Daisy. Her backpack was sitting in the middle of the living room floor, along with her Little Mermaid suitcase, her library, a large part of her wardrobe, and almost every toy she owned.

"I got my pajamas," she explained. "And my blanket. And my bed. Only not my bed. The madras."

Lars turned to Janie. "Madras?"

"Air mattress. It's a double. I thought you could put it on the floor in Jack's room."

"Right." Lars wished he was more awake. He was sure there was something wrong with this plan.

"Daisy's really looking forward to being with Jack." Janie surveyed the pile of possessions in the middle of the floor a little doubtfully. "She wants to show him her toys."

"Right." Lars yawned. "Okay, let me get a little more caffeine in my system and then I'll take her out to the B and B."

At Jess's cabin, Daisy ran through the door before Lars had even climbed the steps.

Jess stood in the doorway, shaking her head. "She's excited."

"Sort of like saying Hurricane Ike was a rainstorm." Lars sighed. "Janie sent an air bed."

Daisy danced around Jack's high chair. "Jack! Jack! I'm gonna sleep in your room. We're gonna have dinner. I brought my Wild Things." She reached out to touch his hand.

Jack grasped her fingers, giggling and swaying back and forth in his chair.

Jess shook her head. "Why do I have the feeling neither of them will be interested in a nap today? We'll get everything set up and you can inflate the air bed when you come back tonight."

"Right. Shall I bring dinner?"

"Don't bother. We've got all the leftovers from last night."

Jack was making impatient noises. Either he really wanted out of his high chair or he really needed a new diaper. Lars sighed again. "Okay, time for the day to officially start."

He managed to get some work done at the office during the morning by ignoring everything else that might distract him. At eleven, Mrs. Suarez buzzed the office line.

"Yes?" Lars kept his eyes on the spreadsheet he was currently trying to massage.

"There's some woman on the line named Sherice. She said you'd take her call or else." Mrs. Suarez's voice gave a clear indication of what she thought of that *or else*.

Lars pinched the bridge of his nose. He'd really hoped for a low-key day. "It's okay, Mrs. Suarez. I'll speak to her."

"You're finally there," Sherice's flat voice drawled when he punched in the outside line. "Don't you keep normal office hours?"

His already long day suddenly looked even longer. "What do you want, Sherice?"

“To make sure my daughter is all right. To make sure she doesn’t get hurt when somebody takes a shot at your girlfriend.”

Lars felt a churning in his stomach that had nothing to do with the amount of coffee he’d already consumed. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“About what’s going on with that so-called babysitter you’ve got taking care of Daisy. As if you don’t know what I’m talking about. Jesus, Lars, do you think I’m stupid?”

At one point, Lars had thought exactly that. Since then, he’d decided that Sherice wasn’t exactly stupid. Vicious, unprincipled, greedy and totally self-absorbed—she was all of those things. But she wasn’t stupid.

“What do you think has happened, Sherice?” he asked, keeping his tone as neutral as he could. He’d really prefer not getting into a shouting match while Mrs. Suarez was right next door.

“Your girlfriend’s house was broken into. Twice. Maybe somebody was after her drug stash or something. I want Daisy out of there.”

Lars gritted his teeth to keep from rising to the bait. “You don’t get to set my childcare options, Sherice. You gave up custody. Besides, the burglaries occurred at night. Daisy was nowhere near the house.”

Even as he said it, Lars felt his shoulders tense. Daisy was nowhere near the house before this, but she’d be living there for the next few days. So would he. And apparently Sherice had some kind of pipeline into Konigsburg.

“I’m concerned about my daughter’s safety,” Sherice purred. “Suppose I took this into court? Suppose I told a judge I was afraid you were putting my little girl in danger? Don’t you think he’d be impressed?”

A male judge would probably be impressed as hell by Sherice’s cleavage. On the other hand, she’d never been particularly good at pretending concern over Daisy. “Is that what you plan to do? Go back to court? I’ll let my lawyer know.”

“It doesn’t need to go that far. I’ve told you. We can discuss this.”

“You want more money.” Lars rubbed his eyes. He should have seen this coming.

“I want what’s coming to me,” Sherice snapped. “You didn’t sell the house in Des Moines for what it was worth. You owe me at least fifteen thousand more. And that’s without interest.”

“Interest? What are you charging me, Sherice? Prime rate?”

There was a pause on the other end. “Smart. You were always so smart, weren’t you, Lars?” Sherice’s voice crackled with fury. It was the same voice she’d used in the endless sessions with the lawyers before the divorce was final.

It had taken him a while to understand how much she hated him. He still didn’t understand why.

“I don’t have fifteen thousand dollars to give you, Sherice. You got a major payout when the divorce was final. Beyond that, you’re on your own.”

“Not if I go to court. Not if I get custody. Then you’d be paying me child support, wouldn’t you, Lars? You’d be supporting me until Daisy’s eighteenth birthday. And I’d make sure you’d support me in style.”

“That’s a lot of ‘ifs’, Sherice. You’re a long way from a sure thing.”

“You think so?” Sherice’s voice rose dangerously. “Try me. Get ready to spend the next six months in court.”

Lars held the receiver away from his ear to get some distance from her suddenly shrill tone, then tried again. “Think about this, Sherice. Just think about it. You don’t want Daisy. She’d get in your way. Is it worth making both of you miserable just to screw me over?”

“Yes,” she snarled. “Yes. I don’t care. You’ll pay me one way or the other, you bastard.”

Lars managed to keep his voice soft, the same technique he used when Daisy had a tantrum. Keep your voice down and sometimes she’d lower hers. “Why? What am I going to pay for, Sherice? What did Daisy or I ever do to you?”

“What did you do? What did you do? You...gave up! You could have made a million, ten million, but you just gave up.” She sounded like she was panting now. Maintaining that kind of fury must be exhausting as hell. “You could have been a top executive. Everybody said so. You could have owned your own firm. *We could have been rich, goddamn you!*”

“I guess I could have been.” Lars rubbed his eyes again. He remembered those years all too well. And what he mainly remembered was coming home from work so exhausted he’d just wanted to play with Daisy and then go to bed. But Sherice would have something planned. Sherice always had something planned. “Being rich is a full-time job, Sherice. I didn’t have the stomach for it. I’m not getting rich down here, and I doubt I ever will.”

“I don’t care! I don’t care about what you want. I want what’s coming to me. You get it for me, or I’ll make you sorry.” Sherice suddenly sounded a lot like Daisy in her more annoying moments. Lars wondered if she’d try holding her breath next.

“So you think fifteen thousand is what you’ve got coming?” It wasn’t really a question. Of course, she did.

“You sold the house for less than you said you would. You owe me.” At least her voice had dropped into close-to-normal range again.

“Look, we made a small profit on the sale, more than most people are making these days. The house had been on the market for months. Chances of getting much more for it were slim. Your lawyer accepted the deal.”

“Maybe he did. I didn’t.”

Lars took a deep breath. “Here’s how it is, Sherice. I don’t have fifteen thousand to give you. On the other hand, I’m willing to set up a trust for Daisy into which I’ll deposit fifteen thousand over a period you and I will agree to, say three to five years, which I may be able to manage. I think a judge will okay something like that.”

Lars could hear her breathing—it sounded ragged, as if she’d developed asthma. When she began

speaking again, the words hissed in his ear. "You think you're smart, don't you? You think that idea will get you out of this? Think again, Lars. It's my fifteen thousand. *Mine!* You can't steal my fifteen thousand and give it to a three-year-old."

"She's still two. Her birthday's not for another two months." He said it without thinking. If he'd thought about it, he would have known better.

"I don't give a flying fuck how old she is," Sherice shrieked again. "That little bitch isn't getting any of my money."

For a moment, Lars seemed to see the world through a haze of red. The breath in his lungs felt like hot steel. If he'd had anything in his hands besides the phone, he would have thrown it at the wall. "That's it. This is over. Go fuck yourself, Sherice."

"Like you couldn't?" Sherice screamed, but he was already slamming down the receiver.

He sat staring at the phone, trying to make himself breathe normally. She was out of his life. No judge in his right mind would let someone like that have custody of a child, particularly after she'd already signed it away.

He closed his eyes, resisting the urge to rest his forehead on the desk. No judge in his right mind...but with his luck, Sherice might stumble over a lunatic judge with a boob fetish somewhere in the state of Iowa.

At noon, Lars headed for the Coffee Corral. Normally, he brought his lunch from home, but today he hadn't had time to make anything. He wondered if he'd be able to make his lunches at Jess's house or if he'd be on permanent kid duty.

No. The kids had to go to bed eventually. Then he and Jess could...he wasn't sure what they could do. After last night, he didn't trust himself to find out.

Most of the people at the Corral were local since the place wasn't on Main. The Corral was a haven for the people who actually lived in Konigsburg year round. The food might not be sensational, but not having to listen to conversations about adorable lawn ornaments more than made up for it.

Al Brosius, the owner and chief cook, nodded at Lars. "The usual?"

The usual was a burger and fries. Lars thought about the last time he'd stepped on a scale. Besides he was trying to get away from the usual. He shook his head. "Tuna sandwich, Al. Erik been in yet?"

Al nodded toward the line of booths along the wall, jotting down the order on his green pad. Lars could see Erik's Stetson hanging from the hook at the end of one booth. He took his glass of iced tea and headed toward that side of the room.

Erik glanced up as he arrived.

"Can I join you?"

Erik nodded, sliding his feet back to let Lars in the booth. He seemed to take up one entire side without even trying. The Big Brother from Hell. Only he didn't look too hellish anymore.

“So what did you all decide last night? Anything I should know about?”

“I figured part of the problem was that Jess was alone out at the B and B, so Daisy and I are going to be staying there too.” Lars kept his gaze on the table as he said it. He’d just as soon not have to deal with more raised eyebrows for the moment.

Erik shrugged. “Having some extra people around can’t hurt.”

Al’s wife, Carol, appeared at their table with a sandwich basket. “I thought it was Cal over here. He’s the only one of you Toleffsons who doesn’t eat Al’s burgers.”

Lars felt like sighing. Couldn’t he ever vary his routine without getting comments? “I love Al’s burgers. I just felt like a tuna sandwich.”

“Try the grilled Swiss next time. We also do a nice chicken salad. Good to see another Toleffson believing that life extends beyond red meat.” Carol turned back toward the counter.

Lars picked up his sandwich. “Pete said Haggdorn’s gone.”

“Looks like it. Kid at the desk said he checked out late one afternoon before I came by.”

“At least I know him by sight. He won’t be able to sneak up on us this time.” Lars took a bite of tuna. Not bad. Not a sublime experience like Allie’s stuff, but not bad at all. “I’ve got another problem, but I don’t know if you can help.”

Erik raised his eyebrows, which Lars took as permission to go ahead.

“I had a call from Sherice this morning.”

Erik’s expression went blank. He’d been around during Sherice’s last, most spectacular crash and burn, when she’d almost derailed Cal and Docia’s wedding. “Must have been fun.”

“Not especially. The thing is, she knew about the break-ins at Jess’s place. She tried to use them to put pressure on me over Daisy. For money, that is.”

“Interesting.”

Lars gritted his teeth. Erik always seemed to find things interesting. He, on the other hand, found this particular case annoying and vaguely threatening. “So anyway, she’s got some kind of information source here in town. Can you think of anyone it might be?”

Erik shrugged. “Probably somebody associated with the city cops. So far as I know, the burglaries haven’t shown up in any of the papers. Police reports would be the most likely source.”

“Some cop is sending information to my ex-wife? Any idea who?”

“Probably not directly to her.” Erik took another bite of his burger. “Probably to somebody who works for her—like her lawyer.”

“Is that even legal?” Lars tried to keep his voice from rising.

“Technically, yeah. The police reports are public records. As long as the cops don’t pass along confidential information, they’d be inside the law.”

Lars crumbled a potato chip between his fingers. “Please tell me there’s a *but* in here somewhere.”

“But—there are rules about what other kinds of employment you can take while you’re working for the Konigsburg Police Department. Most of us are part time, so they know we’ll be working other places to make up the salary difference. But we’re not supposed to be doing anything that might interfere with our cop duties.”

“And passing along information to a lawyer might do that?”

“It might. Chief Olema doesn’t want to ask the town for any more money for the department, so he doesn’t make a lot of trouble about what we do off hours. I work security part time out at the county fairgrounds, and Olema’s never said anything about it one way or the other. But he hates lawyers more than most cops do. I can try to find out who’s getting paid from Iowa, but it may take me a while.”

Lars frowned. “Look, I don’t want to get you into any trouble over this. I just wanted to know how Sherice was getting her information. I was worried she might have somebody watching me or something.”

“Unlikely. Watching somebody is expensive.” Erik gave him a dry smile. “No offense, bro, but I don’t think your ex would be willing to spring for that kind of money to get what few worldly goods you’ve got.”

“No,” Lars agreed. “Sherice might do a lot to get in my face, but nothing that involved spending too much money.”

“So somebody in the department may have sold some information to somebody outside the department. Like I say, I’ll see what I can find out.”

“Thanks, Erik, I appreciate it.” Lars balled up his napkin and tossed it into his empty basket. “You coming to Thanksgiving?”

Erik rubbed his jaw. “That’s next week, isn’t it? I lost track. I’ll be on duty at least part of the time so the married cops can be home with their families.”

Lars shrugged. “Maybe you could drop by for a while anyway. Get some turkey.”

“Maybe. I’ll see what I can do.”

Lars slid to the end of the booth, gathering his trash together.

Erik picked up a last French fry. “By the way...”

Lars turned back. “What?”

“Your ex know you and Daisy are moving in at the B and B?”

Lars grimaced. “Not yet. If her sources are any good she should find out, though.”

Erik grinned. “Interesting.”

"If you say so." Lars headed for the door.

After lunch, Daisy didn't want to take her nap, even in the bower. Jess wasn't exactly surprised.

"I'm staying with Jack," she insisted. "I need to sleep in his room now."

Jess nodded. "At night you do. For now, you can sleep in the bower. That way Jack won't bother you."

Daisy paused, considering the possibility. "Jack doesn't bother me."

"You haven't taken a nap with him before. He can be very noisy. You need your rest so that you can cope."

Jess crossed her fingers. Sometimes Daisy could be distracted with a new concept, particularly if it involved a new word to enlarge her already king-sized vocabulary.

"Cope?" Daisy's eyebrow elevated in an exact imitation of her father.

"So you can help me figure out how we're going to deal with all the problems we'll have getting you moved in with Jack. I need you to be thinking clearly, Dais."

Daisy appeared to consider this possibility. Jess held her breath. "Okay. I'll sleep in the bower."

"Good." Jess wiped off the remains of Jack's lunch and lifted him out of his high chair. "Let's get you both settled."

She wasn't entirely surprised when Daisy climbed out of the bower a half hour later. She was just glad she'd had the half hour to do a little coping of her own.

Ostensibly, she was working on a new site she'd taken on a couple of days before. In reality, she was thinking about Lars. Or rather, trying not to think about Lars. Thinking about him caused all kinds of odd twinges in her body. She decided to spend the afternoon playing with the kids and ignoring her own inclinations.

Lars arrived around five, a little earlier than usual. He had a duffel bag and a suit carrier over his shoulder. "Everything okay?"

"Fine. Assuming you don't count the fact that we spent the day rearranging Jack's room. Several times."

She glanced at Jack and Daisy where they sat in the living room. They each had their own stack of Legos and Duplos, jealously guarded.

"Figures." Lars swung the suit carrier off his shoulder. "Let me get rid of this stuff."

Daisy got up, leaving her Legos for Jack, and followed Lars down the hall. She paused in the doorway of the bedroom, narrowing her eyes. "I'll make a picture for you, Daddy," her voice piped back down the hall. "I can draw it on the wall."

Jess closed her eyes for a moment. She didn't want to think about the amount of work involved in removing crayon from the walls of the spare bedroom.

"Make me one on paper, sweetheart," Lars said hurriedly. "I'll hang it up in here where I can see it."

By dinner time, both children had begun to wind down. A day's worth of excitement had made them tired and cranky. Jack began to fuss, refusing to eat his peas, while Daisy complained loudly about the cold fried chicken.

After ten minutes of caterwauling, Jess lifted Jack out of his chair. "Okay, mister, bedtime."

"It's too early! I won't go." Daisy's lower lip extended to a mutinous length.

"Mrs. Carroll wasn't talking to you," Lars retorted. "You've still got half a sandwich to finish."

"Don't want to," Daisy snapped.

Jess put a wailing Jack over her shoulder and headed for the bedroom. Lars's turn to deal with his daughter.

An hour later she'd cleaned Jack up and nursed him into drowsiness. She could hear Lars's deep voice and Daisy's treble from the general direction of the living room, and then only Lars's voice for a while. She listened more closely.

"Rah, rah once," he intoned. "Rah, rah twice. Rah, rah chicken soup with rice."

He carried Daisy in just as Jess put Jack down in his crib. She turned, holding her finger to her lips, and saw that Daisy was three-quarters asleep against her father's shoulder. He placed her carefully upon the air mattress bed, pulling a quilt over her.

"Good night, pumpkin," he whispered. "Sleep tight."

"Mmph," Daisy replied and curled into a sleepy ball.

Jess felt an odd pain in the general area of her heart, wondering, not for the first time, if Barry would have been like that with Jack. If he would have carried him to bed, cuddled him, told him he was loved.

She took a deep breath and walked back toward the living room, willing the pain to go away.

"Well." Lars sighed from behind her.

"Well." Jess wasn't exactly sure what to say next.

"Kids." Lars smiled at her. "They take a lot out of you."

Jess felt like telling him that kids weren't the only thing that did.

Chapter Fifteen

"Do you think this is going to work?" Lars asked.

Jess blinked at him. Then her sanity returned. *Daisy and Jack. Right.* “They’ll settle down once they get used to being here together. I mean they’re already used to being together, it’s just the excitement of being able to sleep together.”

The moment the words were out of her mouth, Jess felt her face flush purple.

Lars stared at her, his face as scarlet as hers must have been. She had a feeling he was using every ounce of discipline to keep from snickering uncontrollably.

“I mean...” She paused, swallowing hard. “Well, they’re in the same room, and Daisy’s so crazy about Jack and...” Her voice trailed off again. She wondered if it would be too obvious if she turned around and hid in her bedroom.

“I know what you mean.” Lars allowed the corners of his mouth to edge up. “Don’t worry about it.”

Jess blew out a breath. “Okay. Well. Good. I guess I’ll load the dishwasher.” She managed not to run as she headed for the kitchen, but it was a near thing.

She turned on the faucet and began rinsing plates, willing herself to keep her mind blank. Fat chance. Whenever she let her mind roam lately, it seemed to shamble over toward Lars Toleffson. Last night, there’d been a moment when she could have sworn they were going to do more than talk. He’d been sitting so close she could smell the faint mixture of aftershave and dish soap on his skin.

And then he was gone. Heading down the hall as if his hair were on fire.

Which was really better for both of them. Really. Better. Neither of them should want to get involved, not given the chaos that surrounded them right now. And she had Jack to think about. She wasn’t in the market for more complications, anyway.

Was she? No, she most definitely was not.

Jess took another in a series of deep breaths and began arranging dishes in the dishwasher racks. Maybe doing something mindless would make her mind go blank.

“Let me help you.” Lars appeared in the doorway with Jack’s dishes from the high chair tray.

Jess felt like moaning. No man was supposed to look sexy with his hands full of dirty dishes. How did Lars Toleffson manage it?

Part of it was his size, of course. The broad shoulders, the long arms. He didn’t look muscle-bound, but he did look fit, his chest outlined nicely by his knit shirt.

Jess took the dishes out of his hands. “Thanks,” she mumbled, careful not to meet his gaze.

Hair. There was just a tuft of chest hair showing at the v of the knit shirt. The buttons had come undone, maybe while he was carrying Daisy around.

Jess turned back to the sink quickly. She was a sucker for chest hair, always had been. It was like fuzzy testosterone. She loved to rub her cheek against it. Barry’s chest had been mostly smooth and she’d missed it.

Thinking of Barry had the desired effect of cooling her unruly hormones. Jess turned on the water and began rinsing Jack's dishes.

Lars returned from the dining room with the two serving platters she'd left behind. He found a plastic bag and began loading up the fried chicken bones. "What do you do with these? Put them in the outside garbage?"

Jess shook her head. "That brings animals. I usually leave the garbage sack in the utility room until trash pickup day." She bit her lip. "I won't be able to do that with Sweetie in there, will I? He'd probably get into any garbage he could reach."

"I can set you up with an animal-proof garbage can." Lars leaned against the counter. "You just build a wooden frame with a locking top to put the can in. It's easy enough to do."

"Thanks." Jess let herself smile, a very small one that couldn't possibly be taken the wrong way. Nobody would think she was hungering over Lars Toleffson. Absolutely nobody. Now if she could just get out of here without doing anything stupid, or rather, anything stupider.

"You have a lot of animals out here?" Lars peered out the kitchen window into the back yard.

Jess shrugged. "The usual. Deer, raccoons, possums, sometimes a skunk. I guess there are some wild pigs around, and some bobcats, but I haven't seen any."

"Right, Cal says there aren't any big league predators to worry about around here. No bears or gators."

He grinned at her, white teeth flashing against tanned skin, and she wondered what it would be like to run her fingers down his cheek, feeling the slight prick of whiskers beneath her fingertips.

Oh, man, she was beginning to sound like some love-starved spinster. It hadn't been that long since she'd been with a man—just since Barry died. *Over a year now.*

"I guess that's it." She closed the dishwasher.

"Okay." Lars glanced around the kitchen as if he was looking for something else that needed doing. She could think of a few things.

No. Stop it. Guts up, Jessamyn. Time for a strategic retreat. A *rapid* strategic retreat. No way was she going to spend another evening sitting on the couch with Lars Toleffson. Particularly since they probably wouldn't stay sitting very long if she did.

"Okay, I guess I'll go do a little work on my sites. There's a television in the living room if you want."

Lars narrowed his eyes. "Your sites?"

"I'm doing some freelance work. Web site development, jobs I picked up online. Evening is the only free time I have."

"Oh. Okay. I brought my laptop. Maybe I'll get some work done too."

Jess felt a brief tickle of guilt. Had he really looked disappointed or was she kidding herself?

Forget it, Jessamyn. Time to move on. “Good night, then.”

Lars gave her a quick smile. “Good night. See you in the morning.”

Jess turned and walked very purposefully toward the study. *You are not disappointed, Jessamyn. Definitely not.*

Which was a crock if she’d ever heard one. Geez, if she couldn’t even convince herself, how was she ever going to convince Lars Toleffson?

Lars watched Jess disappear in the direction of the study. Clearly, another evening on the couch was not in the cards.

A good idea, of course. Neither of them needed that kind of complication, not given all they had to do already. Both of them needed to be mature about this.

Right. Hadn’t he sworn once he was going to stop kidding himself?

Lars looked around the living room and sighed. He didn’t particularly want to watch television. He glanced at his watch. Nine o’clock. He could probably get a couple of hours of work done before he went to bed.

It was just what he did most nights when he was home. Put Daisy to bed, work for a couple of hours, go to bed himself. He wasn’t sure why the routine made him feel so grumpy this time around. Well, okay, he had a pretty good idea why, but it didn’t make any difference. The lady had made her preferences clear.

Lars slouched off toward his bedroom, managing not to grind his teeth.

In the end, he only made it through an hour and a half of spreadsheets before he started yawning, mostly out of boredom. He almost wished Haggdorn would show up and provide some excitement, which was definitely not a sign of maturity.

He pulled on the pair of sweatpants he’d brought to sleep in and turned out the light. At least this time he wouldn’t have to get up early to get Daisy to Jess’s place before he went to the office.

He’d sunk into an interesting dream involving Jess Carroll, fried chicken, and a power drill when the noise finally woke him. He glanced at his watch, propped on the dresser beside the bed—twelve-thirty.

A heavy irregular thumping seemed to be coming from the general direction of the kitchen. He pushed himself out of bed as quickly as he could, then stepped quietly into the hall. Another thump sounded, along with a solid clang. Lars cracked open the door to the kids’ room, half-expecting to see Daisy pounding on the floor with a mallet, but both children seemed to be sound asleep. After a moment, he turned and headed down the hall toward the kitchen.

Halfway there he paused to take stock. He was wearing a pair of sweatpants with no shirt or shoes. The closest thing to a weapon he saw in the immediate vicinity was Jess’s baseball bat propped against the china cabinet.

Lars sighed. As a bodyguard, he was a good accountant. He picked up Jess's bat and moved toward the kitchen as silently as he could.

The thumps came irregularly now, still interspersed with the occasional clang. Lars moved into the room, then pulled up short.

Jess stood next to the sink, her bathrobe pulled tight across her chest. She was leaning forward, trying to see out the kitchen window.

"Jess!" he whispered.

She whirled toward him, her hands over her mouth.

"Sorry." He stepped beside her. "What do you see?"

"N-nothing," she stammered. "I don't know what's making the noise."

He put his hand on her shoulder, moving her gently to the side. Beneath his fingers, her skin felt like ice.

Lars peered through the window, but all he could see was blank darkness. The thumping subsided to an occasional clang. "Where's the backyard light?"

"In there." Jess turned toward the utility room.

"Okay." Lars nodded. "Go in there and turn it on. I'll stay here and see if I can tell what's happening."

Jess stepped down into the utility room. A moment later, he heard the click of the switch and light flooded the backyard.

Two raccoons stared up at the window from the side of the house, blinking. Jess's bird feeder lay on the ground between them. After a moment, they lumbered into the trees. Lars stood watching their furry brown rumps disappear into the cedar brush.

"What is it," Jess whispered.

He turned to look at her. She stood in the doorway, her arms wrapped around her waist, her face pale in the moonlight. He couldn't be sure, but it looked like her lips were trembling.

"Raccoons. They knocked down your bird feeder. It must have thumped against the house when they were trying to tip it over."

"Oh." She pressed a hand to her mouth. Lars watched as her chin began to wobble. "Oh, god," she whispered, bending forward at the waist. Her shoulders began to heave as she gasped for breath.

He stepped toward her quickly and pulled her into his arms, running his hand in circles against her back. "It's okay," he murmured. "It's okay, Jess. Just raccoons. Don't worry. Everything's all right."

Jess's words were jumbled together with sobs. "I was so scared." *Gasp*. "I thought he'd come back." *Gasp*. "I thought he'd get in."

“Jess.” He worked on keeping his voice level. “Jess, listen to me. You’re all right. Everything is all right. It was just raccoons. Here.” He pushed her gently to the window. “Look. Your bird feeder is on the ground. They knocked it over to get at the seed.”

Jess looked through the glass and then turned back to him, her eyes still brimming. Gasping for breath between the sobs, she pressed her face against his chest again.

His bare chest. He was suddenly aware of warm breath, warm skin, the smell of her hair—rosemary and mint. His heart beat accelerated.

Go. Leave. Now. Back to your bedroom. Donot put your arms around her!

His body was apparently unconnected to his brain. His hands drifted toward her hips, almost automatically. He felt the smooth indentation of her waist beneath his palms.

“I just... give me a minute,” she whispered. “It’s just reaction.” She kept her face pressed against his chest, and he felt tears on his skin.

“It’s okay,” he repeated. Then he brought his hand to her chin, tipping her face back so that he could see her eyes.

The color of moss, of sea foam, of the leaves on the mountain laurel in his backyard. Jess watched him, blinking, her lips slightly parted as she drew another sobbing breath. Her nose looked damp. One leftover tear left a track down her cheek.

She was a mess. Also the most gorgeous woman he’d seen in at least a year, bar none.

Well, hell. He lowered his mouth to hers.

A jumble of sensations washed over him, the salt on her lips, the smell of rosemary and mint, the softness and warmth of her mouth. For a moment, her body tensed in his arms, and then her lips opened beneath his, as her tongue darted across his teeth.

Lars shifted against her, angling his mouth over hers, deepening the kiss. His tongue moved, rasping against hers.

Oh lordy, he hadn’t done this in so long. And those last few times with Sherice hadn’t been anything he ever wanted to repeat. He hoped to god he remembered how to do it right.

Jess’s hands moved up his chest, her fingers sliding through his chest hair to clasp around his neck. She pulled herself flat against him as he bent over her, bodies touching now from shoulders to crotch.

Crotch. Right. He could feel his arousal pressing against the thin fabric of his sweatpants.

Jess rubbed herself against him again, the smooth satin of her robe sliding over his skin. Without thinking, he reached for the sash at her waist, pulling it free, then pushed her robe down off her shoulders. Underneath she was wearing a sleep shirt and nothing else.

He ran his hands across her breasts, feeling her nipples jutting hard against his palms. She moaned against his mouth, her fingers tangling in his hair.

Lars reached for the edge of the sleep shirt, pulling it up slowly so that he could slide his hands underneath.

Jess's fingers moved to his chest again, rippling through his chest hair. For a moment, he was afraid he might explode where he stood.

"Easy," he gasped. "Control is not exactly my strong suit right now."

Jess didn't seem to hear him. He felt her fingers moving again. And then she leaned forward and ran her tongue across his nipple, sending a jolt of sensation straight to his groin.

He was in deep, deep trouble.

Jess was trying very hard not to listen to the cautious voices in her head that screamed *What are you doing? Have you lost your mind?*

Obviously, she *had* lost her mind. But that didn't matter since her body was currently in charge. She couldn't seem to stop touching him, feeling the coarse hair, the smooth skin, the rough pebbling of his nipple beneath her lips.

God, she'd missed this so much.

Lars cupped her breasts, then leaned down to lave the nipples through her sleep shirt. She felt as if an electric current raced from her breasts to her core, lighting her up like a candle.

His teeth grazed her nipple as he pinched the other tight, drawing it to a hard point.

"God," Jess whispered, "oh god."

His other hand stroked across her belly and down, his fingers sliding between her folds. He circled her clit, rubbing his thumb across it.

The pressure built inside her, making her move, jam herself against his fingers. "Please, oh please."

One finger slid inside her, then another, then he was moving, his mouth against her throat.

Jess bit down on a cry, fighting to keep silent, until he covered her mouth with his own, swallowing her moans.

She reached for him, pushing her fingers inside the front of his sweatpants until she found his cock jutting into her hands.

And then she stopped.

Right. The man was six foot five or so. The rest of his body was going to be in proportion. Well, so what? *Guts up, Jess. Time to climb that mountain.* She ran her fingers along his length, scratching her nails light across the tip.

Lars groaned.

Jess started to slide down his shaft again, but he caught her hand.

“Jess,” he panted, “sweetheart, slow down. Like I said—control isn’t my specialty right now.”

“Control is over-rated,” she muttered. She wrapped both hands around him, sliding up and down along his length.

“Jess.” His voice sounded strangled. “Christ!”

He was velvet on iron. Jess leaned forward further, standing on tiptoe, so that she could drape one leg around his waist. She rubbed the head of his cock up and down against her own burning wetness.

Lars gave a great sigh, then wrapped his hands around her hips. He lifted her to the edge of the counter, spreading her legs wide. For a moment she balanced, resting her hands on his shoulders. And then he plunged inside.

He moved without rhythm or restraint, plunging deep, erratically. Jess tried to stifle the sounds that kept jolting from her, biting down hard on her lip. Lars buried his head against her shoulder, rumbling with the strain.

Jess tucked her heels in the small of his back, riding him, letting him take her with him. Whatever was happening to her now was new. She’d never felt anything like this before.

And then Lars reached something deep inside her that almost made her scream. She sank her nails into his shoulders, moaning as her body came undone.

A moment later, she felt him stiffen, and then he was pulling back abruptly as the warm stickiness of his seed flowed across her thigh. She wrapped her legs around him again, pulling him close, her arms around his waist, her head against his bare chest.

It took her a few moments to catch her breath. And a few more to regain her sanity. *Oh my god, what did we just do?*

Lars seemed to come to his senses at the same time, drawing back from her as he struggled for breath.

“That was...crazy,” she stammered, suddenly aware of all the awful things that could have happened, particularly if Daisy had woken up.

Lars nodded. “Right. It was.”

“What were we thinking?”

“I don’t know about you,” Lars murmured, “but thinking was not high on my list just now.” He turned toward the sink, tearing a paper towel off the rack and dampening it beneath the tap. “Stay still.”

Jess watched him. He took a deep breath, and then he rubbed the towel gently along her thigh, cleaning her skin. “Sorry. I wasn’t exactly prepared tonight.”

Did that mean he'd be prepared some other night? Jess shook her head to clear it. That was *so* not what she should be thinking about right now. She pushed herself to the edge of the counter again.

"Let me help you." Lars put his hands at her waist again, lifting her down to the floor. The warmth of his palms sank through the thin knit of her sleep shirt, making her realize she was cold. Particularly now that she no longer had Lars's body to warm her.

Jess licked her lips, suddenly unable to meet his gaze. "I guess... Maybe I'll go back to bed."

"Sounds like a good plan." He pushed a strand of hair behind her ear, his face solemn. "Are you okay?"

Jess nodded. "Sure. Just... a little stunned or something."

"Right, well, that's understandable." He looked away from her, studying the floor. "Get some sleep then."

"I will." Jess picked up her robe and threw it over her shoulders, moving toward the dining room.

"Jess?"

She turned back to look at him. His dark hair was tousled over his forehead, his chest hair matted in whorls. Jess bit her lip. She could see the marks of her nails on his shoulders.

"It was crazy," he said softly. "But it was also pretty amazing."

Jess's lips edged up into a grin, almost against her will. "That it was," she murmured. "That it definitely was." She turned then and headed quickly for her bed.

Chapter Sixteen

Lars dreamed of having sex on a kitchen counter, driving himself deep into a woman's warmth, gazing down at the face beneath him.

And seeing Sherice's mocking smile as she looked up at him.

He woke up sweating. Also hard. He didn't have to wonder what message his subconscious was sending him. The last time he'd done something as impulsive as his kitchen encounter with Jess, he'd made the worst mistake of his life, a mistake he'd be paying off for years to come. Had he just done the same thing with Jess Carroll? Was he really being led around by his dick again?

He lay staring into the darkness, picturing Jess's face as it had looked last night, dazed with passion. He didn't think she was another Sherice. Not by any measure that made sense. But his judgment with women wasn't exactly infallible. He drifted back to sleep, wondering if there was any way to be objective about a woman he'd made crazy monkey love to on a kitchen counter.

When he woke up again, he realized he had a more immediate concern. What exactly would he say to Jess when he saw her at breakfast? Not that he could say much beyond "Good morning, how are you" since Daisy would be hanging around.

Thinking about Daisy almost made him break out in a cold sweat. Jess was right—they'd been absolutely nuts. What if Daisy had woken up? What if she'd walked out into the dining room? What if

she'd seen her father...boinking the babysitter on the kitchen counter?

Lars blew out a breath and told himself to cool it. Daisy hadn't woken up. And boinking Jess Carroll could well prove to be the highlight of his month, hell, his past six months given the way his months had been going lately.

In fact, all things being equal, and in spite of his doubts about his own judgment, he'd really like to do it again. The boinking part, that is, not the guilt and confusion that had hit him afterward. He wondered if he could have one without the other.

He wasn't sure how Jess would feel about the whole thing, though. She'd been enthusiastic enough while they'd been doing the boinking, judging from the nail marks on his shoulders, but afterward she'd seemed to be wallowing in an even bigger wave of angst than he had.

Which probably made her a better person, but might also rule out any future encounters. Which might be better for all concerned, given the tangled state of his own psyche. Lars took a deep breath. Maybe he should just cool it.

He started for the bathroom, then heard Daisy's piping voice from the dining room. He turned back to pull on a shirt and jeans instead of his sweatpants. He *really* didn't want to explain those nail marks to his daughter. Not until he'd had a cup of coffee, at least.

In the dining room, Jack sat in his high chair next to Daisy in her booster seat. Both of them were having something that looked like gruel but was probably oatmeal.

"Daddy," Daisy shrieked, wriggling off her chair.

Lars caught her before she upended the booster chair and put her back in place again. "Morning, sweetheart. Eating your oatmeal like a good future CEO?"

Jess walked in from the kitchen, carrying a plate of toast. "Future CEO?"

"Janie and Docia got her started." Lars shrugged. "Sounds okay to me. She'll need to support me in my old age."

"I'll sport you, Daddy." Daisy nodded vigorously. "I'll sport you good."

Jess pressed her lips together. Lars had a feeling she was fighting a grin. She was also fighting any need to look at him directly.

"There's coffee in the kitchen," she said to Jack.

Lars assumed she was actually talking to him since Jack seemed largely uninterested in coffee possibilities. He wandered into the kitchen and found a cup, then wandered back.

"Can I show Jack my teddies?" Daisy asked.

Jess gave her a stunned look. Okay, so she hadn't entirely forgotten last night.

"Her bears," Lars explained. "Also some rabbits and a couple of tigers."

Jess looked directly at him for the first time. She had shadows beneath her eyes and a beard burn beneath her chin. *Terrific*. He only hoped Docia and Janie stayed home today. He really didn't need his sisters-in-law adding two and two.

She turned back to Daisy again. "Maybe you can show him this afternoon. This morning we have to clean the cabin. We've got guests coming in for the long weekend."

Lars blinked at her. "Long weekend?"

"Thanksgiving. Day after tomorrow." Jess glanced at him directly again. Progress.

"Geez, I forgot about Thanksgiving. You and Jack are coming to Docia's, right? She said she'd invited you."

Jess ran a hand through her hair, leaving it standing in spikes. "I don't know..."

"Jack has to come," Daisy cried. "He *has* to. I told Aunt Docia and Aunt Janie he would."

"Please come," Lars said quietly. "They'd really like you to be there. So would we."

Jess sighed, rubbing her nose. "We'll have guests in the cabin all weekend."

"Leave your cell number. Nobody would expect you to give up your own holiday just so you could be on call."

Jess grimaced. "You'd be surprised what people expect. Okay. We'll be there. Jack deserves a Thanksgiving."

So do you. But Lars didn't say it out loud. He figured he'd pushed his luck about as far as he could for one morning.

The day was full of people trying to get all their work done in advance so that they could take the weekend off. The longer he spent trying to get their problems taken care of, the more Lars began to think that would be a good idea for him, too. At least the taking-the-weekend-off part.

He worked late, until six-thirty or so, then took his laptop home with him. Somehow he was fairly certain Jess wouldn't be interested in any recreational sex. Once he managed to dig himself out from under all the requests that had been dumped on his head during the day, he'd see what he could do about changing her opinion.

"Your sister-in-law called," Jess told him when he finally got back to the cabin. "They want to take Daisy tomorrow, so she can help them get ready for Thanksgiving, if that's okay with you."

"Which sister-in-law?"

"Janie."

Lars blew out a breath. "Okay by me. You want to go stay with Aunt Janie and Uncle Pete, pumpkin?"

Daisy looked up from her bowl of ice cream, most of which was distributed around the lower half of her face. "Can Jack come?"

“Not this time, sweetheart. Mrs. Carroll needs Jack here.”

Jess raised an eyebrow, but let him get by with it.

Daisy’s lower lip stuck out ominously. “I don’t wanna go.”

“Jack will be there on Thursday,” Lars explained. “And this way you get to spend the afternoon helping Aunt Docia and Aunt Janie decorate the barn and get the food ready. Jack’s too young to do that. He’d just be in your way.”

Daisy turned to Jess, her lips trembling.

“It’s okay,” Jess murmured. “We’ll be there later. You’ll have a good time with your aunts.”

“Okay.” Daisy looked more like she’d just agreed to a six-month jail sentence rather than an afternoon of being pampered and probably stuffed full of things that weren’t good for her. Lars only hoped Janie had a sufficient supply of stomach upset remedies.

He wandered into the kitchen after Jess, hoping there might be something left to eat, even if it was only a peanut butter sandwich.

“Your dinner’s in the refrigerator,” she said. “You can warm it up in the microwave.”

She was back to not looking at him again. Lars managed to plant himself in her path.

“Thanks for feeding Daisy. I didn’t think I’d be this late.”

She blinked at him, the corners of her mouth edging up in a dry smile. “She’s a guest. I don’t let my guests go hungry.”

“So I see.” He lifted the plate of meatloaf and mashed potatoes out of the refrigerator, removing the neat plastic wrap from the top. Then he turned to slide the dish into the microwave.

“Daddy,” Daisy called. “You said you’d read Babar.”

Lars glanced down at his dinner, then picked up the plastic wrap again, stifling a sigh. “Sure, Dais, I’ll be right there.”

Jess knew she was being a coward, but she couldn’t seem to stop it. Every time she was in the same room with Lars she found herself remembering several very explicit (and hot) details about his anatomy.

She’d never be able to look at kitchen counters the same way again.

She took a deep breath and blew it out. *Steady*. Everybody deserved the occasional moment of lunacy. But only a real psychopath would try something that risky again.

Particularly with two children in the house, both rambunctious.

She put Jack down while Lars was still reading about Babar's adventures in Paris, then fled to the study and her computer where she stayed for the rest of the evening. If she didn't see him, she told herself she wouldn't be tempted.

She vowed she'd stay in her bed that night, no matter how much noise she heard. And she really did not—did *not*—want Lars to come to her room after he'd finished his own work.

He didn't, of course. She'd been snarling at him all day, and he wasn't a stupid man. Jess told herself she was glad and pulled a pillow over her head.

Nobody tried to break in that night and nobody got lucky. She felt predictably grumpy when she got up, but she knew she had no one to blame but herself.

Not that that made her feel much better.

Janie arrived at noon to take Daisy away. "You're coming to dinner tomorrow, right? Docia told me to remind you."

"We'll be there. What can I bring?"

Janie frowned. "Not much. I think Docia and I have it pretty much in hand."

"How about some homemade bread?"

"Allie Maldonado is coming and she usually brings rolls from her bakery along with the desserts, but we can always use more." Janie grinned. "Go for it."

Jess put Jack in his jumper seat in the kitchen doorway and dug into the pantry. She actually had a couple of packages of yeast on hand and, amazingly enough, they hadn't passed their expiration dates.

Fortunately, her bread recipe had enough steps that she could play with Jack in between.

Create the sponge. Watch Jack bounce. Add flour and milk, stir one hundred times, knead dough until shoulders ache. Build a Duplo castle and watch Jack destroy it, gleefully. Punch dough down. Read Jack the same Babar story Lars had read Daisy, waiting for the fateful eyelid drop, then put Jack down. Grease pans, shape bread into loaves. Get twenty minutes worth of work done on Web site. Place loaves in oven. Find the smell of baking bread oddly soothing, even when Jack wakes up whimpering and thoroughly wet. Take the bread out of the oven and marvel that something in her life still seemed to work just the way it always had.

Jess managed to find an unused oven shelf that could serve as a cooling rack and turned the loaves out of their pans. In the background, Jack crawled around the limited space she'd laid out in the dining room, pausing occasionally to thump Mr. Wiggles affectionately on the floor.

It was sort of refreshing to be back to just the two of them, she reflected. No worrying about what Daisy was up to currently. No thinking about what Lars looked like without his clothes. Definitely no thinking about that.

Lars himself arrived just as she was spooning the last of some pureed plums into Jack's mouth. He

wasn't as late as he'd been the night before, but he was still later getting home than the people who treated Wednesday as part of the Thanksgiving weekend. Jess figured that was because he was one of those who made life easier for the others.

He stood frozen in the doorway, eyes closed. "Oh my god. It smells like what I always figured paradise should smell like."

"There's a cut loaf in the kitchen, along with some vegetable soup. Feel free." Jess turned back to scraping excess plum off Jack's cheeks as Lars headed toward the kitchen, almost at a trot.

When he came back to the table, he had a piece of bread the size of a manhole cover, slathered with a layer of butter around a half-inch thick. "This is the greatest bread I've ever tasted."

Jess narrowed her eyes. "You haven't tasted it yet."

"Actually, I had another piece in the kitchen." Lars gave her a slightly shame-faced grin. "I'm a sucker for fresh-baked bread."

"You and every other male with a pulse. Have as much as you want. Just save the other three loaves for tomorrow."

He was still munching happily when she carried Jack off for his bath. When she came back from putting him down, Lars was sitting in the living room with his laptop. Jess turned toward the study and escape.

"Jess?" Lars looked up. "Got a minute?"

She took a deep mental breath. "Sure."

She sat in a chair across the room from him, reminding herself he was a guy. Guys never wanted to talk about relationships, did they? Particularly if there really wasn't any relationship to speak of. So he couldn't want to talk about what they'd done two night ago. "What's up?"

He clicked his laptop closed. "You're still upset about the other night, aren't you?"

She blinked at him. Just her luck to get the only guy in Texas who didn't mind talking about relationships. "It wasn't the smartest thing we could have done."

"Granted. But we were lucky. Neither of the kids woke up. The only ones involved were the two of us. And frankly, I don't regret it."

He grinned at her, molasses eyes crinkling.

She felt like kicking him. Where did he get off being so damned adorable? They weren't supposed to do this. Not now. Maybe not ever.

"I don't exactly regret it. But..." She licked her lips, trying to find the right words.

"But you don't want me to think we'll necessarily be doing it again. I understand that."

She stole another glance at him. He leaned forward now, elbows on his knees, his expression intent. His hands dangled down—broad, strong, with long tapering fingers. Fingers that had been inside her two

nights ago.

Jess licked her lips again. Apparently, she was losing her mind. “I’ve never done anything like that before,” she stammered. “I mean, well, obviously I have done it. But not like that, and not for a long time...” Heat flowed from her eyebrows to her toes. She was probably the shade of a well-done lobster.

Lars swallowed hard. She really hoped it wasn’t to keep from laughing hysterically. “It’s not something I’ve done too much myself. At least not for a while. Look, Jess, I just want us to get over this. I don’t want it to come between us. If you want me to promise I’ll never come on to you again, I will.”

She stared at him, wide-eyed. *Terrific*. He didn’t want to have sex with her again. Ever. Had it really been that bad?

He blew out a quick breath. “I mean, I wouldn’t be happy about it, but I’d promise. If that’s what you want.”

It took a couple of moments for the words to sink in. “You...want to do it again? Is that what you’re saying?”

He shook his head. “Not if you don’t want to. It’s absolutely your choice. I don’t want you to think...” His voice trailed off and he rubbed a hand through his hair. “I’m really screwing this up, aren’t I?”

“No, you’re not.” She took a breath. “It’s just...I have to get used to the idea. I haven’t been with anyone since Barry died.”

“I haven’t either. I mean, I haven’t done it for a while—not since the divorce.” His smile was close to a grimace. “I didn’t have the energy or the inclination, I guess.”

He’d sure had the energy that night. Jess fought down an attack of hysterical giggles.

Lars’s grin became genuine. “You had a lot to do with that.”

Oh god, she’d actually said the words out loud. She wondered if she could slink out of the room without calling attention to herself. Her face felt like it had returned to boiled lobster shade.

“Look, Jess.” He leaned forward again. “If you want me to back off, I will. If it’s too soon for you, I absolutely understand. But given my choice, I’d like to, well, explore the possibilities.”

“The possibilities?” She licked her lips.

“Between us. I think it could be...really good.” His brow furrowed. “Did I screw this up again?”

She shook her head. “Give me a minute. I’m just processing here.”

“Processing?”

“Changing my perspective. Sort of like a screen refresh.”

“Oh.” The corners of his mouth began to creep up. “Does that mean you’re not entirely against the idea?”

She held up her hand. “Still processing.”

“Does that mean you’d consider it?”

She swallowed hard, feeling her pulse thump. “What if I said yes?”

He was definitely grinning. “Is that a hypothetical question?”

She stared down at her toes for a moment, then raised her gaze to his. “Not hypothetical. I’m interested. Just sort of...nervous.”

He pushed himself slowly to his feet, as if he was trying not to spook her. “Nervous is okay. I’m not exactly rock steady myself.”

Jess raised her gaze to his face, somewhere up there in the darkness above her. He might not be rock steady, but at the moment, he looked like he was made out of granite. Her chest suddenly felt tight. She drew in another deep breath.

“This time I want to do it right,” Lars said softly. “This time I want a bed. And time.” He extended his hand to her.

If I give him my hand, I’m committed. If I give him my hand, we’re going to do this.

One last deep breath, and she placed her hand in his.

Lars wanted to turn on the light in his room, but he was afraid Jess would take off down the hall if he did. Instead, he switched on the reading lamp near his bed.

She didn’t flinch, which he took as a good sign. He cupped her cheek, then ran his thumb across her full upper lip. She stared at him with eyes like tide-pools—huge, green, stormy. He leaned forward and gently opened his mouth against hers.

She murmured against him, her hands moving up his chest. He dropped his hands to her waist, pulling her T-shirt free from her jeans, then sliding his fingers underneath.

Her body felt lithe, muscular—strong, with soft full breasts. He pinched her nipples and heard her gasp, then she drew tight against him, running her tongue along the line of his throat.

He hardened almost instantly. After a long drought, his body was obviously making up for lost time. He buried his face in her hair, smelling rosemary, mint—and yeast. His breath caught in a chuckle.

“What?” She pulled back to stare at him.

“You smell like paradise,” he murmured. “And you taste like it too.” He pushed her backward until her knees hit the edge of the bed, managing not to land exactly on top of her as he followed her down. “I never knew fresh bread could be such an aphrodisiac.”

Jess pulled at his shirt, working the buttons free, then sliding it off his shoulders. She pushed him flat on his back, running her palms lightly across his chest.

Lars speared his fingers into her hair again and drew her face down, plunging his tongue deep into her mouth.

Her hands moved to his hips and she began struggling with his belt buckle.

“Easy,” he whispered. He took hold of her T-shirt again, pulling it over her head, then moved quickly to unfasten her bra.

Her full breasts hung free, her nipples dark in the lamplight. He brought his hands up to cup them, feeling their weight against his palms.

“I’m still nursing Jack,” she whispered. “Things could get messy.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He leaned forward and took her nipple into his mouth, tasting the faint, lingering sweetness of her milk. He pressed it hard with his tongue, and she moaned.

He looked up. Her eyes were closed, her fingers gripping his shoulders. He moved to the other breast and felt her rub against him.

Clothes. They both still had way too many clothes on. He unzipped her jeans, pulling them over her rear and down. Jess kicked them free then pushed his belt loose from the buckle and yanked his own zipper down.

Lars pushed his khakis and underwear to the floor, feeling his cock spring free as he did. He was already at tent-pole size.

Jess sat still for a moment, staring down at his crotch.

“Stand up,” he said.

She blinked at him. “What?”

“Stand up. Please. I want to see all of you at once.”

She pushed up, then stepped back from the bed. Full breasts, a gently curving waist, stomach taut but still slightly rounded from her pregnancy. Slender legs and arms, with a suggestion of muscles underneath.

Lars reached out to run his fingers across her abdomen, earning a soft gasp. “You have a runner’s body. A beautiful runner’s body.”

“I used to run. I haven’t had a chance in a while.” She made a small upward motion with her fingers. “Now you.”

He pushed himself upright, then stood. Without clothes, he knew he looked like a Neanderthal, but most women got over it eventually. Sherice had made a few cracks about his hairiness, but she never seemed to mind once they got to bed.

“You’re amazing,” she breathed.

He narrowed his eyes. Was that a shot?

“I mean it. You’re just...gorgeous.”

Lars bit down on his initial reaction. Why argue? She said he was gorgeous. Okay. For tonight he’d be gorgeous. Anything the lady wanted.

Jess stepped forward, leaning down to run her tongue across his nipple, then catching it in her teeth. Lars groaned and pulled her hips against him, feeling soft breasts and belly, sliding his fingers into her folds. Her clit was hard and erect beneath his thumb, and she groaned when he rubbed across it.

“God, I want you,” he whispered.

She moved her mouth to his throat, gliding her tongue to the indentation at the base, then running her teeth across his collarbone. Her hands rested on his shoulders and she pushed him gently backward toward the bed.

Lars landed on his back, staring up at her as she straddled his hips.

“In the top dresser drawer,” he gasped. “Please.”

Jess half-turned and pulled the drawer open, then leaned back, foil packet in her hand. She bit one corner, then ripped it open with her teeth.

Lars watched her pull the condom out of the foil and then place it on the head of his cock, running her hands slowly down the shaft to unroll it. He closed his eyes. If he was going to die, he hoped he’d at least make it to the end of the evening!

Jess straddled him again, pressing her knees against his hips, and then she lowered herself slowly, taking him into the warm moist depths of her body.

He gasped, then blew out a breath. “Jesus!”

She leaned forward, resting her palms on his chest as she raised her hips and lowered them again, then again, increasing her speed.

He reached up to cup her breasts, arching up to meet her as she rode him. “Jess, ah Jess!”

She paused long enough to bend down, and he pulled her mouth to his, burying his hands in her hair. Then she broke free and began to move again, faster now, her breath ragged.

Heat rolled over him from the base of his spine, pulling him up. He grasped her hips, holding her steady as he plunged deep again and again, then pushed hard against the place where they were joined until she cried out, her arms giving way to let her fall against him.

Lars seized her hands, feeling his body convulse against her as she groaned. Then he wrapped his arms around her waist holding her tight again, his hips pumping hard as he finished.

“Oh my,” she whispered. “My.”

Mine. A voice sang in his head.

Lars tried very hard to ignore it.

Chapter Seventeen

Lars woke up reaching for Jess. *Not good.* Not good at all. It was way too soon to be feeling this way. After Sherice, he'd sworn never to let his cock drive another relationship. But here he was again.

Bad enough that she'd spent the night in his bed. Bad enough that they'd made love twice more before falling into exhausted sleep. Well, okay, that part hadn't really been bad at all, but it was the principle of the thing.

He patted the mattress next to him, confirming what he'd already suspected. Jess was gone. Lars sighed and opened his eyes. Just as well. Best not to keep doing this kind of thing. He didn't have time to get involved with anybody. He had a two-year-old to raise and a business to run. Not to mention his demonstrably lousy taste in women. So what if Jess Carroll seemed terrific—hadn't Sherice seemed terrific at first?

Actually, now that he remembered it, she hadn't. Just hot. And his own overheated gonads had done the rest, convincing his brain that her inability to hold a conversation for more than five minutes made her intriguing rather than scary.

Lars shook his head to clear it. He wouldn't make that mistake again with anybody. Daisy deserved better than that.

But Daisy liked Jess. And Daisy wasn't crazy about Sherice, even though she was her mother. Yet another reason to fight any try for custody changes. Of course, if Sherice found out about him and Jess, she'd use it against him somehow. Lars felt a chill around his heart. Why hadn't he thought any of this through before he'd lured Jess into his bed the first time?

Enough. He pulled on his sweatpants and a T-shirt and went searching for his hostess.

He found her sitting in the dining room, cradling Jack in her arms as she nursed him. Sunlight streamed through the window, turning her hair into dull gold and picking out the red flecks in Jack's light brown fuzz. Lars stared at the creamy swell of her breast against the baby's lips.

She was the most gorgeous thing he'd ever seen, and he was clearly a pervert.

He dropped to the floor beside her chair. "Morning."

"Hi." She smiled down at him. "He wanted breakfast and I didn't want him to wake you."

"What about you? Did you get enough sleep?"

"No, but that comes with the territory." Her smile turned wry. "I'll sleep when he's eighteen. Or maybe not, given the kind of things I got into when I was eighteen."

"How often do you nurse him?"

"I'm down to two or three times a day now. I'm trying to wean him, but it's going slowly. Life would

sure be easier for both of us if he'd move on to bottles."

Lars glanced at the baby's face. His eyes were closed in bliss as he drank. Lars had the feeling Jack wouldn't be weaning himself any time soon, not that he blamed him a bit.

"Did your wife nurse Daisy?"

"Sherice? She has implants. She said they made nursing impossible."

That might even have been true, although by then he'd learned not to put much stock in most of the things Sherice claimed.

"Oh." Jess ran a hand over Jack's head, stroking his hair. "I didn't think I'd want to do this before he was born, then I tried it and here we are. What's your wife like?"

"Ex-wife," Lars corrected automatically. "Sherice looks like every rich man's second wife. Very blonde, very thin, very stacked. I was her starter husband."

She glanced down at him again, raising an eyebrow.

He shrugged. "What can I say? I was an idiot. But I got Daisy out of it, so it wasn't all bad."

"Does she get Daisy for vacations?"

"Nope. I have full custody of Daisy. Sherice has full custody of the money. Most of it. Although she tells me it's still not enough."

Jess frowned. "She gave up custody? How could she give up custody of Daisy?"

"A kid would probably slow her down. Sherice has plans. Besides, she and Daisy don't get along all that well. From Sherice's point of view it was definitely win-win."

Careful. Take it down a notch. Usually, he was able to keep the anger out of his voice, but he had a feeling it was going to surface any minute now. And he'd prefer that Jess didn't think he was some kind of embittered loser in the Divorce Wars. He pushed himself to his feet. "Want some coffee?"

"Sure. As soon as Jack finishes I'll make some."

"I'll fix it." Lars headed into the kitchen, checking the clock before he remembered.

Thanksgiving. Cal and Docia's. Ten o'clock start time. And the clock said eight-thirty. Given the amount of time it took to get the average baby ready for traveling, they needed to get a move on.

Which meant no mid-morning rematch. *Well, hell.*

Jess told herself it was all in her head. No one had any idea what they'd been up to last night. It wasn't like she had *Wicked Widow* tattooed on her forehead. Nonetheless, she found herself checking all the

Tolleffsons for sideways glances, even though she didn't immediately see any.

Cal and Docia lived in a wonderful converted barn with high ceilings and planked pine floors. A sleeping loft extended overhead, while the lower story had an open combination living room-dining room-kitchen layout. Right now the whole place smelled of turkey and cinnamon and butter. Jess had a sudden memory of her mother in the kitchen stirring green beans. Probably the last Thanksgiving before she died. Her throat tightened, and she pulled Jack closer.

Janie took the bread from Lars while Docia held out her arms for Jack. He took one look at her and dimpled. Jess had the feeling most men probably did the same thing when they saw Docia.

"Come here, sweetie," Docia cooed, rubbing her nose against Jack's forehead. He promptly grabbed a double handful of her bright red curls.

"Where's Daisy?" Lars asked.

"Out in back with the herd." Docia motioned toward the back door, then led the way herself.

Outside in the back yard, Cal and Pete stood in the midst of what looked like a pack of dogs. After a moment, the pack resolved itself into a Chihuahua, a greyhound, and one very active blue tick puppy.

"Daddy," Daisy shrieked, "come see! It's Sweetie!"

Sweetie galloped to Daisy's side at the sound of her voice, reaching up to swipe her face enthusiastically with his tongue. Daisy threw her arms around his neck as Cal grinned at them.

Jess stepped out on the back deck with Lars. "Does that mean Sweetie's well enough to come home with us?"

Cal nodded. "He seems to be feeling okay, but you'll need to keep an eye on him. Just to be on the safe side."

Sweetie galloped toward the Chihuahua, who backed up in alarm. The greyhound barked sharply.

Pete sighed. "Settle down everybody. He won't hurt you." He raised a questioning eyebrow at Cal. "Will he?"

Cal shrugged. "Pep can take care of himself. So can Olive. They'll get the pecking order straightened out among themselves."

"Which is which?" Jess asked.

Lars pointed. "Pep is Cal's Chihuahua. Olive is Pete's greyhound. There's also a cat hanging around somewhere who belongs to Docia, but my guess is we won't see him until the dogs settle down."

In the backyard, Daisy started after Sweetie, only to have her Uncle Cal sweep her into his arms. "Hold on, babe, the dogs have to get things worked out first. We don't want you to get snapped at."

Daisy gave him an affronted look. "Sweetie won't hurt me. Sweetie loves me."

"So do I, babe, which is why I'm taking you to your father."

Cal placed Daisy on his shoulders and headed back toward the deck again. “Hey, bro, got a delivery for you.”

“Daddy,” Daisy trilled, “did you miss me?”

Jess managed not to look at Lars.

“Sure,” he said in a hearty voice. “Come here, sweetheart.” He lifted her from Cal’s shoulders and placed her on the deck next to them.

Cal stepped next to Docia, gazing down at Jack in her arms. “Hey, there.”

Jack gave him another of his miraculous grins, showing his tiny pearl teeth. Cal glanced up at Docia. For a moment, their gazes met—she gave him a faint smile.

“Can I?” Cal raised an eyebrow at Jess, extending his hands to Jack.

“Sure.”

Cal slid his hands under Jack’s arms, tossing him quickly in the air and catching him. Jack squealed delightedly.

Docia’s eyes widened. “Cal! Be careful.”

“I am. Come on, big guy, let’s go meet the pups.” He tucked Jack under his arm and started back down the steps, pursued by Daisy and Lars.

Docia sighed. “Typical. I guess that means we go back inside and take care of the food.”

Jess watched the shifting tableau of guys, kids, and dogs, feeling her throat tighten again. Probably best not to stand out here and think about families and what kind of holidays she’d be able to offer Jack in the future. She turned and followed Docia back inside.

More people showed up a few minutes later. A Rubenesque woman with short dark hair and laughing eyes whom Docia introduced as Allie Maldonado, accompanied by a thin man in horn-rims everyone called Wonder. A middle-aged woman in a fluorescent purple sweatshirt who was Janie’s mother, Mrs. Dupree. A man with a walrus moustache whom everyone called Horace who apparently owned the veterinary hospital with Cal. And Horace’s wife Bethany, whom Janie recognized as the woman she’d met at the clinic the day they’d picked up Sweetie.

Janie smiled contentedly. “Mob scene, isn’t it? I love big Thanksgivings. It’s the perfect excuse to cook more food than anyone can eat. And then try to eat it anyway.”

Jess helped place the silverware on the long table Docia had set up in the dining room, then sliced her bread loaves and put them into baskets while Janie stirred gravy and Docia corralled a Toleffson to carve the turkey.

Lars made a great show of running the carving knife along a sharpening steel.

Jess turned to Janie. “Not Cal?”

“Cal’s a vegetarian,” Janie explained. “But he doesn’t mind the rest of us having turkey. Lars must have won the toss with Pete. Both of them like to carve.”

There was, as promised, more food than everyone could eat spread out on the table in the kitchen for people to serve themselves before they headed to the dining room. Turkey, dressing with and without oysters, mashed potatoes, mashed sweet potatoes, green bean casserole, corn with chilies, a huge relish tray and several variations on cranberries and Jell-O. Lars set up Jack’s highchair at the table and Docia pulled it between her chair and Jess’s.

“He’s kind of a messy eater,” Jess cautioned. “You may not want him too close. In fact, you might want to put some newspapers underneath his chair.”

Docia grinned. “I’m not all that neat myself. We can be slobs together. The floor can take it.”

Lars sat beside Jess, wedging Daisy in her booster seat on an adjoining chair. “Docia, the two of us could take the kids into the kitchen. That way you wouldn’t have to have them at the table.”

Jess thought he sounded a little hopeful.

“Nonsense,” Docia said briskly. “We’re family. Everybody at the big kids table, right, Daisy?”

Daisy grinned up at her. Black curls bouncing, with a few bits of straw here and there. “Yes, ma’am.”

Dinner was chaotic and delicious. Jess put bits of green bean on Jack’s tray so that he could practice his small motor skills, and Docia managed to spoon a lot of mashed sweet potatoes and minced turkey into his mouth. Lars cut up Daisy’s meat and buttered her bread, wedging some green beans between the servings of dressing and cranberry sauce and discouraging her from a third helping of the candied yams with marshmallows that Janie’s mom had brought.

“Allie,” Janie cried midway through the meal. “What’s that on your hand?”

Jess turned from Jack and his beans to see Allie Maldonado blush to the roots of her dark hair. She held up her left hand to show a smallish diamond ring. “From Steve.”

Next to her, Wonder turned an even darker shade of pink. The room was absolutely silent.

Then Docia and Janie were both on their feet, rushing around the table to hug Allie and admire her ring, while Horace thumped Wonder on the back so enthusiastically Jess was afraid he might have a coughing fit.

Lars raised an eyebrow at Wonder. “Nice going. I assume you finally decided against the skillet.”

“On the contrary.” Allie turned away from the women admiring her ring to give Lars a smug smile. “He got me a complete set. All-Clad. Stainless steel.”

Wonder shrugged. “I figure the ring is for her, the skillets are for me. The wedding is for both of us.”

“You cook?” Jess tried not to sound incredulous.

“I eat.” Wonder reached for another serving of yams, smiling happily.

Dessert was courtesy of Allie, and Jess could understand Wonder's enthusiasm for her cooking. Pumpkin, mincemeat, and blackberry pies. Cranberry nut bars. Homemade toffee.

"I may need to walk home," Jess murmured to Lars.

"Me, too. Maybe Daisy can drive."

There was a knock and then the front door swung open. An unmistakable Toleffson male stood framed by the afternoon sunlight—Erik, wearing his khaki uniform with a dark leather jacket. He cleared his throat. "Hi. Are we too late?"

"Erik! Come on in," Docia called. "You want some turkey? We just started dessert, so you can work backward."

Erik glanced around the table. "That's okay. We can't stay long. I'm on duty in an hour. Just wanted to say hello."

Another, much smaller figure appeared beside him in the door. Erik slid an arm around her shoulders, pushing her forward gently. "Everybody, this is Dahlia Lawrence. I think she knows a lot of you already from the Dew Drop."

Dahlia had black hair that ended in bright blue tips. Silver studs lined the ridges of her ears and she wore a ring through one eyebrow. She looked like she was maybe five feet tall if she stood straight, although at the moment she was cringing at Erik's side. Daisy stared at her, fascinated. Jess wondered if she was considering future ways to drive her father to drink.

"Hi, Dahlia." Janie walked toward her, extending her hand. "I'm Janie. Erik's other sister-in-law."

Dahlia muttered something that sounded a little like "Pleased to meet you". From her expression, Jess half-expected her to hide behind Erik rather than take Janie's hand.

"Come on in." Janie put her arm around Dahlia's waist, guiding her gently into the dining room. "You've got time for a cookie at least, and we've got lots more food than we can eat. Why don't you fill up a plate?"

Erik glanced at Jess, the corners of his mouth edging up in a faint smile. "Nice to see you, Ms. Carroll. And Jack too."

Jack gazed up at him, grinning, then gave him a quick crow while he pounded on his high chair tray.

"He recognizes you." Lars sounded vaguely affronted.

"He recognizes Toleffsons," Jess explained. "I think he figures you're all more or less the same person."

For a moment, the four brothers stared at each other, then Pete broke into a slow grin. "Maybe the kid's onto something."

"Erik? You want a cookie?" Dahlia's voice was almost as tiny as she was.

Erik turned toward her. "Sure. A cookie would be good. And maybe some coffee."

“Sit down.” Docia waved toward the table. “I’ll bring you a plate. You should have some of everything before you go to work.”

Everyone shifted slightly around the table to make room. Mrs. Dupree headed for the kitchen, muttering something about getting a start on the dishes. Bethany got up to join her.

Dahlia slid into the seat next to Jack that Docia had just vacated. Jack gave her his usual enthusiastic grin.

“He’s cute,” Dahlia murmured in her tiny voice. “Is he yours?”

“Yep.” Jess broke off a corner of her cranberry nut bar and put it on Jack’s tray. “Say hi to Dahlia, Jack.”

“Hi, Jack.” Dahlia’s voice went up a micropitch. Jack smiled at her beatifically.

Docia dropped back into a chair on the other side of the table. “Great dinner everybody. In fact, everything would all be absolutely wonderful if it weren’t for Kris Kringle.”

Jess stared at her. “You have a problem with Santa Claus?”

“I have a problem with the freakin’ Kris Kringle Market that starts tomorrow at the county fairgrounds. Official beginning of the holiday shopping season. And we’ve got dozens of boutique dog biscuits to sell.”

“Not as bad as gingerbread men,” Allie called from the kitchen. “At least you won’t have kids trying to lick off the frosting while you aren’t looking.”

Jess frowned. “Dog biscuits? I thought you had a bookstore.”

“I do. Don’t ask why we’re doing this. It’s too complicated. The gist of it is, we’re selling dog biscuits.”

Allie began carrying in cups of coffee from the kitchen. “Who’s going to run the store while you’re at the fairgrounds? I mean, I’ve got nieces to spell me and help out at Sweet Thing while I’m over spreading good will via gingerbread.”

“We’re taking turns,” Janie explained. “I’m on the booth in the morning, then Docia takes over in the afternoon.”

Allie frowned. “That makes for a long day. Can’t you draft somebody else to help?”

Cal held up both hands. “Don’t look at me. We’ve got a spay and neuter clinic all weekend.”

“I can be there part of the time in the morning,” Pete offered. “I’ve got the day off. I’ll help Janie.”

“I could help in the afternoon,” Jess said slowly. “If you don’t mind me bringing Jack along.”

Lars turned to look at her. “What about Daisy?”

Janie grinned. “Daisy can stay with me. We’ve already got the bookstore all set up, don’t we, sweetie?”

“Or with me.” Pete shrugged. “I’m off all day, so she can hang out with me in the afternoon.”

“Great,” Docia said briskly. “Jess can meet me at the fairgrounds tomorrow afternoon and learn all about tourist town commerce. Jack can be our special marketing ploy—check out the cutie and buy your pup a biscuit.”

Jess had a feeling Jack would be whimpering for a dog biscuit of his own before the afternoon was over, but she’d cross that bridge when they came to it. Maybe she could give him a teething biscuit instead.

Down the table, Erik wrapped up a cranberry bar to go. “Ready?” He raised an eyebrow at Dahlia.

“Sure.” She turned quickly to Docia. “Thank you for having me,” she mumbled.

“Thank you for coming.” Docia got up and walked with them to the doorway where she gave Erik a quick hug.

He looked almost as surprised as his brothers did, but he managed a smile as he settled his Stetson on his head. “Thanks, Docia. I appreciate it.”

He shepherded Dahlia out the door a little like a large, shaggy sheep dog with an abandoned lamb.

By the time they’d finished doing the dishes and playing the traditional Toleffson Thanksgiving poker tournament, Daisy was fast asleep in one of the loft bedrooms.

“Let her sleep,” Docia urged. “She’s got her stuff here from Janie’s. We’ll get her home sometime tomorrow after Jess and I finish up at the fairgrounds. You can leave Sweetie here too, for now. Looks like he and Pep have bonded.”

Lars glanced at the dogs curled in the corner, while he fought back the impulse to look at Jess. *Keep it casual*. No doubt his sisters-in-law would do a complete post mortem anyway, as soon as they left the room.

He helped her gather Jack’s gear together, while Jack himself dozed in an improvised bed of sofa cushions. Lars wondered if he could possibly suggest that Jack stay too, then felt like kicking himself for being an asshole.

Jess turned to Docia. “Thanks again for having us. It was a great Thanksgiving.”

“It was, wasn’t it? We’ll have to do it again soon.”

Lars heard a few vague alarm bells in his mind. Docia was trying to manage his life again. But for once he didn’t care. At least, not at the moment.

He glanced back into the living room where his brothers sat watching him. Cal gave him a slow grin. Well, hell, was everybody in the house monitoring his sex life?

Stupid question. Of course, they were.

Lars gathered up the bundles of food Janie and Docia had put together for Jess to take home as Jess gathered up the sleeping Jack, draping him across her shoulder. His eyes opened blearily for a moment, then closed again.

The ride home was fairly silent, after they'd exchanged the obligatory comments on the food, the poker and the general wonderfulness of his sisters-in-law. Lars wondered if Jess was thinking about the same things he was thinking about, then decided she'd have to be a moron not to be. And Jess was definitely no moron.

At the house, he did a quick survey of the perimeter. If he were Haggeldorn, he might figure Thanksgiving would be the ideal time to make his move. On the other hand, if he actually were Haggeldorn, he'd find a better way to spend his time than harassing widows and kidnapping babies.

Jess gathered up the sleeping Jack, leaving Lars to collect the miscellaneous plastic cartons of food, as well as Jack's high chair and the other equipment they'd brought for him.

When he'd finished putting the food away, he walked back to the hall to find Jess standing in the doorway to her room.

Lars did a quick search through his memory, trying to come up with some kind of line that would work. He had a feeling once she was through that door, he wouldn't be able to follow.

"So," he said, trying for nonchalance, "you're all done putting him down?"

"All done." Her smile was Sphinx-like.

"And you're ready to go to bed?"

She nodded, still smiling.

"I could offer you some company." He swallowed hard, trying to read her expression. Was that smile welcoming, or did she think he was being a jerk. "Or not. Your call. Entirely."

Jess looked up at him from beneath her lowered lashes, and then she reached up, sliding her hands on either side of his face, and pulled him down to her, running her tongue along the seam of his lips.

Lars felt every muscle in his body go rigid.

"Company sounds very good," she whispered.

Chapter Eighteen

The next afternoon, Jess surveyed the county fairgrounds as she pushed Jack forward in his stroller. It looked like a human feedlot—lots of little, square, pen-like booths, arranged in a twisting series of aisles that led into each other in what seemed to be almost random order. She checked the printed map she'd picked up at the entrance, trying to orient herself in the booth maze before she started toward the stall for Kent's Hill Country Books.

The aisles were awash with plastic pine boughs and holly, along with lots of fake snow. Christmas carols boomed from some of the booths, competing versions of "Jingle Bell Rock" echoing down the corridors.

If the temperature hadn't hovered somewhere around seventy-five, Jess could have sworn it was Christmas.

The aisles were also clogged with people, not all of whom were happy about making room for a woman and a stroller. Jess wished she had some kind of Road Warrior armor to put around Jack in case somebody tripped over the front wheels, but she had to make do with dirty looks and shouted "Excuse mes". If only Lars were here, he could run interference.

Lars. Last night in her room. In her bed. Doing things she was pretty sure she hadn't ever done before with anybody. He was a generous man, Lars Toleffson. And the thing about generous men was that they made you want to be generous too. Bedroom generosity lent a whole new meaning to the words, "Do unto others and they'll do unto you."

Jess almost ran the stroller into a squarish woman in a purple sweatshirt who was holding a lethal-looking tote-bag. She pulled her mind back into focus. "Excuse me."

The woman narrowed her eyes, then nodded to acknowledge the apology as she stepped to the side.

Jess paused to take stock again. According to her map, she was nearing the outer edge of the booth maze, which was where the Hill Country Books booth was supposed to be. She turned the stroller down another aisle and headed toward the far end.

Janie waved at her as soon as the booth came into view, and Daisy galloped toward them. "Jack, Jack, wait'll you see! It's Santa Claus!"

Jess raised an eyebrow. "Santa Claus?"

"Actually, Horace in a red suit," Janie explained, sotto voice. "When he powders his moustache and puts on a fake beard, there's a resemblance. That was this morning, though. Now he's back at the clinic with Cal."

"Hey, Jess, you made it!" Docia cried. "Come on into the booth."

Jess paused to check the layout. The counter in front was laden with what looked like homemade cookies shaped like stars, candy canes, and bells, each wrapped in red or green cellophane and tied with a bow. The counter running along the side of the booth was full of pet books—picture collections, training manuals, novels, cartoon collections. A large basket next to the cash register was full of peppermint drops.

Jess raised an eyebrow. "For the dogs?"

"Nope. For the kids. Speaking of which..." Docia leaned down to touch noses with Jack in his stroller. "Hi, sweetie."

Jack giggled and lunged for her hair, managing to bump his head in the process. He stared at Docia in surprise for a few moments before the inevitable wail.

Jess unfastened him from the stroller, lifting him into her arms. "Well, kid, what did you expect? If you keep trying to grab every pretty girl you see, sooner or later you're bound to get nailed."

His wails subsided into sniffles, and then he was reaching for the dog biscuits.

Jess shook her head. "I foresee a long afternoon ahead. Is there a spot where we can set up a playpen? I've got a collapsible one in the back of the stroller."

"Sure. Back there." Docia nodded to the far corner of the booth, shoving aside a couple of chairs. "You and I can sit up front."

Ten minutes later, Janie and Daisy had left for the shop and Jack was standing in his playpen, watching the customers with bright brown eyes that looked a little like raisins in his smiling baby face.

"Can I ask a really stupid question?" Docia leaned back against the edge of the counter, watching a couple of elderly ladies examine the books.

"Sure, I guess."

"How old is Jack?" Her face flushed slightly. "I mean, I haven't been around babies much. I'm just beginning to learn what they do when."

"He's almost ten months." Jess leaned down to pick up Mr. Wiggles from where Jack had thrown him. "Pretty soon he'll be walking, which means everything in the house goes up another level, and my anxiety rate accelerates to full panic."

"You're really good with him."

Docia flushed again, and Jess wondered what exactly was going on. She didn't think she'd missed any nuances, but she might have.

The elderly women glanced at the biscuits without much interest and then moved on, muttering.

"I'm pregnant," Docia blurted, then slapped a hand to her mouth as she checked to see if anyone had heard her. All the customers seemed to be otherwise occupied.

"Oh, Docia, how wonderful!" Jess put her arms around Docia's shoulders, standing slightly on tiptoe to do it.

"Yeah." Docia was grinning now, her face still slightly pink. "I didn't exactly mean to say it that way. I just found out for sure a couple of days ago. Cal and I haven't told anybody else, except for Janie and Pete. Don't tell Lars yet, okay? Let Cal do it."

"Sure. No problem."

"Of course, I won't be able to keep it a secret for long." She patted her stomach. "Toleffson babies are huge, judging by Daisy. And then on my side we've got the Brandenburgs, who aren't exactly small. How big was Jack?"

"Seven pounds, eight ounces."

"That's sort of normal, isn't it?" Docia's forehead was scrunched. "I mean how big are babies supposed to be?"

"Six or seven pounds is normal, I think. Jack's dad wasn't a big man."

“Oh. What was he like?” Docia shook her head. “I mean, I’m sorry, I don’t want to pry or anything.”

“No, that’s okay.” Jess sat back in her chair, watching Jack maul Mr. Wiggles. “He was a good man. Very gentle. Sweet. Funny. A great person to talk to.”

Docia pulled the other chair to the side of the booth. “Cal said he was older.”

Jess nodded. “By a few years. He always said he’d wasted his youth, but had a shot at a great middle age.”

She felt a quick pang somewhere around her heart. She hadn’t thought about Barry in several days. Days during which she’d been doing some serious cavorting with a relative stranger.

“You miss him.”

“Yes, I do. I wish he’d lived long enough to see Jack, but he just couldn’t hang on any longer. His heart problems were too advanced.” Tears gathered in her eyes for the first time in weeks. She reached for her purse to grab a tissue.

“Oh, Jess, I’m sorry!” Docia leaned forward to give her a hug. “I didn’t mean to make you sad.”

“It’s okay. I don’t mind talking about Barry. Really. He was a great guy.”

A couple of teenagers stopped at the front counter, eyeing Jess and Docia somewhat dubiously. One of them nodded at the dog biscuits. “What’s in these?”

Docia pointed at the stars. “These are cheese. They’ve got milk and cheddar and whole wheat flour, along with some egg and a little sugar. The candy canes are peanut butter and flour and milk. Those—” she pointed at the bells, “—are bacon, with whole wheat flour, milk, eggs, garlic powder, and a little bacon fat.”

“Ewww.” One of the teenagers crinkled her nose. “That’s disgusting. Cookies with bacon fat?”

Docia looked as if she were contemplating a quick dismemberment. Jess stood hastily.

“They’re dog biscuits, not cookies for people. Dogs will love them.”

“Christmas dog biscuits?” The second teenager raised her eyebrows.

“Sure. Why shouldn’t your pup get to celebrate like everybody else?”

The first teenager still looked dubious, but the other was digging into her purse. “Okay, I’ll take one of each. Nobody ever gave Boomer a Christmas present before.”

Jess took her money, then offered her friend a peppermint drop, which led to the friend deciding to check out the books, which ultimately ended with the friend buying a dog-themed date book for her mother. “She loves Chihuahuas,” the girl explained, shrugging. “Really lame.”

After she’d made change and sent the teenagers happily on their way, Jess looked back to check on Jack. Docia sat in her chair at the side of the booth again. Her face looked damp.

“Docia?” Jess leaned down beside her. “Is everything okay?”

Docia swallowed. “You know...cookies with bacon fat really do sound sort of...disgusting.”

“Oh my.” Jess put her hand on her shoulder. “Just breathe. You’ll be okay.”

Docia’s face now had a faint greenish tinge. “I was fine. Honestly I was. Then we started talking about bacon fat...” She took a deep breath, closing her eyes. “This is *so* not good.”

“There’s a restroom building at the end of this aisle. I saw it as we were coming in. Can you make it down there on your own? I can call someone to help.”

“Don’t be silly.” Docia stood, wobbling slightly. “I don’t need to go anywhere...” She took another deep breath. “Scratch that. Where did you say that ladies room is?”

Jess took her arm, pulling her gently to the aisle. “Look down there. It’s the green door.”

“Right. I’ll be right back. Hold the fort.” Docia started toward the bathroom at something approaching a brisk trot.

Jess watched her go, then turned back to the booth just as a group of tourists in baseball caps arrived, exclaiming over the biscuits. One of them had a golden retriever who looked capable of eating the entire table in a single gulp. Jess divided her time between selling biscuits and keeping an eye on Jack, who’d taken one look at the retriever and fallen deeply and urgently in love once again.

Ten minutes later, she wondered if Docia needed help. She couldn’t leave the booth as long as they had customers, not to mention Jack.

“Hello,” someone whispered at her elbow.

Jess turned to see Erik’s girlfriend. What was her name? Dahlia. Something about her looked different today. After a moment, Jess realized she wasn’t wearing all her earrings, or the spike through her eyebrow. Without them, she looked sort of...ordinary.

“Hi, Dahlia, how are you?”

“I’m fine. Is this your booth?” Dahlia still sounded like she was auditioning for a Marilyn Monroe sound-alike contest.

“It’s Docia’s. Look, do you have a minute? Could you run down to the restroom and check on Docia for me? She wasn’t feeling well, and I want to make sure she’s okay.”

“Oh.” Dahlia’s eyes widened in alarm. “Okay. I guess I could. You want me to come back here then?”

“Yeah, please come back and tell me how she is.”

Dahlia chewed on her lower lip. She looked as if she’d just been asked to take a quick walk over a fire pit. “Okay. I can do that.” She started down the aisle toward the restrooms, keeping far to the side, out of everybody’s path.

Jess sighed. Somebody needed to take Dahlia in hand, but it wouldn't be her. Maybe that was Erik's job.

The crowd had thinned out a bit as she'd talked to Dahlia. Only a few people strolled along the far end of the aisle. The Hill Country Books booth seemed to be in one of the more isolated sections of the booth maze. Still, just in the hour or so she'd been there, she'd sold a lot of dog biscuits and a few books.

She picked Jack up, cradling him against her shoulder. "Any chance you'll want to take a nap today, kid? Not that you'd be able to sleep around here with all this excitement. Maybe you'll be a sweetheart and go to bed early tonight."

Jack wriggled in her arms, trying to turn so that he could see the people walking by.

"Okay." Jess sighed. "Let me sit. Then you can do your worst."

"She's not there."

Jess jerked around, staring. Dahlia stood in the entrance to the booth, eyes wide.

"I looked all around the restroom and nobody was there. Did she come back here?"

Jess shook her head. "That's odd. I hope she didn't feel so bad she had to leave."

"Do you want to go see for yourself? Maybe I missed her."

"I can't leave the booth. Not with Jack."

"I could look after him." Dahlia glanced at Jack a little doubtfully. "I mean, he doesn't look like he'd be hard to take care of. And you'd only be gone a minute."

Jess considered it. She could put Jack into his playpen. Dahlia could certainly watch him for five minutes, and it wouldn't take her longer than that to see if Docia was still in the restroom somewhere. It seemed like the ideal solution.

She wasn't sure why she didn't want to do it.

"Thanks anyway, Dahlia. Maybe I'll just phone Lars and have him check with Cal."

She put Jack down in his playpen again, then reached beside the playpen to pick up her purse.

The pain caught her before she could straighten up. Her entire body seemed to be clenched in a single jolting cramp. A burning ache flowed down her spine, as if someone had punched her again and again.

She dropped to her knees, panting. "Dahlia, something's wrong! Help me!"

Jess managed to look up. Dahlia stood with what looked like a plastic gun in her hand, her expression impassive. "I'm afraid I can't do that. You should have taken my first offer."

Her hand clenched again, and Jess gasped as her body spasmed with another jolt of agony. She fought for breath, fought to keep herself from passing out. "Why are you doing this to me?" she gasped.

“It’s just a Taser. Don’t worry. The effects pass.” Dahlia’s voice sounded less like Marilyn Monroe and more like Nurse Ratched all of a sudden. “Much better than the alternative.”

Jess tried to push herself up, but her bones had turned to water. Her arms felt too numb to support her.

“Don’t make me hit you again.” Dahlia’s voice sounded almost conversational. “There’s some evidence that too many shocks in a row can result in nerve damage. Just stay where you are. You’ll be okay again eventually.”

Jack stared at Jess through the mesh of his playpen, his eyes wide. He reached his chubby fingers toward her, whimpering.

“Okay, baby, time to go.” Dahlia stepped next to the playpen, gathering Jack into her arms.

“No,” Jess groaned, trying to pull herself up again. “Don’t! Leave him alone!”

“Now what did I just tell you?”

The third jolt sent her thrashing backward. Her body felt like it was on fire. She fought to keep her eyes open as darkness touched the edges of her vision. Somewhere Jack was wailing. And then Dahlia was gone.

Lars told himself he didn’t really mind working on Friday, even though half the town seemed to be taking the day off. The half that didn’t need to sell things to tourists, that is.

He’d never seen the streets so clogged—it looked like everybody in Texas over the age of sixty had decided to come to Konigsburg for the weekend.

Not that the tourists needed the emergency services of an accountant. Lars checked his calendar—no appointments until next week. He supposed he could use the time to catch up on other work, but somehow the prospect didn’t sound all that appealing.

Mrs. Suarez had left at noon. Lars figured he wouldn’t stay much longer himself. He could pick up Daisy at the bookstore and head out to the county fairgrounds to see what Jess was up to.

What she’d been up to last night had left him with a lot of very pleasant memories that had warmed him through the morning. He had no idea where this thing with Jess Carroll was headed, but he figured he’d worry about that later. He’d had a lifetime of careful planning and look where it had gotten him. He’d earned the right to be slightly irresponsible for a change. Right now, life was good.

The bell on the outer door tinkled around twelve-thirty, and Lars felt like groaning. He’d almost talked himself into leaving for the day.

He opened his office door and leaned out. “Hi. What can I...”

Lorne Haggdorn looked back at him, with a slightly smug grin.

Lars grabbed his cell from his belt and began punching in the number for the police station. Given the number of times he'd had to call them, thanks to Haggern, he had it memorized.

"You might want to hold on there," Haggern said mildly. "Hear what I've got to say before you jump off the handle."

Lars paused in mid-punch. Given his choice he'd rather be punching Haggern. "I doubt it."

"You don't want to hear what your wife's been doing?" Haggern's grin widened. "Up to you, of course."

Lars took his hand away from the cell. "My wife? You mean my ex-wife?"

Haggern nodded. "Thought that'd get your attention. You want to take this inside your office?"

"We can talk here. Nobody else is around." Lars clipped his cell back onto his belt. "You work for Sherice?"

"Right. Lorne Halsell, at your service."

Lars ignored his extended hand. "Let's see, that's Haggern, Barrymore, and now Halsell. Any of them real?"

Haggern/Halsell reached into his pocket and pulled out a battered leather wallet. "My license."

Lars studied the laminated card for a moment. "You're a PI?"

"Right. Divorce work, mostly for some people in San Antonio. Your wife's lawyer looked me up."

"For what?" Lars handed the card back. "The divorce is final. It's not like she can do anything else to me."

"Child custody as I understand it." Halsell shrugged. "Lawyer said she was trying to get the custody order amended."

"With what? What are you supposed to find?"

Halsell shrugged again. "Anything I can lay my hands on. She wanted some evidence you were endangering the little girl. Lawyer told me to look at the child care facilities, stuff like that. Also neglect. I guess she figured she might be able to convince some judge that Daddy didn't spend as much time with her as Mommy would."

"That's crazy." Lars stared at him. But even as he said it, he knew it wasn't crazy at all. It was Sherice. Pure Sherice. "So what did you tell her?"

Halsell dropped into a chair, smiling again. It was one of the more unpleasant smiles Lars had seen. "Ah, well, that's where this visit comes in, Mr. Toleffson. On account, I haven't exactly told her anything yet. But I will. I figured you might want to have some input on that. For a fee, of course."

Lars unfisted his hands again. "Meaning?"

“Meaning technically I shouldn’t even be here talking to you, but I figured I’d give you a chance to have your say, maybe help decide what goes into that report. I mean, I could write a report that says your little girl’s staying out in some cabin with a woman who cleans houses. Or I could say you’ve got her set up with the manager of a luxury bed and breakfast. All in the way you phrase it, you see?”

“This is total bullshit, Halsell.” Lars leaned back against the edge of Mrs. Suarez’s desk, folding his arms to keep from grabbing the front of Halsell’s shirt. “All I have to do is tell the judge my ex’s PI broke into a private home and assaulted the owner, to say nothing of poisoning the owner’s dog. You’re not in any position to make deals here. In fact, calling the cops is sounding real good again.”

Halsell’s smile disappeared abruptly. “What the hell are you talking about? I never broke into any house. You mean that Carroll woman? I heard she’d been having problems out there by herself. But I never even got past the front porch. All I did was ask her some questions. If she claims anything else, she’s lying.”

The muscles in Lars’s jaw were so tense they were painful. “You gave her a phony name, after you tried to pump me for information. Are you telling me you didn’t do anything else?”

“Sure I did something else,” Halsell snapped. “I was being paid to find out information. I asked around town about that broad and her kid. I checked to see if you’d screwed up anything else with your daughter. And I tried to find out if you were boozing it up or bringing women into the house with the little girl. All the standard stuff. Nothing illegal. Hell, the only questionable thing I’ve done is come here to talk to you. That’s what I get for trying to give you a fair shake.”

Halsell subsided into his chair, doing his best to look injured.

“Oh, get bent, Halsell!” Lars snarled. “You came here hoping I’d buy you off. You don’t give a damn about whether or not I get a fair shake. You’re probably planning ways you can sell me out to Sherice even if I do pay you off.”

“No sir.” Halsell’s mouth became a grim line. “One thing you can say about Lorne Halsell—he stays bought. You pay me off now and I’ll come through for you.”

Lars stared at Halsell, trying his damndest not to snicker. He had other things to think about just now. “I’ll consider it. You have a deadline?”

“I’ll give you a week. Here’s my card.” Halsell got to his feet, digging into his pocket.

Lars glanced down at the printing, then back at Halsell. “You really didn’t break into Jess Carroll’s house? Or poison her dog?”

Halsell gave him a disgusted look. “Call me in a week, Toleffson. Otherwise, I go to your ex-wife. And she strikes me as a real piece of work.”

Lars watched the door close behind Halsell’s back, trying to decide just what he’d learned. He tended to believe the SOB, oddly enough, but if it wasn’t Lorne Halsell at Jess’s place, who was it? Had there really been a threat from Jess’s in-laws? And was she really still in danger?

Logically, she might not be. Maybe Pete had been right in the first place—maybe it was all a remarkably dumb burglar. But something about it made him feel itchy. Someone had given Sweetie the poisoned

hamburger. Someone had cut a hole in Jess's window. Someone had knocked her down trying to get to her son.

More than ever, Lars wanted to talk to Jess Carroll. He flipped the sign on the door to *Closed* and headed for the county fairgrounds.

Chapter Nineteen

Jess stumbled up the aisle, trying to listen for Jack's cries between the carols blaring from the booths. Somewhere nearby a baby was definitely howling—probably her son. She could get there in a few seconds if she could only get her legs to work again.

She was wide awake in the middle of the worst nightmare she'd ever had. Moving but unable to move, stumbling, her muscles turned to glue. She grabbed hold of the uprights beside the booths, trying to stay upright herself as she pushed forward through the maze of aisles.

If only she could find Docia. Or Janie. Or Lars. Most of all Lars.

"Are you all right, Miss?" someone called after her, but Jess couldn't slow down to answer him. She couldn't let Dahlia get Jack to the exit. Once they were outside, she'd never find them.

And Jack would be on his way to Lydia Moreland.

Jess caught her breath in a sob. And then she heard Jack's wail again, close by. Maybe even in the next aisle.

She turned the corner and saw a row of booths heading toward the red exit sign. And Dahlia, pausing to wrap Jack tighter in his blanket as he howled in fury.

"Stop her," Jess cried. "Please, somebody stop her! She's got my baby!"

Dahlia froze and stared back at her. Then she turned and began walking briskly toward the exit turnstile.

"No!" Jess screamed again. "Stop her! Stop her! Please, somebody." She grabbed hold of the nearest booth, pushing herself forward on legs made out of rubber.

Up ahead a man stepped from behind a booth in front of Dahlia. "Maybe you'd better wait a minute, Miss. Until we get this straightened out."

"She doesn't know what she's talking about. This is my baby. Look at her—she's drunk. Or crazy." Dahlia's voice was clear, no trace of the frightened little girl who'd been leaning on Erik's arm the day before. On the whole she sounded much more rational than Jess did.

The man at the booth narrowed his eyes at Jess, considering the way she was holding herself up, wobbling slightly. Then he glanced back at Dahlia—ordinary, unpierced Dahlia. Any minute, he'd back up and let her go.

"Get a cop," Jess cried. "If it's her baby, she won't mind. Let the police sort it out. Please!"

The man looked back at Dahlia again. "That makes sense, ma'am. It shouldn't take the police long to figure out what's going on. Then you can be on your way." He gave her a reassuring smile as he reached

for his cell phone.

“Can’t let you do that, sorry.” Dahlia pulled the Taser from beneath Jack’s blanket and pressed it against the man’s arm in one smooth movement.

The man dropped to the ground, clutching his arm and moaning. Somewhere in another booth a woman screamed.

Dahlia turned toward the exit again, but now other booth owners and customers had stepped forward, although no one seemed willing to get too close to her.

“Get out of my way and nobody gets hurt.” Dahlia’s voice was calm, but she held the Taser ready at her side.

“You give that baby back,” someone called. “He’s not yours.”

Jess glanced to the side to see a woman she vaguely recognized—maybe the checker at the grocery store or the woman who ran the cash register at the filling station. “He’s not yours,” she called again. “That’s Jess’s baby.”

“On the contrary,” Dahlia snapped. “Finders keepers.” She glanced toward the exit, her mouth curving in a faint smile. “Now move it.” She waved the Taser at the nearest man. The crowd shifted uneasily.

“I called security,” a man at the next booth yelled. “They’re on their way.”

Dahlia’s mouth firmed into a thin line. She started walking toward the exit again, swinging the Taser toward the crowd. Jess stumbled after her, willing her feet to speed up. Her muscles had gone from numbness to agony. She gathered her last bit of strength and lunged, trying to grab Dahlia as she went down.

Dahlia glanced back, then adjusted something on the Taser. “Well, damn. You don’t take orders, do you? Let’s turn this sucker up to max this time.” Jack wailed as the crowd moved back again.

“Leave her alone.” The vaguely familiar voice sounded blessedly calm in the midst of chaos. Jess shifted her glance from Dahlia for a moment.

Erik stood in the space before the exit turnstile.

“Shit.” Dahlia gave him a thin smile. “I should have known you’d show up.”

“Give Jess back her baby,” Erik said quietly. “Then we’ll figure out where to go from there.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Dahlia replied. “Do you know what this kid’s worth?”

“Yeah, I’ve got an idea. But how do you plan to get away with him now? Everybody here knows what’s going on. City cops are on their way. Hell, they’re already here, counting me. Face it, babe, you gambled and lost.”

“Not yet I haven’t.” Dahlia held the Taser in front of her again. “You’re off duty, playing security guard. And I’ve got a top-of-the-line cop Taser. You gonna hit me? Tackle me? Shoot me? With what? You don’t even have a night stick. Plus, I’ve also got this solid-gold baby. You want to take a chance on him

getting caught in the middle of this? Now get out of my way.”

Erik raised his hands, moving out of range of the Taser. “Come on, kid, don’t make me hurt you.”

“You don’t hurt me, I won’t hurt you. Just move out of the way.”

Jess pushed herself to her knees behind them. The numbness in her muscles seemed to be wearing off, but the agony wasn’t. She took a breath and started to pull herself to her feet, hanging on to a nearby booth. The booth owner leaned forward and took her arm, helping her up.

“Better stay back,” he murmured. “Let the guard handle it.”

Excellent advice. Jess had no intention of following it, however.

Jack’s wails were the only sounds she could hear. She could see his face, bright red with indignation, over the top of Dahlia’s shoulder. He began to wriggle, trying to get loose from the arm that was probably holding him too tightly.

Jess moved forward almost without thinking. Jack was only a couple of feet away. Her baby was screaming. She had to do something. Now.

Jack saw her at the same moment she reached toward him. He took a breath and then lurched in her direction, still shrieking, pushing his feet against Dahlia’s shoulder, for all the world as if he were in his jumper seat back home.

Dahlia half-turned, Taser in hand. “Goddamn it, woman! What does it take to peel you off?” She swung the Taser toward Jess again at the same moment that Erik’s hand closed down hard on her wrist.

Several things happened at once, although it took Jess a while later to remember the sequence. Dahlia dropped the Taser and jerked around toward Erik, snarling. Jack howled again and managed to wriggle out of her arms. Jess lunged forward one last time and caught him before he hit the ground.

She hugged his struggling body against her shoulder, scooting backward on her rear until she reached the front of the nearest booth.

The woman behind the counter took hold of her shoulder and pulled her through an opening into the enclosed space. “Stay down!” she muttered. “Let the guard get her in custody.”

Jess rubbed Jack’s back, trying to get him to stop wailing, while she peeked around the edge of the counter. “It’s okay,” she murmured. “I’ve got you back now. You’re safe. We’re both safe.” She really hoped she was telling the truth this time.

In the middle of the aisle, Erik struggled with Dahlia, one hand gripping her wrist. He looked like he was trying not to hurt her. Dahlia slashed at him with the other hand, aiming a knee at his groin that Erik managed to divert to his thigh. Then she leaned forward and bit the hand that held her.

“Shit!” Erik spat and backhanded her across the side of her head. She moaned and dropped to her knees.

“Goddamn it, woman,” he snarled, “I didn’t want to do that.” He reached behind him and pulled out his handcuffs as he jerked her arms behind her back.

Jack's wails were stronger than ever. Yanked out of his playpen by a stranger. Bounced down the aisle in arms that probably held him too tightly. Not to mention having a Taser hidden under his blanket. No way was Jack going to forgive and forget.

Any more than Jess was. She pushed herself to her feet and started toward Dahlia. She wasn't sure what she was going to do exactly, but she knew it involved violence.

"Jess?"

Docia trotted up the aisle toward her, her glance darting from Erik to Dahlia to Jack screaming in her arms. "Are you okay? Is Jack okay? What the hell is Erik doing?"

Jess sighed, shifting Jack to her other arm. "It's a long story. I'll explain as soon as Erik gets the Master Criminal here into the slammer."

Dahlia looked up at her, her gaze cool. "You might not want to do that just yet."

Jess moved back to stand beside Docia. "You've got something else you want to try?"

"I've got information you'd like to hear, believe me." She turned toward Erik. "And a deal you might want to make."

"We'll talk about it later. Right now you're being booked." He nodded toward Docia. "Can you take Mrs. Carroll and her baby to the hospital and get them both checked out?"

Docia nodded, eyes wide. "Sure."

Erik turned back to Dahlia and started toward the exit, his hand on her arm. "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law..."

She pulled back slightly and shook her head. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. I have the right to have an attorney present during questioning. If I cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for me. And, yes, I do understand these rights. Now are you sure you don't want to just talk this over someplace over a cup of coffee? Believe me, I've got things you'll want to hear."

Erik studied her for a moment, then shrugged. "Nice try, but we'll be doing this by the book. At least for now."

Dahlia's lips curved up in a faint smile. "Okay, ace, your choice. But you may kick yourself later."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Erik muttered as he towed her toward the door.

Lars had just turned onto the highway, heading for the county fairgrounds when his phone buzzed. He hit the speaker button. "Yeah?"

Docia's voice crackled through static. "Lars, where are you?"

“Heading toward the fairgrounds to see you and Jess. Why?”

“Jess isn’t there. You need to come meet me at the hospital.”

Lars’s stomach filled with ice. “What happened? What’s wrong? Is Jess okay? Is Jack? Where’s Daisy?”

Docia blew out what sounded like an exasperated breath. “Daisy’s with Janie at the shop. Jess and Jack are here, but they’re both all right. You need to come over here right now, though. Come to the ER.”

Lars looped into the driveway at a closed fruit stand, turning the car back toward town. “I’m on my way.”

The Kramer County Regional Hospital was smaller than the name suggested, but the emergency room was still hopping with tourists when he got there. Lars counted four families with children under five, one with a couple of dogs too. Maybe they’d be swinging by Cal’s clinic next.

Docia stood at the side of the admitting desk, trying to stay out of the way of exhausted parents and whining toddlers. She held Jack against her shoulder, but he didn’t sound much happier than the other children in the room.

“Lars.” She let out a sigh, patting Jack on the back. “Thank god you’re here. I need to go back to the fairgrounds and close down the booth. Plus I have to call Pete and get him over to the police station ASAP.”

“Not before you tell me what’s going on.” Lars managed to clamp down on the panic roiling his gut.

“Right.” Docia sighed again. “Here’s the short version. You can get more details later. Dahlia was the one working for Jess’s ex-mother-in-law. She attacked Jess with some kind of stun gun and took Jack from the booth. Jess managed to follow her and the booth owners kept her from getting away until Erik got there and took her into custody. Jack’s okay—the doctor checked him over. Jess is still in one of those cubicles back there, but she was on her feet and walking when we got here, so I think she’s going to be all right. Now, take Jack and go find Jess.”

Lars stared at her. For one of the few times in his life, he could think of absolutely nothing to say beyond “Huh?”

Docia placed Jack in his unresisting arms. “I’m sorry I can’t stay with you. I’ll try to get back as quickly as I can, and I’ve already called Janie. You can take Jess to their house when they release her.”

“Okay.”

“She’ll want to go to the police station, Lars. Don’t let her.” Docia’s eyes were bleak. “There’s nothing she can do there now. They’ll call her later when she needs to come in. Right now she needs to trust Erik. And Pete.”

“Right.” Lars figured sooner or later his brain would start processing all of this information. Right now, it was sliding off him like slime off a catfish. He watched Docia stride away, trying to remember all the things she’d just told him.

Jack squirmed slightly in his arms, making small baby distress sounds, and Lars managed to shake himself back to minimal consciousness.

Jess. He needed to find Jess. Right now.

The nurse at the admitting desk glanced at him. "Who needs help, you or the baby?"

"Where's Jess Carroll?" he blurted. "I'm here for her."

The nurse frowned slightly, regarding him through narrowed eyes. "You're a Toleffson."

Lars nodded. No use in denying it.

"Which one? I know Dr. Cal. He takes care of my Pekingese."

"Lars," he croaked. "Lars Toleffson. The accountant."

The nurse frowned at him for another moment, then shrugged. "Come on. She's back here."

Jess sat on an examining table in one of the ER cubicles. In the moment before she saw him, Lars had time to take in the bruises on her arms and the dust on her face. Her very pale face. She looked like a woman who'd been through hell, and still had a way to go before she made it all the way back. His chest felt painfully tight all of a sudden. "Jess?"

She turned and gave a small cry, extending her arms toward Jack, who was suddenly eager to get loose from Lars's grasp.

"Baby! Oh, Jack, come to Mommy."

Lars handed Jack to her, and she wrapped her arms around him, holding him tight against her body. "Jack, oh, Jack."

The tightness in Lars's chest seemed to increase as he watched her face, her eyes clenched against her tears.

"Are you okay?" he murmured.

Jess opened her eyes again as she took a shuddering breath. "I ache all over, and my legs still don't work as well as they used to, but the doctor doesn't think the effects will last. He said he'd sign me out. I need to go to the police station."

Lars shook his head. "You need to go to Janie's house and lie down."

"I'm fine, Lars." Her mouth was a thin line. "I need to make a statement about Dahlia."

"Dahlia's not going anywhere. You look like you're still in shock. And I've got my orders. You're supposed to go to Janie's for now."

Jess took another breath, and then blew it out, closing her eyes as Jack squirmed against her shoulder. "Okay, maybe you've got a point. I've never been so tired in my life."

“Right. You need to sleep for twelve hours or so. After I drop you off, I’ll go over to the police station to see what’s going on. I’ll come back for you if they need you.”

“But...” Jess yawned.

Lars put a hand on her back, rubbing lightly across her shoulders, fighting the desire to pull her against him. “It’s okay, Jess, trust me.”

Her eyes were stormy seas again as she looked up. “I do. Believe me, I do.”

Lars nodded, his chest tight. “Good. Now you can tell me all about it on the way to Janie’s. I’ve only heard Docia’s version, which sounded way too weird to be accurate.”

Jess closed her eyes. “Oh, Mr. Toleffson, sir, believe me, you haven’t begun to hear weird yet.”

Chapter Twenty

Pete got to the police station around ten minutes after he’d taken Docia’s call, just long enough to exchange his paint-spattered T-shirt and jeans for something more respectable. Technically, he should have been called by somebody who’d actually been involved in arresting Dahlia—the arresting officer or the desk officer. But he figured nobody was exactly operating at peak performance levels right now. Kidnapping and stun gun assault weren’t all that common in Konigsburg.

Hell, they weren’t all that common in Des Moines, where he’d spent a lot of years as a prosecutor before moving to Texas.

Erik glanced up as he walked in, then turned back to his prisoner.

Dahlia sat beside his desk, looking too small and frail to have done all that Docia had said she’d done. But every time he thought about Jess Carroll and her son, and how close she’d come to losing him, Pete wanted to punch somebody. Possibly Dahlia, although possibly himself for having been too dumb to catch on to what she was up to in time to stop her. Which made no sense, since nobody else had seen this coming either. But then nothing associated with this whole debacle made much sense as far as Pete could see.

He glanced around the station. By all rights, every cop in town should be in here checking out the nasty kidnapper, given how rare serious crime was in Konigsburg. At the moment, though, he didn’t see anyone except Erik and the dispatcher, Helen Kretschmer, sitting behind her desk at the front. Helen threw an occasional narrow-eyed glance in Dahlia’s direction, but she wasn’t showing a whole lot of interest otherwise. Everybody else was probably still out directing traffic.

Pete pulled up a spare chair beside Erik’s desk as Erik leaned back to watch Dahlia. “So who paid you to snatch the baby?”

Dahlia glanced at Pete, then shook her head. “I didn’t snatch any baby, Mr. Toleffson. I found that child in the middle of the aisle. His mother must have been too busy to watch him the way she should have. I was trying to return him when she jumped me.”

Erik gave her a sour grin. “Oh, nice one! It might even work if it weren’t for the Taser.”

Dahlia shrugged. “How was I to know she was the kid’s mother? She lunged at me. I had to protect

myself.”

“You met her yesterday. You knew it was her baby.”

Dahlia gave him a dry smile. “I’ve got a lousy memory.”

“So why did you Taser the guy at the booth?”

“Same deal. Protecting myself and the kid.”

“And the things you said about how much the baby was worth that were heard by at least six or eight other people? And the fact that you tried to Taser me too, even though I was in uniform?”

Dahlia’s smile was thin. “I know a very good lawyer.”

“I’m sure you do, babe, but it’s not going to help you much. That Taser is police issue only. I’m willing to bet when we check the registration, it won’t be in your name. Would you like to call that lawyer now?”

“I got the Taser on the Internet.” Dahlia’s eyes widened. “Surely that’s not illegal, officer. I had no idea it might be. And no, I’m not ready for my lawyer yet.”

Erik sighed, raising his gaze to Pete. “Your turn.”

Pete shook his head. “Not much to talk about here. Assault. Kidnapping. Illegal weapon. You’re going down, lady.”

Dahlia leaned back in her chair. “All right. Enough preliminaries. You two need to call whoever you call to make a deal. He’s going to want to hear what I have to say.”

“That would be me. I’m the Assistant County Attorney.” Pete frowned, folding his arms across his chest. “Of course, you might prefer the County Attorney himself. Only the office is closed for the holidays. But you can wait around here in a cell until Monday. There’s even a television set down the hall you can sort of see. Or we could always send you over to the county lock-up. Of course, Sheriff Friesenhahn’s a lot harder to con out of anything.”

Dahlia narrowed her eyes, scowling. “Very funny. Let’s get this discussion going. And I’m guessing you’ll want it to be in private.” She cast a quick glance in Helen’s direction. Helen stared back, unsmiling.

Pete cocked an eyebrow at Erik. “Any space available around here?”

Erik shrugged. “Olema’s office. He wouldn’t be happy about it, but he’s off deer hunting until Monday. I don’t figure he’s got much need for it at the moment.”

“Good enough.”

Five minutes later, Pete was seated at Claude Olema’s desk, trying to ignore the numerous pictures on the wall showing the chief with a succession of bloody dead animals.

Dahlia sat opposite him, cradling a Diet Coke in her lap. “We ready to go here?”

Pete ignored her, turning to Erik. "I've already got an outline of what happened from Docia. You want to go through it for me again?"

Erik shrugged. "She shocked Jess with her Taser and grabbed Jack out of his playpen at the booth, then took off for the exit. Jess managed to follow her, even though she'd been shocked a couple of times. People at the booths kept Dahlia from getting away and called for help. I got there before she could get out the exit and took her into custody."

"What did she use to shock Jess?"

"Taser M26. Power turned up close to max." Erik's voice was bland but his eyes snapped.

"Right." Pete turned toward Dahlia. "Assault and Battery. Kidnapping. You're looking at major jail time here, Miss... what is your last name, anyway?"

"Smith." Dahlia gave him a bland smile.

Erik's smile was equally bland, but his eyes were like anthracite.

"How did you happen to pick her up?" Pete asked him.

"One of the booth-owners called security when she grabbed Jack. I headed for the exit—didn't know what I'd find until I got there. She shocked a guy who tried to stop her, but she didn't use a cartridge like she did on Jess—he says he's okay. I told him to get checked out at the ER when he finished with his booth."

"And you stopped her?"

"I did."

Dahlia turned her head so that Pete could see the bruise on her temple.

Pete shrugged. "Hey, lady, you had a Taser and you were using it. As far as I'm concerned, whatever he did to you was justifiable force." He glanced back at Erik. "Jack and Jess okay?"

Erik nodded. "Docia took them to the hospital to be checked out, but I think they're all right."

Dahlia leaned back in her chair studying the two of them. She'd changed her look slightly, Pete noted. Her hair no longer had blue highlights and the earrings were gone, although she still looked like she needed several square meals to stave off malnutrition. But she wasn't the same woman anymore. The waif was gone.

"Are you all done trying to scare me?" Dahlia's lips curved into a lazy smile. "Because I'm ready to get on to the serious stuff here. Assuming you two don't have some kind of good-cop-bad-cop brother act you want to try out."

"Assault and battery and kidnapping don't qualify as serious?" Pete shook his head. "I'd say you've been spending time with the wrong people."

Dahlia rested her elbows on the table, staring straight at him. "I've got proof that Jess Carroll's mother-in-law has a more than passing interest in snatching her kid. If you're interested, both of you need

to back off.”

Pete leaned back in his chair. “What kind of proof?”

“Recordings of her hiring me and giving me instructions. Some instructions that could send the mother-in-law away for a very long time and make sure nobody comes after that baby again.”

The room had gone absolutely silent. Erik sat watching her, his expression blank.

Pete drummed his fingers on the desk for a moment. “And in exchange you want?”

“I want these charges to go away.”

“No way. It isn’t like this was a little private set-to. You shocked two people with a Taser and abducted a child in front of a dozen witnesses. There’s no way this could disappear, no matter what you’ve got.”

Dahlia shrugged. “Can’t blame a girl for trying. Okay, the kidnapping goes away and the battery. The assault goes down to simple assault.”

Pete narrowed his eyes. “There may be some flexibility on the charges. Not as much as you want, but some. It depends on the quality of the recording.”

“Oh, you’ll like the recording, believe me. Mrs. Moreland enjoys talking. Apparently, it never occurred to her that anyone might be interested in a record of what she had to say.” Dahlia’s smile reminded Pete of Docia’s cat eyeing a wren.

He spread his hands on Olema’s desk. “We hear the tape first. Then we discuss deals. And just so we’re clear here, you’ve said you don’t want an attorney present, is that correct?”

“Don’t worry, counselor.” Dahlia’s smile became slightly crooked. “Your brother already did the Miranda stuff. In front of witnesses. You’re covered.”

“Okay.” Pete nodded. “Now where’s this tape?”

“In my purse. A DVD, anyway. Assuming your desk officer hasn’t already sold it on eBay.”

Pete turned to Erik. “See if you can find it. I’ll see if I can find us something to play the damned thing on.”

It took Lars a lot longer than he’d anticipated to drop Jess off at Janie’s place. He’d figured on hearing Jess’s story and then heading over to check with Erik about what she needed to do. But he’d reckoned without Jack, who needed to be fed and changed and comforted and put to bed, and Daisy, who needed to show him her drawings and the books she’d brought back from the shop. Not to mention his sisters-in-law, who adamantly refused to let him hear Jess’s story without them.

Finally, a half hour later, with Jack asleep and Daisy preoccupied with *Sesame Street*, the adults gathered around the dining room table.

Lars watched Jess—her expression worried him. Her eyes looked flat, and her complexion was the color of skim milk.

Janie handed everybody cups of tea, although Lars had a feeling tea would only make a minor dent in Jess's desolation. Given his choice, he'd have favored a large brandy. "Okay. Tell us what happened. You start, Docia."

"I was at the booth, but then I had to go to the bathroom. I was...indisposed." Docia's cheeks flushed pink for a moment. "When I got back to the booth, Jess and Jack were gone. Merrilee Rusher across the aisle told me some woman had come running out of the booth carrying Jack and Jess had gone after her. She'd already called security. I tried to call Erik, but they said he was off today."

"On the days he isn't on duty, he works security at the fairgrounds." Lars shrugged. "Lucky break."

"True. Anyway, I started down the aisle where Merrilee said they'd gone."

"Okay." Janie turned toward Jess. "So what happened before that?"

"Dahlia came to the booth and I asked her to check on Docia. She came back and said Docia wasn't in the restroom anymore. Then she offered to 'look after' Jack if I wanted to try to find her. When I turned her down, she shocked me."

Janie's eyes widened. "Shocked you how? With what?"

Jess shook her head. "Some kind of stun gun. I don't know what it was exactly. She picked Jack up out of his playpen." She paused, taking a deep breath. Lars reached over and took her hand. "When I tried to stop her she shocked me again."

Docia gripped the edge of the table. "Son of a bitch!"

Janie nodded slowly. "No 'son of' about it. So then what?"

"I tried to chase her, but my legs weren't working right. I caught up to her just as she got to the exit."

Jess's voice broke slightly on the last word. Lars put his arm around her shoulders. Nobody seemed to notice, not even Jess.

"And?" Janie said gently.

"And Erik got there and stopped her." Jess took another deep breath. "I grabbed Jack and got him out of the way. So now she's under arrest and Jack's safe." Jess paused, blinking. "God. Jack's safe, but it was so close." Her lips trembled. "So close."

Lars put his arms around her, holding her against his chest as she sobbed. Janie and Docia glanced at each other, then both became very interested in their tea. He rubbed a hand across Jess's back, whispering "It's okay." Probably the most useless words in his vocabulary.

"I hope they throw that bitch in the slammer for the rest of her life," Docia murmured.

"And I hope they put your ex-mother-in-law in there with her. They can share a cell." Janie put her hand

on Jess's shoulder. "You need to get some rest now, Jess. We can take it from here."

"I need to go to the police station," Jess whispered.

"I'll go." Lars stood. "I said I would. You get some sleep. I'll be back later and tell you all about it."

Jess looked like she might have argued with him, but she also looked like she was at the end of whatever reserves she had left. After a moment, she nodded.

The only other time Lars had been inside the Konigsburg police station was when he'd stopped to see Erik about Jess. Hell, the only time he'd ever been inside any other police station had been when he was in college and part of a spectacularly stupid fraternity prank.

He recognized Ham Linklatter, one of the few full-time cops in Konigsburg. It was hard not to recognize Ham since he looked like a barely animated skeleton. The dispatcher, Helen Kretschmer, one of the scariest individuals Lars had ever met, was sitting behind the desk, turning people to stone whenever she looked their way.

She caught sight of Lars and managed a smile that involved just the corners of her mouth. "Yeah?"

"I'm looking for my brother."

"Which one—the cop or the CA?"

"Are they both here?"

Helen shrugged. "Cop's over there. Don't know what happened to the CA." And didn't care much, judging by her tone.

Pete threaded through the desks to where Erik sat typing at a computer. "Hey."

Erik glanced up at him with a smile that was only slightly warmer than Helen Kretschmer's. "Hey yourself. Jess okay?"

"She's resting at Pete and Janie's. The doctor at the hospital said she'd be all right. Does she need to come down here?"

"Eventually. Maybe tomorrow." Erik sighed, pushing back from his desk. "You doing anything right now?"

"Talking to you. Other than that, not much."

"I need an hour of your time."

"Okay." Lars figured an hour of his time was a good trade off for finding out what was going to happen to Dahlia.

He assumed they'd head somewhere like the Coffee Corral, but five minutes later he found himself sitting in Erik's cruiser in the station parking lot. "What's up?"

"A lot."

Erik stared out at the side street. The traffic seemed to have died down now that the sun was setting. After a moment, he sighed. "There's no way to get into this easily. It turns out Dahlia recorded Jess's mother-in-law hiring her to kidnap Jack. She played it for Pete and me."

Lars blinked. "That's good, isn't it? I mean, you can arrest the mother-in-law too, particularly if Dahlia's willing to testify."

"Could be. I hope so anyway. Won't be us, though. Dahlia was down here on the phone calls and the old lady was up in Pennsylvania. That means it's interstate, which means it goes to the Feds."

"The FBI?"

Erik nodded. "They're in charge of kidnapping. Of course, these days, they're a lot more interested in terrorists, but maybe we can get their attention. Pete's already called the Rangers."

Lars narrowed his eyes in the dimming light. "Why do I feel like there's a *but* coming up here?"

Erik's teeth flashed white in the darkness. "But... There are all sorts of loopholes a good lawyer could probably drive a truck through. Not the least of them being the fact that the old lady was being recorded without her knowledge, and we've only got Dahlia's word that it was her on that tape at all. If I were the old lady's lawyer, I'd work real hard to get that recording thrown out."

"Still... it should slow her down. If people know she tried to kidnap Jack, she couldn't go out and do it again."

"If people know it. If it actually goes to trial, so other people will hear what she tried to do."

A drop of ice glided down Lars's spine. "You don't think it will?"

"I don't know. Right now I'd say it's fifty-fifty, depending on how much the Feds like Dahlia as a witness. And there's no telling how long it may take them to follow up and go to Pennsylvania."

Lars blew out a breath. "Okay. I'll tell Jess that. She won't be happy, but she needs to know. Thanks, Erik."

"That's not all." Erik looked back at the street again. "I want you to listen to the recording."

Lars frowned. "Is that legal? I'm not part of the case."

"Nope." One corner of Erik's mouth edged up as he dug into his pocket and pulled out a digital mini-recorder. "I'm not even supposed to have this thing. I started using it in interrogations, even though nobody else around here does. I figure it's only a matter of time before the department gets sued. Usually, I ask before I turn it on, though."

"But you didn't with Dahlia?"

Erik sat quiet for a moment or two, staring at the fading light. "I didn't let either Dahlia or Pete know I was doing it. Pete's one hell of a County Attorney, better than anyone they had before him, according to people who've been around here a while. And I'm damn sure he'd never let me copy Dahlia's recording. The thing is, though, we need other copies of this thing around here, just for safety's sake."

“You think someone might destroy it?”

“Maybe. Or maybe it gets lost. Or maybe some judge suppresses it somewhere and nobody ever hears it again. Like I said—if I was the old lady’s lawyer, I’d do my damndest to get the thing thrown out of court.”

“Where’s the original?”

“Right now it’s in the safe in Pete’s office. But it won’t stay there. He’ll give it to the Rangers who’ll give it to the Feds, and that’ll be the end of it, as far as we’re concerned.”

“But...”

“But if we’re ever going to stop this woman, we need some kind of leverage. Whatever else this tape may be, it’s definitely leverage.”

Lars stared down at the silver recorder in Erik’s hand. “I can download that sound file to my computer. I’ve done it before.”

Erik narrowed his eyes. “I didn’t hear you say that. Just take the recorder off and do what you need to do. Jess should know what that woman said. So should you. I figure you can listen to the tape and then tell her. I just...” His voice trailed off as he turned back to stare at the street again. “I don’t want that old lady getting away with it. Take this someplace quiet and listen to it. You’ll feel the same way.”

Lars stared down again at the silver rectangle. “Okay,” he said slowly. “Thanks, bro.”

“Don’t mention it.” Erik opened his door and then turned back. “I mean that literally, by the way. Don’t mention this. To anyone except Jess. For both our sakes.”

“Right.” Lars climbed out of the car as Erik started back toward the station. “Erik?”

He looked back over his shoulder. “Yeah?”

“I’m sorry about Dahlia. I mean, that she turned out to be...” He waved his hand, trying to think of a word a little less stark than the one that leaped immediately to his mind.

“A gold-plated bitch who figured she could use me for information and then grab Jack before any of us figured it out?” Erik’s smile twisted slightly.

Lars blew out a breath. “Yeah. Pretty much that.”

Erik shrugged. “Don’t worry about it, bro. I heal up easy.” He turned back toward the station again.

Lars watched his big brother’s slumped shoulders as he pulled open the station door. *Yeah, we all heal up, don’t we, bro?* After a moment, he tucked the recorder in his pocket and headed for his car.

Chapter Twenty-One

Long after his computer had finished playing the sound file, Lars could still hear the voices in his mind. *His mother’s safety is her own affair. I have no interest in it one way or the other....Kidnapping is*

a tricky business, Mrs. Moreland. Even though you have basically given me permission to murder your daughter-in-law in the process. And finally, most chilling of all, Would you rather I not kidnap your grandson? Do you forbid me to harm your daughter-in-law even in passing? followed by a moment of absolute silence.

Lydia Moreland had the coldest voice Lars had ever heard. The thought of the owner of that voice having any contact with Jack, with his rosy baby joy, made his skin crawl. They had to do something. No, *he* had to do something. Pete and Erik couldn't—the whole thing was out of their hands. If they tried to do anything more, their jobs might be in jeopardy. It had to be Lars who came up with a way to stop her.

If only he knew what that way was.

At Pete and Janie's house he found Janie and Docia sitting at the dining room table, picking at the remains of dinner. He slid into a chair, looking over the congealed macaroni and cheese and rejecting it. Coffee, however, he could handle, although whiskey might do a better job of drowning out Lydia Moreland's voice for the time being. "Everybody asleep?"

Janie nodded. "Daisy went down an hour or so ago. Jess lay down with Jack, and then she fell asleep herself. Thank god—she looked like she needed it."

"Where are Cal and Pete?"

"Cal's still at the clinic, and Pete's still at his office taking care of all the paperwork on Dahlia. You're it, as far as Toleffson males go."

Docia pushed her plate away. "So what's the verdict? What happens with the hired gun?"

Lars rubbed his eyes. "Don't ask me. Erik says they're charging her with kidnapping and assault for now. I think they'll try to use her against Mrs. Moreland eventually, though, so the charges against her may be reduced."

"Does Dahlia admit the wicked granny was behind it?" Janie's fingers tightened on her coffee cup.

Lars closed his eyes, hearing Lydia Moreland's voice again. "Pretty much. Dahlia's done for, anyway. Erik says they'll horse-trade on charges with her lawyer when she gets around to calling one, but she'll get some jail time for this, undoubtedly."

"Terrific. The kidnapper goes down, while the woman who instigated and financed the kidnapping might go free." Docia stood, gathering plates. "Assuming, as we all do, that she's a nutcase, what's to stop her from hiring somebody else?"

"Just what I was wondering." Jess stood in the doorway, watching him. She looked marginally better than she had the last time he'd seen her, but that wasn't saying much. Her eyes were still deep set, surrounded by shadows. She should have slept for another twelve hours at least. And then had breakfast in bed, preferably with him.

"Oh, Jess, I'm sorry. Did we wake you?" Janie pushed back from the table.

Jess shook her head. "I was waiting for Lars to get back so I could find out what happened at the station. So you're saying Dahlia didn't have anything on Lydia?"

“She had something.” Lars glanced around the room. He really didn’t want to tell Jess about the recordings of Lydia Moreland and her plans in front of an audience.

“Want to go for a drive?” Jess said. “I need aspirin.”

“I’ve got...” Janie started, but Docia waved a hand at her.

“Go ahead. If Jack wakes up we’ll take care of him.”

Jess sat quietly in the front seat as Lars negotiated the packed parking lot at HEB. He pulled into a space near the back, but neither of them moved to get out of the car.

“So what was it they told you? Was it really bad?” Jess’s mouth was a thin line in her shadowed face.

Lars took a deep breath. “Dahlia recorded your mother-in-law offering her the kidnapping job. Erik let me listen to it, which is on the far side of legal, so don’t tell anybody about it, okay?”

“But that’s good, isn’t it? I mean, now they have proof that Lydia was behind this. They can charge her.”

“They can try.” More than ever Lars wished he were a better liar.

“I don’t understand.” Jess’s voice sounded thin in the darkness of the car. “Didn’t Lydia say it clearly enough?”

“She was very clear. They negotiated the kidnapping on the recording. No question about it—she wanted Jack abducted and brought to her.”

Jess blew out a breath. “That’s pretty much what I expected. That’s her style.” She turned to look at him. “There’s more, isn’t there?”

“Yeah.” Lars stared out at the cars moving around the lot. How could he tell her she was considered collateral damage, someone who could be killed in passing if it meant Jack would be easier to grab?

“Did she want me dead?” Jess’s eyes were huge in the darkness. Her lips trembled.

Lars shook his head. “She didn’t care. She didn’t tell Dahlia to kill you. But she didn’t care if it happened.”

Jess closed her eyes, grasping the panic bar. “She’ll go on trying, Lars. If I can’t stop her this time, she’ll just find another way. Jack and I need to leave Konigsburg. Now. If I’m fast enough, maybe she won’t be able to follow us.”

“Don’t do that,” Lars pleaded. “Don’t let her drive you away. Give us a chance to work something out.”

Jess turned toward him again, pressing her trembling lips together. “Work what out, Lars? What other choice is there?”

“Just... give us a chance, okay?”

“Does she know where I am?”

Lars shook his head. "Not from her conversations with Dahlia. Dahlia played it cagey."

"But Lydia could find out. She could hire someone else."

"Right, but who knows how long that would take? And meanwhile the FBI will probably go after her. She'll know where you are for sure then, but she'll have more important stuff to deal with."

"The FBI?"

"Interstate kidnapping's a federal offense. Pete passed the original recording on to the Rangers and the FBI. You've got some big guns on your side now, at least. Or you will have, once they've had a chance to hear the recording."

Jess watched him for a moment, her moss-colored eyes dark in the reflected parking lot lights. "Okay, I'll give you some time," she murmured finally. "But I can't wait too long. Who knows who she might send down here next?"

Lars and Daisy didn't move back to town the next day, which Jess found slightly surprising. She'd half-expected them to, now that Dahlia was out of action and she no longer needed his protection. Still, she didn't mind having the two of them around. Dahlia might have been out of action, but Lydia Moreland wasn't.

Erik called on Sunday afternoon. Lars leaned into the den, where she was working while Daisy and Jack played. "You mind some company this evening? Erik wants to get us all together for something."

Jess shook her head. "Tell them to bring some food. I haven't been to the grocery yet."

"With my family, I don't think that will be a problem."

Around four, Toleffsons started drifting into the house. First Cal and Docia, carrying Thanksgiving leftovers—ham, turkey, stuffing, green beans and sweet potatoes. Then Pete and Janie arrived with two loaves of bread, three dozen homemade chocolate chip cookies and a bag of apples. When Erik got there around five, he brought a case of soda and a gallon of cider.

Jess wondered how they'd worked it out without consulting each other. Maybe their communication operated at the genetic level.

She helped warm leftovers and slice bread, while various Toleffson males sliced turkey and ham, with a plate of cheese for Cal. The children were passed from person to person like wriggling footballs. Jess heard Jack's giggle at one point and looked up to find Erik patting him against his shoulder.

Her chest ached for a moment. Whenever she was around the Toleffsons, she thought of Barry and what Jack would be missing. It almost made her forget about the Morelands and their take on family values. Almost.

Finally, they all circled the table with sandwiches and bowls of leftovers. The children had been fed, and

Daisy perched in front of the TV watching *Aladdin* for the eighteenth time while Jack dozed in Jess's lap.

"Okay," Erik said in a soft voice, "this is why we're here. I need to fill you all in."

"On what?" Pete frowned. "I haven't checked with the office today."

"It's Sunday," Janie reminded him. "You're off duty, counselor."

Erik glanced around the table, then sighed. "Dahlia escaped from the jail sometime last night."

Jess clutched Jack convulsively so that he muttered a complaint in his sleep. Lars covered her hand with his own.

"What the fuck! Who screwed up this time?" Pete pushed his plate across the table in fury.

In the living room, Daisy swiveled toward him, her eyes wide.

Janie scowled. "Peter Toleffson, there are children here, so keep it clean. And if you're going to shout, you can do it outside."

Pete closed his eyes, rubbing his neck in irritation. "Sorry. Who was on duty, Erik?"

"Boyd Garrett. One of Olema's new hires. Apparently, he fell asleep, and she got the door open without waking him."

Pete groaned. "Tell me Olema's taking a hit on this one."

"Looks like it." Erik's expression was grim. "That's the only up side I can see. The city council brought in Sheriff Friesenhahn for a consult—my guess is Olema's toast."

"What should I do? Should we go somewhere else?" Jess wished her voice wasn't trembling, but there wasn't much she could do about it. It might be too late to hide from Dahlia by now, anyway.

Erik shook his head. "She won't come after you, Jess. There's nothing in it for her—she was doing it for the money, and she won't get anything out of hurting you or Jack now since we know about her deal. My guess is she's putting as much distance as she can between herself and Konigsburg."

"He's right." Pete grimaced. "She's a sociopath, but she's not a dumb sociopath."

Rationally, Jess agreed with them. At the same time, she figured she'd be sleeping on the floor in Jack's room tonight. Or maybe in front of the door.

Pete turned back to Erik. "So who's gone after her?"

"The Rangers. There's a fugitive warrant on her. General opinion was the Konigsburg cops couldn't find their asses in the dark with both hands. Sadly enough, that's probably true for Olema and the guys he hired."

Lars rubbed the back of his neck. "There's more, isn't there?"

"Yeah." Erik stared down at his hands where he gripped the edge of the table. "When Dahlia took off,

she took the case against Lydia Moreland with her. Without Dahlia's testimony, we've got nothing on the old lady but the recording and Dahlia's cell phone. My guess is, that's not enough to bring her down."

Pete nodded, his mouth a grim line. "Without Dahlia to back it up, the recording's worth shit."

"What recording? Would somebody please explain what's going on here? Besides more Konigsburg police incompetence." Docia helped herself to another serving of cranberry sauce, before she gave Erik a slightly guilty look. "Sorry, Erik. I didn't mean you. But I've had problems of my own with that bunch."

Cal slid his arm across the back of her chair, one hand cupping her shoulder.

Jess's arms were still locked around Jack. He whimpered in her lap until she loosened her hold.

"Dahlia recorded her conversations with Mrs. Moreland," Pete explained. "The whole thing is on a DVD I passed along to the Rangers, who were supposed to pass it along to the Feds."

Janie shook her head. "So you've got her. Why is this a bad thing?"

Erik shrugged. "The Assistant County Attorney here was of the opinion it might be hard to charge Lydia Moreland with anything, even with the recording. Given recent events, I'd say legal action's looking a lot less likely."

Pete nodded. "Without Dahlia, she'll walk. We needed Dahlia's testimony to confirm what she said on the recording, and to confirm that she actually talked to Mrs. Moreland. Without Dahlia, there's nothing to say the recording is genuine."

Erik shrugged. "We've got Dahlia's cell phone."

"It wouldn't hold up in court. Not against a good attorney."

Lars's fingers moved in a slow circle on the back of Jess's neck, easing the knots of tension. "The hell with court. How can we make sure she stops trying to hurt Jess and grab Jack? I don't care about seeing her go to trial. I just want to make sure she can't hire any more hit men, or hit women as the case may be."

"How about sending the story to *The Philadelphia Inquirer*?" Cal said slowly. "That might slow her down at least."

"I was thinking more of *The San Antonio Express-News* or *The Houston Chronicle*." Erik gave him a dry grin. "But Philadelphia would do it too."

"With what?" Pete raised an eyebrow. "The DVD is with the Feds, who may or may not take it any further. You'd need more than Jess's story to get them to take it seriously. The Morelands would sue for libel if they published the story on nothing more than that, and then where would we be?"

Erik and Lars were carefully not looking at each other, Jess noted, which probably meant Pete still had no idea the copy of the tape existed.

"I'd still go with the exposure threat." Cal twisted off the top of a bottle of Dos Equis. "That might be enough to get Mrs. Moreland to lay off. She's some kind of social bigwig, right, Jess?"

Jess sighed. Her stomach still clenched with panic, but no one else seemed as frightened as she did. "She's pretty much the top of the heap in Belle View. And she's got connections on the Main Line too. That's what Barry said, anyway."

"Right." Cal took a swallow of his beer. "That's the kind of woman who'd really like to stay out of the news. Particularly news like this."

"I'll e-mail my mama tomorrow," Docia cut in. "She knows people at the *Express-News*. She can at least get us pointed in the right direction."

Pete shrugged. "It's worth a try, I guess. Maybe you'll find some reporter hungry enough to take it on."

"I'm on duty in forty-five minutes. I'll see what's going on downtown and get back to you later."

Erik gathered his dishes and started for the kitchen at the same time as Pete. The two brothers reached the door simultaneously, then Erik stepped back. "After you."

Pete stared at him for a moment, then his mouth edged into a faint smile. "No, bro. You earned it. After you."

Lars checked all the locks in the house at least three times before he headed up the hall toward his bedroom. Logically, he knew Erik was absolutely right. Dahlia was headed for someplace a lot safer than Konigsburg, and she had absolutely no reason to stop off at Jess's place along the way.

All the same, he wished he had a Taser of his own. He picked up Jess's baseball bat as he walked through the dining room. Field expedients were better than nothing.

He turned up the hall toward his room and stopped. Jess's bedroom door was open, sending light streaming into the hall.

He walked closer and peered in. She stood in the middle of the room, unrolling her sleeping bag.

"Jess?"

She turned abruptly, then pressed a hand to her chest. "You startled me!"

"Sorry." He nodded toward the sleeping bag. "What's with the bag?"

"I was just..." She shook her head.

"Just going to bed down in the kids' room tonight?" He raised an eyebrow. "You know Erik's right. There's no reason for Dahlia to come here and a couple dozen reasons for her to stay away."

"I know. But somehow that doesn't make me feel as safe as it should." She nodded at the baseball bat dangling from Lars's hand. "You planning on doing a little batting practice?"

He sighed, leaning the bat against the wall. "Okay, so we're both spooked. Do you want to talk about

your mother-in-law?”

Jess shuddered slightly. “God, no.”

“Then what do you want to talk about?”

Jess raised her head, and he felt a jolt of arousal straight to his groin. Moss-green eyes, dark gold hair, lips spread in a faint grin. Dimples. He hadn’t seen those two dimples in days. He’d been starved for those dimples.

“What makes you think I want to talk, Lars?”

Jess lay on her back, eyes closed, trying to get up enough energy to move. Her bones had dissolved; her muscles were like water. It was a little like being Tasered, but in a good way.

She felt Lars’s fingers moving lightly down the inside of her thighs, stroking the smooth skin, his touch as light as a breath. She spread her legs wider, wanting him, needing him.

His fingers moved away and she almost moaned in protest. And then his tongue was tracing the same line, warm and soft, setting off flames wherever it touched.

Jess moaned softly, moving again, and felt Lars’s hands on her hips, holding her steady. A moment later, his fingers spread the folds of her sex and his tongue moved to her clit.

She jerked in reaction, but his hands held her again. His tongue moved slowly across the hardening bud, his mouth closing as he sucked. Jess bit her lip to keep from moaning louder.

One finger moved into her, then another, while his tongue slid across her again, leaving burning need wherever it touched. Jess buried her fingers in his thick soft hair, clutching him desperately as her hips jerked again.

“Easy,” he whispered, his hands sliding up her body. “Take it slow.”

“If you keep doing that much longer, I won’t be able to stop,” she moaned.

“Then don’t. Let go, Jess. Just let go.”

“Come with me,” she whispered. “I want you with me, Lars.” She stared up at him. The wide expanse of his shoulders as he propped himself above her. The broad chest, furred with dark hair. His eyes, black and sweet as molasses. “Please. Oh, please.”

He leaned down, running his tongue along the line of her body, her stomach, between her breasts, her collarbone. She felt his teeth against her shoulder, nipping her lightly. And then he drove inside her.

Jess wrapped her legs around him, tucking her heels against his buttocks, plunging him deeper into her body. Her back arched up, and her body strained to meet him. Once, again, again, again.

She was caught up in a warm vortex, her mind flying, a tornado whirling through her body. “Oh Christ,” she gasped, reaching for him. “Christ, Lars.”

He covered her mouth with his, drinking in her cries as she came, body jerking against his. And then he was groaning too, and she buried her fingers in his hair, holding his mouth against her own, feeling him plunge until the two of them were joined in one final writhing climax.

And then she collapsed against him, bones gone, muscles gone, mind gone to sweet oblivion as the world spun away.

She wasn’t sure how long they slept—probably less than an hour, although she checked the clock a little guiltily to make sure it wasn’t morning yet. Lars would have to go soon, of course. He couldn’t be with her when Daisy woke up, and Daisy woke up before anybody else.

She looked back at him again and found him watching her, dark eyes rimmed with thick lashes that would have looked feminine on a man who wasn’t six foot five or so and built like a lumberjack.

“Hi,” he whispered.

“Hi yourself. Everything okay?”

His lips spread in a grin. “What do you think?”

Jess sighed, closing her eyes and resting her forehead against his shoulder. “I think my body may never recover. You’ll probably have to pour me out of bed in the morning.”

“I can do that.” His lips brushed against her forehead and Jess felt her heart lurch slightly.

It doesn’t mean anything. Well, okay, it means something, but not anything serious.

Jess sighed. She wasn’t a great liar, particularly to herself. Usually she was better off just skirting around the truth rather than lying outright.

And the truth here was that she’d fallen hard for Lars Toleffson. Which didn’t necessarily mean they were right for each other in the long run. They both had kids. Responsibilities. Lives. They couldn’t go on doing this much longer.

Of course, if they could take care of Lydia Moreland and her plots, they wouldn’t have to. Lars could go back to his daily life, and she could go back to... Whatever it was she wanted to do.

Lars ran his hand down her back, his fingers bumping lightly along her spine. “Jess?”

She kept her eyes closed, reveling in the feeling of his hands and trying hard not to think about anything else. “Mmm?”

“Who really runs things in the Moreland company—your mother-in-law or her older son?”

Jess groaned. Talking about the Morelands wasn’t at all what she wanted to do right now. “Preston runs the company. Lydia’s in charge of the family. She’d be the first to tell you that’s more important than anything Preston does. Why?”

“No reason.” Lars ran his hand along her thigh again. “What did your husband say about his brother? Is he as bad as she is?”

“Preston?” Jess rubbed her eyes. “Barry liked Preston. Sort of. He thought he was too much under Lydia’s thumb, but he thought he was all right.”

“Did you ever meet him?”

Tension began to invade her shoulders again. “Once. At the funeral. He stood on the other side of Barry’s grave and stared at me until the minister was finished. Then he walked over and gave me one of those looks that could turn you to stone if you were prone to that kind of thing.”

“What did he say?”

“‘Are you my brother’s wife?’ Which I guess is marginally more polite than ‘Who the hell are you?’ When I said I was, he nodded and then walked off. It was not the highlight of my day. And again I ask, why do you want to know?”

“And again I answer, no reason.”

Jess pushed herself up on her elbows. “You mean no reason you want to tell me. Lars, don’t try anything heroic, okay? Don’t get in any deeper with the Morelands than you already are, thanks to me. They’re dangerous people.”

Lars gave her a lazy grin, rubbing his hand from her thigh to her hip, sliding it across her belly to cup her breast. “Sweetheart, I’m an accountant. Heroism isn’t in my job description.”

Jess was about to answer him, to point out that he’d already shown more heroism than most men she’d known, that he’d been a hero to her and to Jack. But by then Lars was using his other hand too, stroking her in places that made her brain turn to mush.

The Morelands could wait. Preferably until Judgment Day.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Preston Moreland checked his schedule one more time. An hour. He had an entire hour without an appointment.

Of course, an hour didn’t give him time to do much. He couldn’t make it to the gym and back. He couldn’t go to his tailor’s to get the final alterations on his new suit. He couldn’t go home and check on Bunny.

Not that Bunny would have wanted him to check on her. Even pregnant, Bunny didn’t like to feel that she needed supervision. Preston could sympathize. He’d always hated supervision himself, although god knows he’d had to put up with enough of it in his own life.

The buzz of the interoffice phone brought his attention back to the present. He sighed. Probably something that would eat up his free hour. Of course, it wasn’t really free. As long as he was in his office, he was on duty. He flipped the switch. “Yes?”

“Mr. Moreland? There’s a call for you on line two.” His secretary’s voice was briskly efficient as usual.

She'd probably have been happy to book something into this hour if she'd noticed it was empty.

"Who is it?"

"A Mr. Toleffson. He said he wanted to speak with you about someone named Jessamyn Carroll."

Preston's left hand jerked into a fist. Jessamyn Carroll. He'd thought that had been taken care of. Hampton and his staff were supposed to have it in hand. Unless, of course, his mother had gotten herself involved. Then all bets were off.

Preston closed his eyes, rubbing a hand across his forehead. Chances were very good indeed that Mother *had* gotten involved. "All right, Miss Cowell, I'll deal with it." He punched the button for line two. "Yes, what is it?"

"Mr. Moreland?"

"This is Preston Moreland. Who are you?"

There was a brief silence on the other end of the line before the voice began again. "My name is Lars Toleffson, Mr. Moreland. I'm a friend of Jessamyn Carroll and her son."

"Why are you calling me, Mr. Toleffson? Is my sister-in-law ready to bring my nephew back home where he belongs?" Preston kept his voice brisk, with a slight touch of irritation. No hint that this was important information in any way. That would only raise the price.

"Your sister-in-law is where she belongs now, Mr. Moreland. She's in her home. I have something that belongs to your mother. I thought you might like to reclaim it."

Preston's chest clenched. As he'd feared, Mother had done something. And he was willing to bet that whatever she'd done wouldn't be easy to deal with. It never was. "What do you have, Mr. Toleffson, and how much do you want to give it back?"

"I have her words, Mr. Moreland. Let me play you a short sample. Then we can talk about how you can reclaim them."

There was a click on the other end of the line, and Preston heard voices, sounding slightly distant, as if he were listening to a conversation in another room.

"You want to ensure you grandson's safety. Am I to assume you don't feel the same way about his mother?"

"His mother's safety is her own affair. I have no interest in it one way or the other."

"In fact, if his mother were to meet with an accident of some kind it would simplify things greatly, wouldn't it?"

"I believe his mother has no living relatives. The Moreland family would, of course, assume responsibility for the child should anything happen to his mother."

Preston swallowed hard. His mother's voice was unmistakable. He supposed it was possible to fake the recording, but he didn't think this was a fake. In fact, he was fairly certain it wasn't. It sounded just like

her.

When Toleffson came back on the line, his voice was calm, almost matter-of-fact. “The woman your mother hired to abduct your nephew is in custody. She gave the police the recordings of their conversations.”

Preston unclenched his hand. “What woman? That didn’t sound like a woman.”

“She used a device to disguise her voice, probably to keep your mother from discovering her identity. She’s been charged with attempted kidnapping and assault and battery.”

Preston licked his lips. “Attempted kidnapping?”

“Yes. She didn’t succeed. The child has been returned to his mother.” Toleffson’s voice hardened. “Fortunately, neither of them suffered any serious harm. But of course both of them were traumatized.”

Preston took a deep breath. Clearly, it was time to reassert control of this conversation. “Mr. Toleffson, I don’t know what you think you have here, but I can assure you it has nothing to do with me or my mother. Do not attempt to contact either of us again. I’ll alert my attorneys.”

“That won’t work, Mr. Moreland.” Toleffson’s voice sounded almost as cold as his mother’s had. “The police have the woman’s testimony. Plus they’ve got your sister-in-law’s story about your mother’s actions toward her in the past. Plus they have these recordings. And then there’s the fact that your mother’s phone number is on the kidnapper’s cell phone.”

Preston’s grip on the receiver tightened again convulsively. *Damn, damn, damn.* “What exactly do you want, Mr. Toleffson? Or rather, how much do you want?”

“I don’t want any of your money, Mr. Moreland. I want you to come down here and deal with this. There are some people who need to speak with you.”

Preston licked his lips. The man was clearly insane. “Why would I do that, Mr. Toleffson? So that you can blackmail me more effectively? I have no intention of traveling anywhere.”

“You’ll do that, Mr. Moreland, because you don’t want it publicized that your mother hired someone to kill your sister-in-law and kidnap your nephew. I thought we’d established that.” Toleffson’s voice had lost any matter-of-fact quality. He sounded cold to the bone.

A chill moved down Preston’s spine. “Is my mother going to be charged with some kind of crime?”

“There’s always that possibility, since she actually committed one. The FBI has jurisdiction over interstate kidnapping. The recordings will eventually be turned over to them. However, as I said, I prefer to have this conversation face to face. Let’s say you’ll come down here by the end of the week. Saturday, to be exact.”

Preston sank back into his desk chair. “Saturday where? Where are you calling from?”

“Sorry. I should have told you. I’m in Konigsburg, Texas. It’s about seventy miles northwest of San Antonio. Let me know when you’ll be arriving in San Antonio and I’ll give you directions.”

Preston took a deep breath. One more chance to smooth over this debacle. “I repeat—I’m not going

anywhere. If we talk about this, we'll talk here in Belle View. Let me know when you arrive."

There was a pause on the other end, then Toleffson spoke again, his voice flat. "You haven't figured this out yet, have you, Moreland? Your mother committed a serious crime. It's only luck that no one was injured or worse because of her plans. You can face the consequences with her or you can come down here and talk to me. There are no other choices."

Preston stared down at his bronze desk set. Actually, his father's bronze desk set on his father's desk in his father's office. In his father's company. He was responsible for all of that, as his mother never tired of telling him. He was also responsible for his mother, as his father had told him on his deathbed.

Or rather, as his father had warned him.

"All right. I'll be there on Saturday. Do you want me to meet you at the police station?"

"The police station?" Preston could swear the man was grinning. "Oh no, Mr. Moreland. I'm not a cop. I'm something much worse. I'm the man who loves your sister-in-law. See you Saturday."

Lars called Jess in the middle of the afternoon to say he was bringing dinner with him that night. It was just as well. She'd spent most of the day at the cabin cleaning up after a party of five who'd clearly had a very exciting Thanksgiving. She was only glad they hadn't succeeded in burning the place down, although it looked like they'd given it a good try, at least as far as blackening the oven and stove went.

Daisy was whiny and bored. Jack was whiny and restless. Jess was just whiny. She figured she was entitled.

Lars arrived with a large pepperoni and mushroom pizza a little after six. Daisy announced she didn't like mushrooms. Lars pointed out that she'd always liked them before. Daisy didn't deign to reply. Lars picked the mushrooms off her piece, sighing, while Jess managed to shovel some strained squash into Jack before he lost interest.

Fortunately for everyone, both children went to bed early. Jess flopped down at the dining room table again and took a slice of pizza, her first. "Thanks for dinner."

"Consider it a bribe. I've got something I need your help with."

"What?" Jess nibbled on some mozzarella, letting herself settle back in her chair for what felt like the first time all day.

He picked up his own slice of pizza. "I called Preston Moreland this morning."

Her hand shot forward again, dropping her pizza slice back in the box. "You did what?"

"I called him. Pre-emptive strike, sort of."

"I assume there was a plan behind this," she said through gritted teeth.

Lars shrugged again. "Somebody had to tell the man what his mother was up to. Even if it's not likely she'll be charged with anything, thanks to Dahlia taking off. And somebody has to stop Lydia Moreland."

Jess shook her head. "Preston won't stand up against his mother. Nobody in that family has ever stood up to Lydia, except for her husband. Preston will be more likely to turn the whole thing over to the lawyers and let them deal with it. Or even just turn it over to Lydia and let her do what she wants to do."

"I don't think so, Jess. I played him a little of the recording. He seemed to take it seriously. God knows I did."

She bit her lip. "Maybe I should hear that recording for myself."

His eyes were bleak. "I'll consider it."

"So what do we do now? Wait for Preston to make the next move?"

Lars rubbed his fingers on a napkin. "I've already made the next move. He'll be down here on Saturday. We can discuss what needs to be done then."

"Oh, god," she whispered, closing her eyes again. "He'll tell Lydia. If she knows where I am, she'll send people after me—and Jack."

"No." He shook his head. "I don't know if Moreland will tell his mother about this or not, but he's not going to let her do anything else. Not if he wants to keep this quiet—and my guess is he does. He knows she's busted. And he knows what this kind of publicity could do to his company. His next step will probably be to try to buy us off, assuming he can figure out how much we want."

Jess blew out a breath, leaning back in her chair again. "Probably. That's also the way the family operates—throw money at anybody who might make trouble. What is it you want me to do?"

"I've gotten him to come down here. Now I need to scare him into leaving you alone for good. The cops can't charge him or his mother, not without Dahlia around. But I've got some other ways to convince him to back off."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning I'm going to outline some consequences he'll want to avoid. We've got the threat of publicity on our side. We can tell them we're talking to reporters. It might even be true by then." He tapped his fingers on the table as he thought. "I'll also say a few general things about there being an ongoing investigation into his mother's activities, which is also true as far as it goes. Given the whole mess with Dahlia, somebody's going to be investigating something."

"If he brings the family lawyers along, that won't work. I've seen them in action. They'll just get an injunction or something." She fought the urge to lean against his shoulder. Now was definitely not the time.

"Yeah, if he brings the lawyers, we're probably screwed. On the other hand..."

"What?"

"Moreland might not want his lawyers to know what his mother has been up to, given the nature of the

crime. He might want to keep this a secret from everybody. Particularly if he thinks he can buy us off.”

“And you think he does?”

Lars nodded. “It was his first response—how much did I want?”

Jess chewed her lip for a minute, considering possibilities. “Are you going to tell Pete and Erik about this?”

He shook his head. “I don’t want to get them involved—it could cause them all kinds of trouble. It’s just going to be Moreland and me.”

“And me.” She swallowed hard, feeling her heart hammer. “I’m the one with the major interest here. I want to talk to Preston face to face.”

His fingers closed over hers. “You don’t have to do this, Jess. You can take Jack somewhere and hide out until it’s over. I’ll tell you everything that happens.”

She shook her head. “Lydia threatened me. And my son. I’m not going to let her get away with that. I want to make sure Preston knows just what his mother did this time. Even if he doesn’t do anything about it, at least he’ll have to admit to himself what she’s capable of.”

Lars nodded slowly. “He’ll know that. I promise.”

“Where do you want to hold this meeting—your office?”

He shook his head. “Too public. I’d like to keep my brothers and their friends from finding out what we’re doing. And I’d like to keep gossip from spreading through Konigsburg. I have a feeling Moreland’s going to be noticeable.”

“We could bring him out here.” Jess swallowed. “Only I don’t want him to be near Jack. Just in case. I’ll need to find someone to look after him.”

“No, I don’t think this would be a good place. We want him to think we’ve got some power behind us. This place is great, Jess, but it’s not the kind of place Preston Moreland would be impressed with.”

“So where?”

“I’ll ask Docia if we can use her house.”

Jess narrowed her eyes at him. “The barn? It’s a great house, but I never thought of it as all that impressive.”

“Not the barn. Buckhorn.”

She shook her head. “Excuse me?”

“Buckhorn. It’s her dad’s hunting place. It’s up in the hills about ten miles from town. That’s where we should do this, preferably in the trophy room.”

“I don’t...why would a hunting cabin be a good place to meet?”

He gave her a dry smile. "It's a lodge, not a cabin. Buckhorn is the size of a boutique hotel, and the trophy room is around the length of a football field."

"Docia's family is rich?" Jess did a quick review of Docia's usual get-up—jeans, dress shirt, Merrills. She didn't look anything like Paris Hilton.

"Between the money her mother inherited and her father's business, Docia's family owns a large part of Texas. Docia supports herself from the bookstore, but the money's there in the background."

She felt as if her head was spinning. "But I don't know her father."

"I do, but that's not the point. Billy and Reba aren't around right now—they're on vacation in Europe. Docia's looking after Buckhorn for them, more or less. There's a caretaker who does all the real work, but she's in charge. She could set it up for us to go there."

"Which would mean telling her what we're doing."

He nodded. "I'll ask her to keep quiet about it. That may or may not work, but I still think Buckhorn is the best place to do this."

Jess stared down at the pizza congealing in the box. She nudged a blob of mozzarella with her forefinger. "Lars, think about this for a minute. You're taking a major risk here. If he wanted to, Preston could try to have you arrested. He could ruin your business." She took a deep breath. "And Sherice could use this against you if she found out. She could say you were trying to blackmail Preston. I don't want you to lose Daisy because of me." She risked a glance at his taut expression.

He shook his head. "That's not likely. And if she tried it, I'd fight like hell. But I'm still going ahead with this. Lydia Moreland shouldn't get away with it. And you should be able to live your life the way you want to. That's the whole point here."

Tears pricked her eyes. "You're a good man, Lars Toleffson. A very good man."

"Don't make me out to be some kind of hero." He braced his elbows on the table, leaning toward her. "I expect to be rewarded."

Jess edged into a smile. "With what?"

Lars shrugged. "I expect to get laid at least."

He smiled at her, dark eyes laughing again. Her chest tightened. Sometime soon she was going to have to figure out what to do about Lars Toleffson, and the fact that she was in love with him.

Right now, however, she'd rather not.

She blew out a quick breath. "Who knows, Mr. Toleffson. Tonight you might get lucky."

"Might?"

Jess leaned forward, sliding her fingers across his lips. "I'd say the chances are improving even as we speak."

Chapter Twenty-Three

The road up the hillside to Buckhorn was dented with potholes and ruts that Lars had to edge the Honda around. The last time he'd come up here, he'd had Daisy with him, which meant listening to her constant commentary on trees and rocks and caves in the limestone cliffs which she'd insisted were full of bears.

Today he would have been glad for the conversation. Apparently, Jess didn't feel like talking. As they turned a final curve, Buckhorn came into view, all limestone and rough wood, with a shining silver tin roof. He hadn't exaggerated when he'd described the place earlier—it could hold at least fifty guests along with staff. It would have made a great hotel, but it didn't look much like a home. Blue water glinted in the sunshine at the back of the house—either the Olympic-size pool or the private lake, possibly both.

Jess's eyes widened. "Just how rich is Docia's family, anyway?"

One corner of Lars's mouth edged up. "Definitely rich enough to tell the Morelands to go screw themselves if they need to. Like I said, both her parents have sizeable assets."

"And she lives with Cal in a converted barn?"

Lars shrugged. "Docia's Docia. She doesn't depend on her parents for money. She's got a decent relationship with them, but she lives on what she makes at the bookstore, along with Cal's salary from the clinic. My guess is whatever trust funds she has will go to their kids." Actually, he knew for a fact they would since he was Docia's accountant.

Jess nodded toward the house. "You're sure her folks won't mind our being here?"

"Docia says they're in Greece, the last time she heard. Second honeymoon. Or third. Billy's a little footloose. Of course as soon as they hear about Docia being pregnant, my guess is the honeymoon will be cut short." He grinned. "My guess is also that Cal and Docia won't mention anything about the baby until after Christmas."

He hoped Jess might smile back, but instead she stared straight ahead at the lodge, taking a deep breath.

"I imagine her parents will really be excited. Lucky kid too. Look at all the room to play. What size is this place, anyway? Forty bedrooms or so?"

Now she was babbling. Again, not a good sign. Lars sighed as he pulled up in the driveway in front of the six-car garage.

Jess took another deep breath. "Is Preston here already?"

"Not yet. Probably fifteen or twenty minutes behind us." Of course, that assumed Preston Moreland had actually called from the San Antonio airport that morning as he'd claimed rather than from someplace like downtown Konigsburg.

"All right, then, let's get it over with." She turned to open the car door without looking at him.

He watched her climb out of the car as if her legs weren't really working. She tottered for a moment, and he caught her elbow to steady her.

“Easy.” He slid an arm around her waist, stifling the impulse to pull her closer to him. “You don’t have to do this, Jess. You can wait in the pool house. Or I can take you back to town and you can stay with Jack at Docia’s place.”

Jess shook her head stiffly. “I can do it. Let’s get on with it.”

The man who opened the door looked like he could probably take Erik on in a fair fight. Judging from the shape of his nose, he already had—or somebody Erik’s size, anyway. He extended a ham-sized hand in Lars’s direction. “Mr. Toleffson? Docia said to expect you. I’m Marcus Shandey. I run the place when Mr. and Mrs. Kent aren’t around.”

Lars took the extended hand, nodding toward Jess. “This is Ms. Carroll. We’re expecting another guest, probably in ten minutes or so.”

Shandey nodded. “Docia told me about it. Come on in and get set up. The trophy room’s probably your best bet for a meeting place.” He pointed down the hall to the double doors at the end.

“Thanks.” Lars laced his fingers through Jess’s and started toward the door.

“Mr. Toleffson,” Shandey called after them.

He turned back.

“You’re not alone here.” Shandey gestured toward the window. “I’ve got two men on the grounds outside, along with me in here. You need anything, you yell, okay? That’s another thing Docia told me to do.”

Lars nodded. “Thanks.”

Shandey gave them a slightly lop-sided smile and disappeared through another door at the side.

Jess pressed her fingers to her lips. “You think there may be trouble?”

Lars slid his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close again. “Relax. There’s not much they can do to us here. Plus Shandey looks like somebody I wouldn’t want to cross in a fight. I don’t think your in-laws are likely to try anything, but...” He shrugged. “We’re ready if they do.”

“Right.”

The hall they walked down was bigger than his living room back in Konigsburg. Jess gazed up at the wrought iron chandelier that hung a good fifteen feet overhead.

“Quaint, unassuming little place,” Lars cracked.

Sunlight streamed through the windows that lined one side of the hall. On the other, display cases held a variety of rusty weapons that would probably command a lot more than his complete net worth. He hoped Preston Moreland would be impressed, but he doubted it.

Just then, he heard the sound of car wheels on gravel outside. His shoulders tensed.

“Show time,” he muttered, pushing open the double doors at the end of the hall.

Now that they were actually inside the trophy room, Jess wondered if it had been such a good idea to meet here after all. It wasn't really the size of a football field—more like the average bowling alley. It made her feel a lot smaller than usual, huddled at one end of a massive leather couch that was sized for a troop of giants. Or a family of Toleffsons.

Lars paced slowly around the room, glancing up at the collection of stuffed animal heads that lined the walls. He paused beneath a warthog that reminded her of her least favorite history professor. "This place looks like an old-school natural history museum. I'm surprised Billy doesn't have typed cards for each head."

"Did Docia's father actually kill all these animals?"

Lars shrugged. "Knowing Billy, probably not. My guess is the same decorator who did everything else in the house probably found these at somebody's estate sale."

Voices sounded from the outer hall. She stiffened. "Here we go," she whispered.

He stepped behind her, resting his hands upon her shoulders.

Shandey opened the door for a man in a gray business suit and a woman in bright blue.

Jess caught her breath. *Lydia. He brought Lydia.*

"Your guests have arrived, Mr. Toleffson." Shandey gave them both a bland smile. "If you need anything, just give me a call." He closed the door behind him.

Jess stared at her former mother-in-law. Lydia Moreland was smaller than she remembered—only five foot two or so. Much too small to be the source of so much anguish.

Her face was framed in a helmet of short dark hair. Everything about her seemed sharp—high cheekbones, narrow, pointed nose, piercing blue eyes. Her gaze flicked around the room, apparently dismissing Lars without a pause, until she settled on Jess.

Her expression then was like a red-tail hawk sighting a dove on a cypress branch.

Jess drew herself up and stared back. *You're not in charge here, lady. No matter what you think. And I'm not your prey.*

"Mr. Moreland?" Lars's voice rumbled behind her. "I'm Lars Toleffson. And of course you know Ms. Carroll."

Preston Moreland looked even more like a corporate drone than Jess remembered—conservative gray suit, clipped dark hair, the beginnings of jowls to go along with the slightly padded quality of his body. He was maybe three or four inches taller than his mother. Next to Lars he looked like the hero's sidekick.

He glanced once at Jess, then back to Lars again. "My mother insisted on accompanying me since

these...allegations concern her.”

Lydia flicked a glance at Lars, then turned back to Jess. “You can leave us now. We prefer to speak to my daughter-in-law in private.”

Lars shrugged. “I’m sure you would. That’s not going to happen, though. Not unless Jess wants it. Have a seat.”

Preston cleared his throat. “My mother is here to dispute these baseless charges and to make sure my nephew is all right. There’s really nothing else to talk about.”

Lars stared at him, his mouth edging up into a slightly sour smile. “There’s actually a lot more to talk about, Mr. Moreland. As I’m sure you’ll agree when you’ve heard the complete recordings of your mother’s dealings with Dahlia Smith. Please sit down.” He nodded toward the leather chairs.

“We have nothing to discuss. This is a complete fraud,” Lydia snapped, but she sank into one of the leather chairs opposite Jess while Preston chose a chair next to the fireplace.

Just as Lars started to settle on the couch beside her, more footsteps sounded in the hall, along with angry male voices.

Lars shook his head. The sour smile was back. “Oh god, it figures. I knew Docia couldn’t keep quiet about this.”

The door flew open and Jess caught a glimpse of Marcus Shandey’s annoyed expression behind two large Toleffson bodies.

Erik was in uniform, carrying his white Stetson at his side. His badge shone brightly against his brown leather jacket.

Pete was in a kind of uniform too—jeans and a T-shirt that read “Lawyers do it with subpoenas.” He caught Jess’s glance and grimaced. “Sorry. Didn’t have time to change.”

Lars sighed, rubbing his eyes. “Mr. Moreland, let me introduce my brothers, Erik and Peter Toleffson.”

“Police?” For the first time, Preston sounded less than bland. “You didn’t mention anything about police.”

“I’m not here in any official capacity.” Erik gave him one of his half smiles. “Although I am the arresting officer in this case, so you might say I’ve got a stake in these proceedings.”

“And you?” Preston glanced at Pete.

Pete flushed. “I may not look like it at the moment, but I’m the Assistant Kramer County Attorney. So yeah, I’ve got some interest here too. Unofficially.”

Preston’s lips firmed into a thin line. “If you’re planning to charge my mother, this discussion is over. I didn’t bring my legal team because I didn’t realize I’d need them. You lied to me, Mr. Toleffson.”

Lars drew himself up to his full height. Jess had noticed all the Toleffsons did that whenever they were pissed, including Pete and Erik at the moment. The three of them looked like a set of Stonehenge

megaliths. “Nobody lied to you, Mr. Moreland, with the possible exception of your mother.”

“Your mother is not being charged with anything by my office.” Pete’s voice was glacial. “However, she has a lot to answer for unofficially. We’re here to support my brother. And Jess.”

Lydia snorted, elevating one elegant eyebrow. Across the room from her Preston cleared his throat.

“My...sister-in-law left Belle View rather hurriedly, after being interviewed by an agent from Child Welfare Services. The agency has an open file on her. We’ve been quite worried about my nephew’s safety. Can we see him now?”

He kept his gaze on Lars, avoiding Jess, his glasses flashing blank in the light.

“My son isn’t here,” she said tightly. “He’s in a safe place.”

Preston’s forehead furrowed as he glanced back at her. “Safe? Safe from what?”

“From your family and its employees.”

Lydia’s mouth narrowed to a thin line. “The child can hardly be safe with a negligent mother.”

Jess’s chest clenched. Suddenly, her throat felt too tight to answer.

“You did leave Belle View rather abruptly.” Preston sounded almost apologetic.

“I left because your family was harassing me. And because I had no intention of letting you take my son away.” At least her voice was steady, although her hands were trembling.

“*Harassing?*” Preston stared at her blankly. “How could I harass you? I only met you once—at Barrett’s funeral.”

“What happened before Jess got here may be relevant as background,” Lars cut in. “But what we’re really concerned with is what happened to her here in Konigsburg.”

“Here?” Moreland glanced around the room. “I didn’t even know there was a town called Konigsburg, Texas, until a few days ago when you called me. I’ve never had any business in Texas, nor has my mother. I believe this is her first visit to this state.” He flicked a glance in Lydia’s direction.

Erik took what looked like a cell phone out of his pocket and placed it on the table. “I don’t know what my brother has told you about these recordings, Mr. Moreland, but I think you need to hear them for yourself. They’ll make several things more clear.”

Preston turned toward his mother again, his forehead furrowing. Then he glanced back at Erik. “I would like to hear them, yes.”

“Preston!” Lydia’s voice was like a whip crack. “You will do no such thing. It’s all a trick.”

Moreland stared at her for a long moment, then shrugged. “Yes I will, Mother. I have to.”

Erik nodded. “I thought you might feel that way.”

He leaned forward and pressed a button on the mini-recorder. A moment later, an oddly distorted voice echoed from the table.

"Mrs. Moreland?"

"This is Lydia Moreland. To whom am I speaking?"

Lydia looked carved out of ice, her head held high, her hands clasped in her lap. Jess had a feeling Mary Queen of Scots had looked like that when she'd climbed the scaffold. Although on second thought, Lydia looked more like the man with the ax.

The voices droned on. After the first few minutes, Lars took her hand in his, trying to warm her ice-cold fingers.

It took very little time to hear all the conversations—less than thirty minutes. Dahlia had managed to keep things moving. After the first few minutes, Jess turned away from Lydia's frozen disdain to watch Preston. His expression didn't change as Lydia's voice droned on, but the muscles in his jaw became tighter. When the recorded voices finally gave way to silence, he swallowed hard.

"Did anything...did this person harm anyone?"

Erik leaned over to switch the recorder off. "The woman your mother hired tried to break into Ms. Carroll's house several times. Ultimately, she managed to snatch your nephew at the county fairgrounds by shocking Ms. Carroll with a Taser. Fortunately, she was apprehended before she could escape with the child."

Preston stared down at his hands, his jaw working. "Jesus Christ."

"Preston, don't be an idiot!" Lydia's voice sounded very much like the recorded version. "You can't really believe that was my voice on that...fabrication. Don't you think if they actually had any evidence implicating me in a kidnapping, I'd be under arrest by now?"

Preston turned toward his mother, his expression shifting from shock to doubt.

"You know who's responsible for this." Lydia turned her Medusa gaze toward Jess. "She thought she was going to come into a great deal of money with Barrett. Then when that didn't work out, she thought she'd use Barrett's son as her bargaining chip. Now she's trying direct blackmail. And she's gotten these men to help her. Her kind can always find men to help her."

Jess had been able to control her nausea while the recording had droned on. Just as well since she had no idea where the nearest restroom was. Now she considered vomiting in Lydia's lap. "How exactly did I set this up to blackmail you, Mrs. Moreland? I didn't even know Dahlia Smith until she tried to kidnap my son."

"Oh, for god's sake! Don't you think we know these things can be faked? You must have paid someone to create it for you. Or you did it yourself. You used to work with computers, didn't you?" Lydia waved her hand dismissively, then turned her glittering blue gaze toward Lars. "How much?"

Pete pushed himself upright. He was the shortest of the brothers, but when he was angry, as he was right then, Jess thought he looked around eight feet two. Yet when he spoke, his voice was surprisingly mild. "Are you offering my brother a bribe, Mrs. Moreland?"

Lydia sighed. “You. Your brothers. Whoever’s in charge here. I want this nonsense to end. Now. Tell us what it will take to make that happen.”

“Mother, for god’s sake. He’s a county attorney. The other one’s a cop.” Preston’s expression seemed to be a combination of panic and exasperation. Jess wondered if he’d ever really seen his mother in action before.

“Preston, be quiet,” his mother snapped. “I’ll handle this. I repeat—how much?”

“As I recall, a hefty fine and anywhere from five to fifteen years in prison, in my case anyway,” Pete drawled. “I’d have to check on the penalties for bribing a city police officer. I suggest you listen to your son, Mrs. Moreland. This isn’t an auction. Jess’s safety isn’t for sale.”

Lydia’s lips snapped back to a thin line, her gaze laser-sharp. If she’d had super-powers, Jess suspected Pete would have been a pile of ashes.

“Mother, stop it,” Preston pleaded. He turned back toward Pete. “I apologize for this misunderstanding, but my mother has raised a significant point—how do I know these calls weren’t faked?”

Erik picked up the recorder again, sliding it back into his pocket. “The FBI lab can probably determine that for sure. However, the person on the other end of those calls confirmed that the recipient was Mrs. Moreland. And we have the actual cell phone from which the calls were made. Mrs. Moreland’s number is programmed into it.”

Preston swallowed. “The FBI?”

“They have the original conversations, Mr. Moreland.”

There was a moment of silence. Lydia glanced around the room, her gaze finally resting on Erik. “I want to talk to her.”

“Who?”

“This...person. This woman who said I hired her. I want to talk to her. Bring her here.”

Jess held her breath. If they found out Dahlia was missing, everything fell apart.

Erik shrugged. “That’s not possible, Mrs. Moreland.”

“I have a right to confront my accuser.”

“She’s not accusing you of anything.” Lars moved beside his brothers. “We are. More specifically, I am.”

“You? What on earth...”

“Mother!” Preston’s voice drowned out his mother’s. She turned to stare at him, open-mouthed.

“Be quiet for a moment.” Preston turned toward Lars. “Enough. What do you want?”

"I want you to guarantee Jess's safety. And Jack's."

Preston blinked at him. "Jack?"

The corners of Lars's mouth quirked up in a dry smile. "Your nephew. The center of this controversy."

Preston nodded slowly. "I assure you. I have no interest in harming my sister-in-law or her son."

Lars's smile faded. "It's not you I'm worried about, Mr. Moreland."

Preston swallowed. "My mother also promises not to interfere."

"Your mother does no such thing!" Lydia leaned forward, her gaze fastened on Jess. "My grandson belongs with his family. His real family. The Morelands. I intend to take you through every court between here and Philadelphia. I will make sure my lawyers go through your life thoroughly, until they find every detail of your affairs." Her gaze flicked to Lars and back. "Quite thoroughly. A judge may have some opinions on how fit a blackmailer is as a mother. When I'm done with you, no court in this country will leave a baby in your care."

Jess raised her head slowly, her gaze holding Lydia's. "I won't let you take my son." Jess's fingers closed painfully tight on Lars's hand, but she didn't look away. "You can try whatever you want, but I won't let that happen. Never. I'll spend the rest of my life making sure it doesn't."

"Ms. Carroll."

Jess glanced toward Preston Moreland reluctantly. She really didn't want to take her eyes off Lydia, not even for a moment. She didn't trust her not to pull out a garrote.

"You said you were harassed in Belle View. What did you mean by that?"

Jess's forehead furrowed. "I lost my job because your family forced me out of it. Then you had three of my friends fired for good measure. I lost my lease."

"Fired? From where?" Preston turned toward his mother. "Did you have anything to do with this?"

Lydia shrugged. "She was working for one of our companies while refusing me access to my grandson. Why should we pay her to do that?"

Preston closed his eyes for a moment, then shrugged. "I'm sorry about that, Ms. Carroll. Was that the problem with the Child Welfare Office?"

Jess pressed her lips into a thin line. "No, that was the guy you hired to cause a disturbance at my place. That set me up so that you could sic the Child Welfare Service on me."

"You admit you were investigated by the Child Welfare people," Lydia snapped. "Then you ran away in the middle of the night without telling them. They have an open file on you."

Jess turned back to her. "I'm sure they do. I'm also sure you guaranteed that the file would stay open by using your contacts. And I ran away in the middle of the night because you were having me watched."

"Paranoia in addition to neglect." Lydia's mouth stretched in what looked like a parody of a smile. "I'm

sure the Child Welfare people will be interested to hear that. They can contact whatever agency handles such things down here. Single mothers are always an inherent risk.”

“That’s enough,” Lars growled. “That’s more than enough.”

Lydia turned her gaze to him for the first time. “And who might you be? The latest boyfriend?”

“Like I said, my name is Lars Toleffson.” He leaned across the table, towering over Lydia. Looming was much more effective that way, Jess reflected. “And I’m the man who’s going to marry Jess.”

The silence in the room had an electric quality, mainly from the other Toleffsons, both of whom were staring blankly at Lars.

“That will make Jack my stepson. Of course, since I intend to adopt him, he’ll soon be more than that.” Lars was very carefully not looking at Jess. “Jess will be a Toleffson. She won’t be alone, and she won’t be vulnerable to you.”

The silence lasted another few seconds. Then Lydia Moreland’s rictus smile slid into a sneer. “Another fortune-hunter? I don’t think so. I’ll make sure my lawyers put a stop to that. There’ll be no adoption of my grandson. Not by anyone!”

“Mother!” Preston Moreland’s voice roared from the other side of the room.

Jess turned toward him. Preston had risen from his chair. For a smallish man, he did a fairly impressive job of looming himself.

“Preston.” Lydia shot him an annoyed glance. “Don’t interrupt.”

Preston Moreland’s hands clenched convulsively at his sides. “Mother. Shut. Up.”

Lydia stared at him open-mouthed. Preston stared back. Whatever she saw was enough to make her subside into annoyed silence.

Preston turned to Pete. “I’ll ask you again. What do you want from us?”

Pete blinked at him, then seemed to recollect what they were talking about. “Jess?” He turned toward her slightly. “Tell them what you want.”

Jess looked up at Lars, warmth building slowly behind her breastbone. The warrior accountant. *Her* warrior accountant. She turned back to Preston Moreland. “I want you to stop trying to take my son away from me. More than that. I want you to leave both of us alone from now on. Permanently.”

Moreland sighed. “I understand your feelings. Yes, of course, I’ll stop any contact if that’s what you want.”

“Preston!” Lydia’s voice sounded slightly choked.

“I promise.” Moreland raised his voice slightly. “I’ll make sure my mother doesn’t bother you anymore. No one from our family will interfere with your life.”

Judging from Lydia’s expression, Preston would be lucky to survive the flight back to Belle View, let

alone keep her in check.

Preston took a deep breath, turning to face his mother directly. "When we get back to Belle View, I'll inform the department chiefs that they are to report any attempts you make to contact them. And to ignore those attempts. I'll make sure the security division knows that includes them as well. In fact, before we left this morning I told your friend Roy Westerman to clear out his office by close of business today. I knew you'd done something, but I had no idea how bad it was until now. Give it up, Mother. You're through."

After a moment, Lydia turned away from him, raising her chin defiantly. "No. Definitely not. This is *not* over. I will have *my* grandson back at Belle View where he belongs."

Preston's knuckles turned white where his hands grasped the chair.

Jess stood slowly, wiping her palms on her thighs. She met Lydia's basilisk gaze one more time. "Listen to me, old woman. You will never get my son. Never. Even if you manage to get rid of me, Lars will become his guardian. And Lars will be much harder to get rid of, believe me. But even if you send your people after him, he has three brothers, and their wives, and his parents, and the wives' parents. I'm not alone anymore. I have a family now. *Jack* has a family now." Her lips trembled for a moment, then she went on. "You can send down all the high-priced lawyers and hit men you want, but you don't control things down here. Jack will never be yours. *He's mine.*"

Lydia's complexion turned a shade that resembled eggplant.

Jess shook her head. "Sooner or later somebody will decide you belong in jail, or maybe a nice psychiatric ward. Whichever it is, you won't have access to my son. Not now. Not ever. Do I make myself clear?"

Lydia took a breath, but Preston beat her to it. "We understand, Ms. Carroll. I mean..." He paused. "Mrs. Moreland."

Jess wasn't sure it was possible for Lydia's complexion to get more colorful, but just then it seemed to.

"I'll make sure no one bothers you. From now on, my mother won't have access to anything or anyone that could cause harm to you or your son." His jaw hardened. "In fact, from now on, my mother's access to almost everybody except her medical personnel is going to be severely curtailed. I don't want my own family endangered."

Lydia let out a long, hissing breath.

Preston extended a hand toward her. "Get up, Mother. We're leaving now."

Lydia gave Jess one more burning glance, then allowed Preston to help her to her feet. She narrowed her eyes at him. "Weakling," she snarled.

Preston sighed. "Come on. The driver's waiting."

Lydia marched through the door without glancing back. The crisp click of her footsteps echoed down the hall.

Preston turned back once more to look at Jess. "Mrs. Moreland, I'm sorry. That may not mean much

under the circumstances, but you have my sincere apology. I loved my brother, you know. I hope someday you'll let me meet my nephew."

Jess nodded slowly. "Maybe someday."

Preston gave her one last half smile, then headed down the hall after his mother.

Jess felt an overwhelming urge to break into a chorus of "Ding Dong the Witch Is Dead".

Chapter Twenty-Four

Pete flopped into a leather chair across from the fireplace, narrowing his eyes at Lars. "That was possibly the dumbest thing you've ever done. Or anyway, the dumbest since that time you tried to float down the Nishnabotna River on a homemade raft. Calling him down here with nothing but that DVD to back you up. Jesus, Lars!"

Erik shook his head. "Why didn't you tell us you were planning something like this? If Docia hadn't spilled it to Cal and if he hadn't called us, we wouldn't have found out what was going on until it was too late."

"You should talk," Pete snapped. "What the hell were you thinking, with your secret recording? I don't even want to consider how many ethical guidelines, plus regulations, we're both breaking at this point."

Erik's expression went blank.

"If Erik hadn't made that recording, nothing would have stopped her." Jess swallowed hard. "Thank you."

The room was silent for a moment, then Lars shrugged. "Look, I just didn't want you two to get any more involved than you already were. I didn't want you in a position where you had to put your jobs at risk for our sake. Besides, if I'd told you, you'd have tried to talk me out of it."

"True that," Pete muttered.

Erik leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "What would you have done if the old lady had called your bluff, bro? What if she'd gone on demanding to see Dahlia? She was ready to do it too. If her son hadn't decided to reel her in."

Lars shrugged. "I was going to say something vague about Dahlia no longer being in Konigsburg because the investigation had been turned over to the FBI."

Pete grimaced. "Which brings up another problem. What happens when the FBI finally gets around to interviewing Lydia Moreland and it turns out she already knows about the phone recording?"

"My guess is, by then Lydia will be safely stashed away somewhere with a lot of security and a very high wall. I think Moreland was dead serious about her only having access to medical personnel. He wants her out of the way. *Far* out of the way."

Pete blew out a long breath. "Still. Risky, bro. Very, very risky."

Lars's lips spread in a slow smile. "Ah, well, what's life without a little risk?"

“Says the accountant.”

“Says the Toleffson.”

The three of them grinned at each other for a moment. Lars wondered if that had ever happened before—if they’d ever grinned at Erik and had him grin back. Certainly not when they were kids. But the times, as they say, were a-changin’.

“So.” Pete’s eyes took on a devilish glint. “When’s the wedding?”

Shit. Lars cleared his throat. “We haven’t exactly set a date yet.” He was careful not to look at Jess.

“If you really got going on it, you could do something around Christmas. Dad and Mom are going to be here anyway. It would save them a trip.”

Pete’s lips edged up in a teasing smile. Lars felt like throttling him, but he supposed he’d asked for it. Pete had the right to a little payback.

He cleared his throat again. “Probably not that soon. We’ll have to discuss it. Maybe after you leave.” He gave Pete his most pointed look.

Erik stood, picking up his Stetson from the table. “Come on, Counselor. That’s our cue to haul ass.”

“Aw, just when I was starting to have fun.” Pete gave Lars another half grin.

Fratricide had a real appeal just then.

Lars watched his brothers troop out the door, very aware as he did that he hadn’t looked at Jess since the word *wedding* had been mentioned. The room suddenly seemed awfully quiet.

He took a deep breath, keeping his gaze on his feet. “Look, Jess, I’m sorry.”

She was silent for so long that he finally turned back to look at her. Her face was wiped clean of expression. “What are you sorry for exactly, Lars?”

“For putting you on the spot with the whole marriage thing. I didn’t think about that. I just...said it.”

She shook her head. “I didn’t feel on the spot. I thought it was brilliant. Did you see her face?”

“I was afraid she might have a stroke or something.” Lars grinned and then felt a quick pinch from his conscience. “Not that I wanted her to.”

“I did.” Jess’s voice was flat. “I wouldn’t mind if she were dead. And yes, I know what kind of person that makes me. And no, I don’t care.”

Lars sank beside her on the couch. “I’d say it makes you human. The woman would have had you killed so that she could snatch your son. She’s a monster.”

“She’s a Moreland. That’s what they do.”

“Preston didn’t seem so bad.”

“Preston...” Jess closed her eyes for a moment.

In the silence Lars could hear a rasping grackle outside in the yard.

“Barry liked Preston. But he said Preston didn’t understand their mother. He never understood what she was really like.”

“I’d say he understands now.”

The grackles cried again, raucous blats against the sound of the wind through the live oaks. “Are you ready to go back?” he asked. “Docia’s probably wondering what happened to us.”

“I guess we should,” Jess murmured, not moving. She closed her eyes, leaning her head against the back of the couch.

Lars took a deep breath. *Go on. Go for it.* “We could do it, you know.”

“Go back to town?”

“Get married.”

Jess’s eyes popped open.

He pushed on doggedly. “Daisy could be the flower girl. She’d like that. She’s already outgrown the dress she wore at Pete and Janie’s wedding, and she’s ready for another one.”

Beside him, Jess swallowed hard.

“We could even do it at Christmas if you wanted to. Pete’s right. My folks are going to be here anyway, and they’d help. Docia and Janie could pull it all together. They’ve done it before. Well, Janie has. And Allie. They did a good job on their own weddings. Well, sort of.” Now he was babbling. He just wished Jess would say something.

As long as it wasn’t *No* .

After a long moment, she cleared her throat. “What about Jack?”

“I love Jack,” Lars said flatly. “I’ll be a good father to him. I promise you.”

Jess’s fingers rested lightly on his arm. “I know that. That wasn’t what I meant. I meant, what do you want him to do in the wedding?”

His heart gave a mighty thump. “I’m not sure. Ring-bearer?”

“He can’t walk yet without help. And if you give him rings to hold, he might eat them.”

Lars shrugged. “He could be a ring-bearer pillow, then. We could pin them to his front.”

Jess started to giggle, which quickly turned to something closer to snorting and then chortling. She

wrapped her arms around herself, laughing so hard now that she had tears in her eyes. And then the tears became real, and she was sobbing.

Lars gathered her against his chest, rubbing his hand up and down her back. "It's okay. It's over. We won." His hand moved up to cradle the back of her head, stroking the silky softness of her hair. "It's okay," he whispered against her ear. "It's okay, Jess."

She lifted her head to look at him, moss green eyes still wet with tears, a nose badly in need of a handkerchief. She sniffed.

The corners of his mouth crept up into a grin. God, she was a gorgeous mess. Totally natural. Totally his. He laced his fingers through hers. "Jessamyn Carroll, I love you. Will you marry me?"

Jess took another deep breath, then let it out in a sigh. "Lars Toleffson, I love you too. And I'd be delighted."

He leaned forward, pressing his mouth against her salty lips, then angling deeper as he felt her arms wrap around his neck. Jess's tongue rose to meet his, rasping against him as he tasted salt again.

"Jess," he whispered against her hair, "ah, Jess."

Her body was pressed against his now, breasts soft against his chest, one leg draped across his hip. The couch was large and deep and might almost hold them if he shifted slightly to put her against the back. He reached toward the buttons on her shirt.

And remembered the door was unlocked. And Marcus Shandey was probably on the other side.

He sighed. "I suppose it would be tacky to go down the hall and see if there's an unlocked bedroom."

Jess nodded slowly. "Plus it would probably make more work for Mr. Shandey, and we've already put him through a lot."

"Okay." Lars started to pull himself upright again, his nether regions screaming in protest. "Maybe later."

"Hold the thought. We need to go get our kids anyway."

Lars's mouth spread into what he was sure was a sublimely goofy grin. "Our kids."

Jess's forehead furrowed. "Yes?"

"Our kids," he repeated. "Ours."

After a moment, Jess's lips spread in a grin that was probably a mirror image of his own in terms of goofiness.

God, they were made for each other.

Jess knew there were several dozen things they should be planning, not to mention a dozen or so people they needed to inform about their plans, but somehow all she wanted to do was ride through the hills with her head on Lars's shoulder, as she was doing right at that moment. The GPS had them pointed in the general direction of Cal's barn, but she wasn't in any hurry to get there. She had a feeling as soon as they walked into the barn, chaos would descend. Plus they still had a few things to work out.

"Lars," she murmured, "are you sure you want to do this so quickly? I don't want you to rush into anything—no second thoughts later."

Lars narrowed his eyes as he avoided a pothole. "I won't have any second thoughts, Jess. Will you?"

She shook her head. "I'm certain. It's just... I know you and Sherice didn't, well, take much time."

Lars glanced down at her, his eyes bleak. "You're not Sherice. And I'm not the same man I was then. There's a time to be cautious, and a time to go for it. This is the time to go for it, ma'am."

Jess settled her head against his shoulder again. "Yes, sir. Go for it."

When they pulled into the drive beside the barn, Cal's front door burst open, and Docia, Cal, Daisy and Sweetie trotted out.

"What happened?" Docia called. "We didn't hear anything from Pete and Erik, and we've been worried sick!"

Cal shook his head. "Not all of us. Some of us assumed you'd do just fine. Right, Jack?"

Jack, squirming in the crook of Cal's arm, squealed his delight when he saw Jess.

"I'll take that as a yes." Cal grinned, extending the baby in her general direction.

Jess gathered Jack into her arms as Daisy threw herself at Lars's knee.

"Daddy, can we take Sweetie home now? He's missed us so much."

Sweetie obligingly leapt up on Lars's other side, yipping.

"Come in for dinner," Docia demanded. "You can tell us all about it."

Lars shook his head. "Not tonight, ma'am. Maybe tomorrow. Thanks for the babysitting." He started herding Daisy and Sweetie toward the car.

Docia turned toward Jess, her forehead furrowing. "Is everything okay?"

Jess nodded, loosening Jack's fingers from her hair. "Fine." She took a deep breath, letting the goofy grin she'd been trying to suppress break out again. "Terrific, in fact."

Docia narrowed her eyes. "You *will* come back."

"Sure." Jess took the diaper bag from Cal. "Eventually." She turned and followed Lars to the car.

At the B and B, Jack had to be fed, changed, bathed and put to bed. Lars made dinner while Jess was

on baby duty. She stared down at the plate of spaghetti he placed in front of her at the table. Amazing how convenient it was to have somebody else doing things in the house besides her.

Someone to talk to. Someone to pour Daisy's milk. Someone to rub her feet and tell her what a sucky day he'd had. Amazing.

Jess closed her eyes for a moment, almost afraid that Lars would disappear when she opened them, leaving her alone again.

"You okay?" His forehead furrowed slightly.

"Just tired."

He wiped Daisy's face and hands while Jess cleared the table and loaded the dishwasher. She'd expected him to put Daisy to bed, but when she came back to the living room, Daisy was sitting on the couch beside her father. Jess raised a questioning eyebrow.

Lars shrugged, smiling. "Daisy, honey, we've got some news. Some *really* good news. Mrs. Carroll and I are getting married. And we'd like you to be our flower girl."

Jess felt like wincing. *So* not the way she would have done it. Oh, well, maybe it would work.

Lars beamed, his face glowing with such delight it made an ache begin somewhere deep inside Jess's chest.

Daisy stared back and forth between them open-mouthed. Then her lips began to tremble.

Uh oh!

"No," Daisy blurted.

Lars's grin disappeared. "Daisy?"

"No." Daisy's face began to crumple. "No, no, no!" Tears spilled down her cheeks as her mouth formed a ragged O. Her chest heaved with sobs.

"Daisy," Lars murmured. "Oh, sweetheart, don't."

He reached toward her, but Daisy jerked away, her sobs gaining volume. Jess bit her lip. If the sobs became wails, she'd wake Jack, and then they really would be in trouble.

She knelt in front of Daisy, putting her hand on her knee. "Daisy, look at me please."

Daisy turned her tearful gaze downward, looking like an infant mask of tragedy.

"What's wrong, honey? You're not afraid your daddy won't love you any more, are you? Because you know he always will."

Daisy's tragic mask turned faintly puzzled. "I know."

Jess took a breath. "Do you miss your mommy?"

Daisy's puzzlement became more pronounced. "Who?"

"Your mom, Daisy," Lars explained, his voice slightly dry. "Your mother."

Daisy shook her head, her forehead furrowing.

Jess took another breath. *Okay, let's hear it.* "Is it me, Daisy? Do you not like me?"

Daisy's lower lip thrust forward. "I like you. You're nice."

Jess glanced at Lars. *A little help here?*

"Then what's wrong, sweetheart?"

"Jack'll be my brother." Daisy's voice had a dangerous quaver.

Lars nodded. "Yes. He'll be your stepbrother."

"I can't marry my brother," Daisy wailed. "Who can I marry?"

Jess stared at her, caught between relief and exasperation. And fighting back the urge to snicker.

Lars looked as if he was fighting the same battle.

"Oh, Daisy," Jess murmured, "trust me. With those eyes and that hair, you'll have to beat the men off with a stick. Or your daddy will. Finding someone to marry will not be a problem."

Lars suddenly looked a little grim, as if the prospect of beating potential suitors off with a stick wasn't entirely out of the question.

"But Jack needs a sister, Daisy." *And a father and a family,* she added silently. "He needs you."

Daisy blinked at her. "He needs me?"

"To help take care of him. To show him how to do things. To make sure nobody picks on him. Because they wouldn't want to mess with your brother, would they?"

Daisy's eyes grew thoughtful. "My brother."

Lars was smiling again. "I can tell you about that, Dais. About having brothers. It's not a bad thing."

A long, soulful moan echoed from the general vicinity of the backyard.

"Crap," Jess muttered. "I forgot to let Sweetie back into the utility room." She pushed herself to her feet.

Daisy's expression became fretful again. "What about Sweetie?"

Jess blinked. She wasn't sure what she was being asked. "Sweetie?"

"Is Sweetie our dog?" Daisy gave her an earnest look, that would have been utterly guileless if Jess

hadn't known her so well. She took a deep breath.

"I'll tell you what, Daisy, everybody gets a wedding present in this deal. And Sweetie can be yours. From me." Jess was very careful not to look at Lars.

Daisy's brow furrowed. "Sweetie's my dog?"

"If you like."

Daisy's face was transformed into a cherubic gleam. "Yes. And I get to be flower girl. And I get a velvet dress. With lace."

Lars sighed. "Come on, sweetheart, time to get you ready for bed."

Chapter Twenty-Five

It was a beautiful wedding. Even Lars thought so, and his previous experience with weddings hadn't been particularly pleasant.

Docia and Janie had taken charge, as he'd known they would. In short order they managed to reserve the private dining room at Brenner's restaurant with its massive limestone fireplace and bronze lone star. It meant keeping the guest list down to less than a hundred, but that was fine with Lars. Jess said she didn't know anybody in town except Toleffsons anyway, but there were enough of them to fill the place, even on Christmas.

The room was hung with ropes of evergreens and bittersweet and occasional clumps of mistletoe. Everything except the evergreens was local, including the poinsettia plants that ringed the hearth, but the room still smelled vaguely like Iowa in December.

Pete had strong-armed one of the local judges into presiding—apparently, he owed Pete a favor and performing a wedding on Christmas afternoon was a suitable way of discharging it.

Fortunately for them all, Daisy had no problems with opening her presents on Christmas Eve rather than Christmas morning.

Jess had found Daisy her velvet dress, red with white lace at the neckline and wrists. She had white stockings too, and black slippers. Docia had given her a wreath of red and white roses to wear in her coffee-colored curls and a basket of rose petals to toss as she skipped down the aisle between the folding chairs. She looked so lovely she made Lars's heart ache. Of course, when she stood next to Jack, who wore a green velour coverall, the two of them looked a little like Scrooge's worst nightmare.

His mother sat at a table now with Jack in her lap, guiding his fingers away from the gorgeous wedding cake Allie had made for them. Mom looked surprisingly relaxed about being on Jack duty, but then she'd had a lot of practice with male babies in her time.

His parents had also sent him what was probably the best wedding present he could have wished for—an announcement that had appeared in *The Des Moines Register*, informing the world that Sherice Bettendorf Toleffson had wed Dr. Carl Nolan, "prominent West Des Moines plastic surgeon", in Cancun on December twentieth. The very fact that Sherice hadn't bothered to contact him about her marriage told him she was no longer interested in her ex-husband or her daughter. Lars wondered if she'd bothered to tell the prominent plastic surgeon that Daisy existed. Not that he particularly cared.

He glanced around the room at his brothers. Pete, looking at home in his tuxedo, was in conference with the judge. Cal was giving Daisy a ride on his shoulders. His tuxedo looked a little the worse for wear. Erik sat beside his father at a table, eating a piece of wedding cake. Even in a tuxedo he still looked like a cop. Lars wondered if that had always been true, but he was pretty sure it hadn't been. Still, he had to admit—it looked like Erik's thug days were behind him.

His sisters-in-law stood at the side of the room, surveying the buffet table. In their black silk bridesmaid dresses, they looked like a pair of mismatched Bond girls—one of whom had a slightly greenish tinge. As he watched, Docia grabbed a soda cracker from the table and started munching.

Lars glanced at the other side of the room and saw Allie talking to Jess. His wife. His throat tightened suddenly as she turned in his direction and smiled. The moss green of her dress matched her eyes, making them seem almost luminous. The bodice molded to her breasts, the long skirt skimming across her hips, ending at her ankles with a side slit that showed enticing glimpses of leg now and then. Her bosom glowed white above the rounded neckline.

His wife was standing under a clump of mistletoe. Well, sort of beside it. Next to it. In the vicinity. Close enough.

He was beside her in three steps. Jess looked up at him, green eyes dancing, the corners of her lips edging up. "Hi."

"Hi." He nodded at the clump of white berries behind her. "Mistletoe." Cupping her face in his hands, he lowered his lips to hers. She tasted of champagne and frosting. He brushed her lips lightly. There were, after all, a lot of people around, including a couple of kids who belonged to them.

Jess reached her arms around his neck, drawing her body tight against him.

Lars took a deep breath and wondered if it was too soon to leave. "Sure you don't want to go to Austin? Or even Fredericksburg—that's closer. We've got three days of child care. Daisy's with my folks, Jack's dividing his time between Docia and Janie. Sweetie's staying with Cal's Chihuahua. We could still head for the wicked city."

"We have food, drink, and a king-size bed back at the cabin," she murmured. "What else do we need?"

"You know, we could be in that king-size bed in under twenty minutes, assuming we undress fast, which is pretty much guaranteed."

Jess ran the backs of her fingers along his jaw, her smile turning sultry. "You're on, ace."

Lars carried Jess over the threshold, which was sweet but totally unnecessary. On the other hand, he didn't seem to break a sweat when he picked her up, which made her feel a lot more delicate than she really was.

Inside, he kicked the door closed and set her on her feet. "You're not carrying me to the bedroom?" Jess raised an eyebrow.

Lars took hold of her shoulders and turned her around. "We're not going that far."

She felt cool air against her back as he pulled down the zipper, a brief pause before the warmth of his breath grazed her nape.

"No bra. I like that in a woman."

"It's built into the dress." Her voice shook slightly. Amazing. They'd been making love for over a month now, and he still took her breath away.

His hands cupped her breasts as he pulled her against him, his tongue tracing a sweltering line from her shoulder to the tip of her ear.

Jess sighed, letting her body relax. Her bones had turned liquid. Oh god. Three days would *not* be long enough.

But then they had a lot longer than three days. With any luck, they had years ahead of them. *The rest of your life.*

Jess pushed the phrase away. After all, Barry had had the rest of his life with her, and it had only been a couple of years. She wanted more than that with Lars. Lots more.

She pushed her dress down over her hips, then turned back to him, trying not to cross her arms over her breasts. "You look over-dressed to me."

He had a killer smile—she knew that already. His molasses eyes turned warm. "Want to give me a hand here?"

Jess slid her hands up his tuxedo shirt, pulling the studs loose and dropping them to the floor. Lars stripped off his jacket and reached for his belt.

"Uh-uh. That's mine." Jess pulled the buckle open and jerked down his zipper.

Lars kicked his tuxedo pants and underwear into the corner, and pulled her against him again. Clearly, he was very, very glad to see her. She reached for him, sliding her hand along his erection.

His breath hissed between his teeth. He took hold of her hips, raising her so that she could wrap her legs around his waist, then lowering her so that she sheathed him slowly.

Jess gasped with the effort, slowly, slowly, taking him bit by bit into herself. She pushed her back against the wall as he braced her.

"Look at me."

She raised her gaze to his then, staring into the depths of those deep brown eyes. "Ah, Lars," she whispered.

"Jess. My Jess. All mine." His forehead creased with strain as his pace increased, filling her again and again.

The explosion started at her heels, moving up her body in a wave of heat, until she cried out, pushing her head back against the wall. She held onto his shoulders as he drove into her in a last series of wild plunges, then buried her face in the crook of his shoulder, gasping for breath. The wall behind her was cold, pressing against her backbone, and she slid down as Lars bent his knees, collapsing them both to the floor.

He cradled her against his chest, warming her skin. The rough surface of the carpet pressed against her shoulder. Jess felt as if her bones had liquefied.

“Okay,” he muttered after a moment. “That’s the living room. We’ve already done the kitchen and two bedrooms. That leaves the dining room, the study, and the utility room. I assume we’re skipping the nursery—the crib doesn’t seem like a good option.”

Jess crooked an eyebrow. “The utility room?”

“Hey, that dryer looks pretty sturdy to me.”

Jess giggled, then drew a finger through the thick hair on his chest. “We’ll have to stop to eat occasionally. And cook.”

Lars shook his head. “Not a problem. Docia and Janie left us with a full refrigerator. They said it was a wedding present. Just heat and serve.”

Jess leaned back to look at him. “You have a wonderful family.”

“I do.” He ran his fingers along the line of her cheekbone. “And now you’re part of it.”

“I am indeed. I’m also freezing.”

Lars chuckled. “Yeah. I was going to say something about that, but I didn’t want to break the moment.”

“My chattering teeth would have done that anyway.”

She sat up slowly, reaching for her dress on the chair where she’d tossed it.

“You’re not getting dressed are you?” Lars looked faintly disappointed.

“Nope. Just going to hang this up so I can pass it down to our daughters.” She grinned again to hide the quick shiver. Their daughters. *Theirs* .

In the silence, she heard the chirping of a cardinal, the breeze rustling the live oaks and the sound of tires crunching on the gravel of the drive outside. Jess jerked toward the door as Lars sat up quickly. “Guests?”

She shook her head. “The B and B’s booked for the whole week. They’re already up there.”

Somewhere outside a car door slammed. “Holy shit!”

Jess ran to the bedroom to grab a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, while Lars pulled on his bathrobe. She pushed the hair out of her eyes as someone rapped on the door. “Just a minute!”

The FedEx delivery man on her doorstep didn't bat an eye when she finally opened the door. He handed her a signature box. Jess scrawled something that looked sort of like her signature.

The delivery man gave her an envelope, allowing his lips to spread into a slightly dry grin. "Merry Christmas, ma'am."

Jess turned back to the living room, closing the door behind her. "Who sends FedEx on Christmas? It must cost a couple of significant limbs."

"You could always open it and find out."

She stared down at the envelope, her chest tightening. "It's from Belle View."

Lars's eyes turned dark. "Do you want me to open it?"

"I can do it." Jess took a deep breath and pulled the tear strip along the side.

She pulled out what looked like a stack of spreadsheet printouts with a densely written memo clipped to the front, along with a letter. "What is this?"

"Let me." Lars took the stack of papers from her hand and began leafing through them.

She reached into the envelope again and pulled out a single sheet. "It's from Preston."

He said nothing. She glanced at him. His gaze was glued to the papers.

"What is it?" she asked breathlessly. "What are those spreadsheets?"

"A statement of worth. Jack's worth."

His voice sounded slightly choked as he stared up at her again. "Did you know how much he'd inherited from his father?"

Jess shook her head. "Barry's lawyer asked the Morelands for an accounting, but their lawyers threw up all kinds of roadblocks. He said we'd have to go to court, and he wasn't all that enthusiastic about doing that."

Lars blew out a breath. "Looks like they've changed their minds."

Jess looked back at the letter again. "Preston says it's a wedding present."

"Did you send him an invitation?"

"No. But I wrote to tell him we were getting married. I figured it wouldn't hurt for the Morelands to know we were official."

Lars sank onto the couch, staring down at the spreadsheets again.

"What's the matter? Is there something wrong about Jack's inheritance?"

He shook his head slowly, his lips spreading in another dry grin. "Only that there's a lot of it. *Really* a lot

of it. Jack's worth more than some countries I know. They're small countries. But still."

Jess peered over his shoulder, then slid down beside him. "Is that the total? Holy crap!"

"You didn't know?"

"That Barry had that much money? No. I mean the Morelands are a big deal in Belle View, but Belle View's a pretty small town."

"I'd say the Morelands are probably a big deal in other places too. Are you Jack's legal guardian?"

Jess nodded. "Barry made sure of that. Technically, I'm also Barry's executor, but like I said, the Morelands stonewalled me. And then I ran away." She bit her lip, trying very hard not to be scared witless.

Lars stared down at the paper again. "This...explains a lot."

"Such as?"

"Such as why Lydia Moreland wanted Jack." He raised his gaze to hers, eyes dark.

Jess wiped her suddenly damp palms against her thighs. "What do you mean?"

"Did she ever strike you as grandmotherly? Or even maternal?"

Jess shook her head. "That wasn't the point with her. She wanted Jack because he was a Moreland. She wanted what he represented."

"Exactly." Lars picked up the memo. "But I'd be willing to bet this was what he represented to her, not the whole Moreland honor thing."

Jess stared down at the figure on the page again, the almost unbelievable figure. "But she had her own money, Lars. Why would she want Jack's?"

He shrugged. "Maybe she didn't have as much as we thought she had."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning it would be interesting to see her husband's will. To see just how much of the Moreland fortune he left her and how much he left his sons."

Jess raised an eyebrow. "Can we see it?"

"Oh yeah." Lars nodded emphatically. "We *will* see it, although it may take a minor battle."

"You think he disinherited her?"

"Maybe he just put her money where she couldn't get at it easily. If he knew just how scary she was, he may have wanted to make sure his sons had some way to protect themselves."

Jess closed her eyes. "It didn't protect Barry."

“Barry chose not to fight her.” Lars laced his fingers through hers, his palm warm against her cooling skin. “It was an effective way to defend himself—give her what she wanted. Complete access to his estate.”

“Until he died.” She swallowed hard, moving closer to the warmth of his body.

He nodded. “And you wouldn’t follow orders, wouldn’t move into the compound, wouldn’t let her go on doing what she’d been doing for god only knows how long.”

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her into his lap. Jess clung to him. “Why me?”

“You were Jack’s guardian. There should have been an audit of your husband’s estate. If there had been, whatever she’d done with his money—and I’m willing to bet she’s done a helluva lot—would have come out. Plus she wouldn’t have had any more access to his funds.”

Jess snuggled closer to him, resting her head against his chest. “But she still wouldn’t have been Jack’s guardian. Even if Dahlia had kidnapped him, taking him back to Belle View wouldn’t have gotten Lydia his money.”

“But if she had Jack, she had the leverage she needed to keep what she’d taken, and maybe to take more.”

“Leverage?”

Lars rubbed his cheek against her hair, his hand making small circles on her back. “Suppose she’d offered you a deal—Jack in exchange for your signing off on Barry’s money. Would you have taken her up on it?”

Jess chewed her lower lip, staring up at him. “Of course.”

He nodded. “That’s what I figured. And it’s probably what she figured too.”

He brushed his lips across hers, then turned his head to deepen the kiss. She flattened herself against him, winding her arms around his neck, pulling him tight, clinging to the kiss with a desperation that scared her. “Christ, Lars,” she whispered. “Jesus Christ.”

He touched his forehead to hers. “It’s okay, Jess. It’s over—she’s gone now. And she won’t be back. You’re both safe.”

After a moment, she leaned back to look at him again. “So what are we going to do with all this?”

“All what?”

“This.” She gestured toward the papers on the couch. “Jack’s estate. And Preston says I’m supposed to be getting some kind of ‘salary’ as Jack’s guardian.”

“What do you want to do?”

“We can use some of it to live, but I want to save a lot of it for Jack. And some for Daisy. And...you know...any others.” She swallowed hard. “And I’d like to give some of it away if we can. Only I don’t

know how to go about doing that exactly.” She drew another shuddering breath, then stopped. The shuddering breath became a giggle, then a full-fledged guffaw.

She leaned back against Lars’s shoulder, the laughter shaking her body like tears, bubbling up to leave her gasping for breath. She wasn’t sure whether she was laughing or crying exactly. Some of each, it seemed.

“Jess?” Lars sounded more concerned now. He drew her into his arms again. “Sweetheart?” His hand rubbed slow circles in the middle of her back. “Take it easy, love.”

“I just realized. I need...” Jess paused, trying to catch her breath. “I need...a good accountant.”

Lars stared at her for a moment, then started to laugh himself, his body shaking silently against hers.

Jess wrapped her arms around him, pressing her forehead against his chest. “Isn’t it lucky I already have one?”

“You definitely have one,” Lars murmured against her ear. “I’ll do my best for you. And for Jack. I’m all yours, babe.”

Jess pulled back to look at him. Molasses eyes, hair the color of very strong coffee. Body like a redwood. The world’s sexiest accountant. Hers. All hers.

“C’mon husband,” she said, pulling him to his feet. “Let’s go see how sturdy that dryer really is.”

About the Author

Meg Benjamin writes about South Texas, although she lives in the foothills of the Colorado Rockies. Her comic romances, *Venus in Blue Jeans*, *Wedding Bell Blues*, and *Be My Baby*, all published by Samhain, are set in the Texas Hill Country. When she isn’t writing, Meg spends her time listening to Americana music, drinking Texas and Colorado wine, and keeping track of her far-flung family. To learn more about Meg Benjamin, please visit www.MegBenjamin.com . Meg loves to hear from her readers. Send her an email at meg@megbenjamin.com .

Look for these titles from Meg Benjamin

Now Available:

Venus in Blue Jeans

Wedding Bell Blues

Who knew you could find the love of your life at the wedding from hell...

Wedding Bell Blues

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Janie Dupree will do anything to make sure her best friend has the wedding of her dreams, even if it means relinquishing what every bridesmaid covets and never gets—the perfect maid-of-honor dress. Problem is, family drama as tangled as a clump of Texas prickly pear cactus threatens to send the skittish bride hopping aboard the elopement express.

Janie could use a hand, but the best man's "help" is only making things worse.

Pete Toleffson just wants to get through his brother's wedding and get back to his county attorney job in Des Moines. He never expected to be the engineer on a wedding train that's derailing straight toward hell. Janie's the kind of girl he'd like to get close to—but her self-induced role as "Miss Fix-It" is as infuriating as it is adorable.

If they can just fend off meddling parents, vindictive in-laws, spiteful ex-boyfriends, and a greyhound named Olive long enough to achieve matrimonial lift-off, maybe they can admit they're head-over-heels in love.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Wedding Bell Blues:

Janie was trying to walk off the effects of the wine she'd had at dinner and the margarita she'd had at Allie's. She didn't drink much as a rule, and her head still felt a little loopy.

She turned up Spicewood, heading for home. Soft music was playing on someone's radio—a woman singing "Making Believe". It almost sounded as if the music was coming from the bookstore.

Janie stopped. It *was* coming from the bookstore. From the backyard behind it anyway.

She began to walk again, as quietly as she could. At the gate, she stopped and peered into the yard.

Pete Toleffson was dancing. Sort of.

Janie loved to dance. She even loved dancing in Docia's chorus line, although she could only do it now and then, when she felt particularly raucous. She'd been known to waltz around her backyard on a summer night to the sound of her own humming, reveling in the feeling of the grass beneath her toes and the warm night air on her face.

Pete Toleffson didn't look like he was reveling in much of anything. His upper body was impossibly rigid, as if he wore a solid steel jacket that kept him from bending at the waist. He held his arms stiffly in front of him in a parody of a waltz position. Apparently, his partner wasn't cooperating. As he passed beneath the reflected street light, his face looked pinched and tense, like he expected something very painful to happen at any moment.

Olive sat beneath a lawn chair watching him, her head canted to one side. After a minute, she got up and trotted to his side, then jumped away quickly as his feet brushed against her. Pete ground to an immediate halt.

"Shit," he muttered. "Sorry, girl." He bent down and rubbed her ears.

Janie cleared her throat.

Pete stood straight, his back rigid. After a quick glance at her, he fastened his gaze on the back fence. "I suppose it's too much to hope that you didn't see anything." His voice sounded oddly choked.

Janie opened the gate and stepped into the backyard. "You didn't look as if you were enjoying yourself."

"That, as they say, would be an understatement." Pete sighed and finally looked her way. "I'm a total non-dancer, but you and I are supposed to dance at the reception. I'm trying to remember enough about waltzing not to cripple you for life."

Janie grinned. "I'm pretty agile. I think I can deal with a dance."

She wasn't sure what was wrong with what she'd said, but judging from Pete's expression, she'd just made the whole thing worse. "I'm hoping agility won't be needed," he said stiffly.

The music on the radio changed to Lyle Lovett and "If I Needed You". Janie extended her hands. "Come on, it's not that bad."

"Yeah, it is." Pete sighed, but he moved toward her, taking her hands. "This isn't a waltz."

"No, it's not." Janie smiled. "It's just beautiful." She swayed back and forth lightly, letting the music move into her bones.

After a moment, Pete began to move with her in a sort of tentative way.

Janie shuffled lightly to the left and back again, taking the rhythm from the music and pulling Pete gently in her wake.

He stumbled, half-catching himself, but Janie kept hold of his hands, sliding back and forth easily, humming along with Lyle. The tension began to fade in his arms.

On the radio, Emmylou Harris started singing "Cattle Call". Pete stopped in his tracks. "What the hell?"

Janie laughed. "C'mon, it's a waltz. Dance with me." She extended her arms.

Pete pulled her closer, one hand at her waist, the other holding her hand out rigidly. After a moment, he began leading. Emmylou's sweet soprano yodeling followed them around the yard. Janie found herself emphasizing each downbeat, enjoying herself immensely as Pete's arms began to loosen slightly.

The music slowed and shifted to another slow one. Without thinking, Janie moved closer, letting Pete slide his feet alongside hers. She could feel the hard muscles of his shoulders beneath her fingers, flexing slightly as he moved her in careful circles. She let him push her along, keeping her spine straight but moving steadily closer until their bodies finally touched.

She hadn't meant it to happen, really. Pete came to an abrupt halt, his shoulders stiff again. Janie started to move, but his hand at the small of her back held her in place. Then he began to dance again, more slowly this time. Another waltz began to play. Apparently, the DJ was psychic.

Janie could feel the smooth plane of his body pressing against her breasts. An ache had started low in her body that had nothing to do with exhaustion and everything to do with Pete Toleffson. She closed her eyes and let her cheek rest against his chest for a moment, feeling warm skin and smelling faint hints of sweat and aftershave, letting herself relax against the hard muscles of his chest and thighs.

One muscle was very hard indeed.

What the hell was she doing? Janie's head popped up abruptly. Pete Toleffson was staring down at her, his eyes obscured in the dim light. "Something wrong, Ms. Dupree?" he murmured.

Janie shook her head, feeling a weird bubble of panic rise in her chest. This was just a dance, after all. She danced all the time.

Pete's fingers spread against the small of her back, nudging her closer as their bodies moved slowly back and forth. Her hips brushed against him, and she was aware again of the hard shape of his erection.

Okay, she wasn't imagining it—something was definitely going on beyond a quick turn around the backyard.

The music faded and changed to a muted commercial. Pete stopped moving.

Janie felt as if she were standing on the edge of a precipice, looking down. She could step back. Or she could leap over the edge and fly.

Pete's hand moved from the small of her back to cup her cheek, and Janie stood very still, looking up at him. His eyes were dark in the dim light of the backyard, but she could see the fire behind them as he moved closer. Then his lips touched hers.

For a moment, she tasted traces of beer and salt before heat blossomed in her belly, burning away the ache of the dance. His tongue moved across the seam of her lips, touching, teasing. She opened for him, winding her arms around his neck so that she could feel the heat of his chest against hers.

His tongue touched her lightly, rubbing against her teeth, her mouth, her own tongue. Janie rose against him, her legs opening against the warm heat of his arousal, trying to find the right spot as her head swam.

Trying to find the right spot? She was losing it—she needed to pull away, right now. But she didn't.

She moved closer, slipping up onto her toes until the V of her crotch fit across his groin. Pete groaned, his arm fastening tight around her waist, pulling her flat against him.

And then he raised his head to stare down at her. "Janie Dupree," he said softly, "you are lightning in a bottle."

The world whirled around her for another moment, and then the genes of several generations of Texas ladies yanked her back to reality. "Oh my," she gasped. "Oh my goodness." She stepped back from him, staring wide-eyed.

One corner of Pete's mouth curved up in a dry smile. "I take that to mean the dance lesson is over for the night."

"I...yes, I guess I'd better get on home. I mean, I was on my way when..." Janie stuttered to a halt,

swallowing hard.

“I’ll walk with you,” Pete said, swinging the gate open.

Janie shook her head. “It’s just one block over. You don’t need to.”

“Yes.” Pete’s voice was firm. “I do.”

They started up the darkened street, a warm night breeze shivering through the live oaks in the yard next door. Janie hadn’t the faintest idea what to say to him. At least she managed to keep quiet rather than babbling.

Pete walked beside her with easy grace. Why couldn’t he dance like that?

“Why don’t you like dancing?” Janie blurted.

She saw his grin in the streetlight. “Because I’m a lummox. Lummoxes don’t dance.”

What to say to that? Janie saw the porch light her mother had left burning ahead to her right. She turned in front of Pete and extended her hands.

After a moment, he took them. Janie looked up into his warm brown eyes, feeling the soft night air envelop her. “You’re not a lummox, Pete Toleffson. Your inner dancer is longing to get out, believe me. Just give him a chance.”

Without pausing to think, Janie reached up and brushed her lips lightly across his. “Thank you for dancing with me. We’ll do it again some time.” She turned and started toward the front porch.

“Have I ever told you what a knock-out you are, Janie Dupree?” Janie glanced back at him. He was grinning. “Night, ma’am.”

Janie smiled, then slipped through her front door.

What if everything you knew about your past turns out to be...wrong ?

Summer’s Song

© 2009 Allie Boniface

Ten years after leaving home, the last thing Summer Thompson expects is to inherit her estranged father’s half-renovated mansion. And the last thing she wants is to face the memories of the night her brother died—sketchy as they may be. Now a San Francisco museum curator, she plans to stay east just long enough to settle the estate and get rid of the house. Until she finds it occupied by a hunky handyman who’s strangely reluctant to talk about his past.

Damian Knight has something to hide: his mother and sister from a brutal stalker. They’ve found a measure of peace and carefully guarded safety in Pine Point. Yet when the lonely, haunted Summer steals

his heart, he finds himself opening up to her in ways he should never risk. Especially to a woman who's planning to return to the west coast—after selling their refuge out from under them.

Summer's mounting flashbacks leave her confused—and more determined than ever to find out the truth behind her brother's death. But in a small town full of powerful secrets, confronting the past could cost her the man she loves...and even her life.

Warning: This title contains a hunky hero who can do anything with his hands, a heroine desperate to discover the truth, tons of summer heat, and a small town with so much charm you'll want to move there.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Summer's Song:

Summer sat on the top step and stared up into the sky. Damian had disappeared inside, but she didn't really mind. She needed a few minutes to collect herself and calm her racing pulse. She could still smell his cologne in the air beside her and feel the warmth of his body only inches away. If he hadn't gotten up, she would have peeled off her clothes just to feel his skin on hers.

She inhaled, taking in a good long breath of clear Pine Point air. This she would miss. The air and the view of the stars at night. A San Francisco skyline could never take the place of bright white dots skating to eternity in the black above you. She raised one finger and moved it through the growing darkness, tracing the constellations she knew so well. Wrapping her arms around her knees, she peered again toward the street. Nothing but faint streetlights winked back.

The front door opened and closed. "You're quiet."

"Just thinking about how good this place looks," she lied. "About how much you and Mac have done this summer."

"Well, we had some help. But my mom says the same thing. She's even talking about buying a place of her own and redoing it." He paused and then sat beside her. "She loves coming over here."

"She's terrific. She has so many ideas for the house. We were talking about the bedrooms upstairs, and the library..." She didn't speak for a few seconds. "It's meant a lot to me, to spend time with your mother and Dinah. To feel..." She paused again. "...like I belong here."

"They both think you're great."

Summer reached over and laid a hand on his arm. "And you," she added. "I like spending time with you." She left her hand there for a moment, and he laid his own on top of it, gently, as if with too much pressure he might burst the bubble they hovered inside.

He swallowed. "What about Gabe?"

"What about him?"

"You get things sorted out?"

She nodded, not really sure how to answer. "I think so."

“I hope so.” He laced his fingers through hers and didn’t speak again.

“Think you’ll ever build your own place?” Summer asked after a few moments of silence. “You’re good at it.”

He smiled. “I don’t think I’ll build from scratch. I’d like to restore one, maybe. Do something like this.” He flushed. Even in the half-light Summer could see it, a darkening of the cheeks, a shine in the center of his eyes. “Well, not exactly like this. Something on a smaller scale.”

“I know what you mean.”

Summer thought she heard something scuttling in the shadows behind her—a mouse? a squirrel looking for a spot to bed down?—and she turned to look over her shoulder. A bulky outline in the darkness startled her. It looked almost like a person, and she jumped.

“Is that—is that a guitar?”

He followed her gaze. “Oh, yeah. I was playing a little for Dinah, earlier.”

“I didn’t know you were the musical type.” It seemed like a silly thing to say—after all, what did she know about him? A few puzzle pieces, a story here and there, not enough to put together the whole, complex person Damian Knight seemed to be. “Would you play something for me?” She didn’t know where the request came from and was surprised when it left her lips.

“Sure.” He moved past her, and the warmth from his sleeve touched her bare arm. She shivered in the hot night air.

Damian took the instrument from its case and cradled it in careful arms. Tuning, tweaking, he strummed a few chords and began to play “Yesterday” by the Beatles. At first it was only instrumental melody, the strings of the guitar humming the poignant song. But after a minute he began to sing along. His voice was husky but certain, caressing the words as if he’d sung them a hundred times.

Summer leaned against the railing and watched him. The strong, thick fingers that usually wound themselves around a hammer now danced across the strings. The forehead that frowned all day in concentration smoothed. Damian sang, and when the song was over he played “Take It Easy” by the Eagles and sang again.

After the final chord he stopped. The music echoed across the grass, to the hills and back, and Summer let out a breath she didn’t know she’d been holding.

“You’re good.” No one had ever sung to her before. Nerves along her spine stretched and splintered. Her heart, over-full with the night and the music and the man beside her, began a jig.

Damian cleared his throat. “I’m not that good.”

“Are you kidding? You’re amazing. Do you ever write anything of your own?”

He turned toward her. The movement pressed his thigh against hers, and she thought for a minute he might kiss her. His gaze moved to her mouth and then to the place where the white skin of her breast met the vee of her sundress.

“Yes,” Damian said, his breath warm on her cheek. “Sometimes I write my own songs.”

He repositioned the instrument, curved his fingers into place and began to play. The melody was simple, a sweet tune that rose and fell without lyrics. It reminded Summer of a butterfly in the morning or dawn above the ocean. The notes dropped honey-like into an endless pool of longing. In the middle, it changed, became low and sensual with guttural chords that hovered and hung in the air. Damian’s shoulders hunched, and his arms tightened with intensity as he played on. A pause, and then the first melody returned, sweeter than the start, if that was possible. The sun coming out after a brilliant summer storm. A baby waking with a smile to a brand new day. It faded, grew, then faded again to nothing. With the final chord, the notes vanished into the night.

“God, that was...” Summer couldn’t find the words. “...beautiful,” she finished, but it wasn’t enough to describe the passion or the complexity of the song.

He smiled. “Thanks.”

“Does it have a title?”

He looked toward her and paused, opened his mouth and closed it again. “Summer’s Song.”

Damian set down the guitar and moved toward her, and this time Summer saw the kiss coming. She felt it, knew it and wanted it with every part of her. He brushed his lips against hers, reached up with one hand to cup her cheek, and the step fell away beneath her. Sweet lightness flooded her stomach, her chest, her mouth. He pulled away, whispered her name, pressed his cheek to her temple and let her feel the pulse that raced there.

“Summer.” The name sighed out of him, and he kissed her again.

Her fingers reached for him, felt the smooth, strong muscles of his chest and drew him close. Kisses moved along her cheek, her chin, down to her collarbone, until she moaned with a pleasure she couldn’t remember ever feeling before. One hand stroked the curve of her breast, and she shivered. Burying her fingers in his hair, she pulled Damian to her. Lips parted and tongues searched, until she could hardly tell where she ended and he began.

The days flipped backwards. She had come here wanting nothing, expecting nothing. Yet something—everything—had changed. First the house. Then dark memories. Then days of light and laughter, of Dinah and Hannah, of Rachael and Cat, strung together like stones on a string. Summer had never believed she might call Pine Point home again. Yet here she sat, wanting Damian Knight’s touch, his kiss, his songs, more than she remembered wanting anything in her life. Maybe coming home didn’t mean going backwards, after all. Maybe it meant growing up, making new discoveries, learning to forgive the past and finding that the future held myriad possibilities.

Her heart swelled as she took Damian by the hand and led him inside.

Rebel meets by-the-book businessman. Love doesn’t stand a ghost of a chance.

The Ghost Exterminator: A Love Story

© 2009 Vivi Andrews

A Karmic Consultants Story

Jo Banks has been seeing ghosts since she was six, so normal was never really an option. Embracing the weird and shunning normalcy makes her the top Ghost Exterminator in her region. Then she meets Wyatt Haines, the uptight, materialistic and irritatingly sexy owner of a successful resort chain.

Wyatt's new Victorian inn is extremely haunted and the Commando Barbie Ghost Exterminator is just the girl for the job. Except Wyatt doesn't believe in ghosts, or Jo, or anything outside the norm. He'll have to start believing fast, though, because Jo's extermination goes awry and accidentally throws two prankster ghosts into Wyatt's body to haunt him.

Every time he falls asleep, the mischievous ghosts take over, turning his perfectly ordered life into chaos. His waking hours are no less chaotic, with his thoughts possessed by Jo's quirky appeal and Playmate physique.

Unfortunately, Jo's ghost-exing mojo is on the fritz just when she needs it the most to unhaunt Wyatt and figure out why his inn is swarming with ghosts. Preferably before his spirit is permanently separated from his mouth-watering body.

And before her heart is permanently attached to the most sexy, frustrating, normal man she's ever met.

Warning: This book contains prankster ghosts, PG bondage, and a not-so-PG trip to the mile-high club.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Ghost Exterminator: A Love Story:

"Is it really so awful being a ghost host? I've always kind of wondered what it would feel like to have someone else inside me."

She hadn't meant it to sound dirty. Really she hadn't. She didn't even realize her words could have a wicked interpretation until his eyes lit darkly, the blue as hot as the flame from an acetylene torch. *Oh, baby. Come to mama.*

"I didn't mean it like that," she said hurriedly.

He laughed, a low, husky rasp of sound. "Didn't you?"

That laugh was going to be her downfall. She couldn't be interested in him. She just couldn't! He thought she was nuts, for crying out loud. But when he wasn't glowering down on her like a disappointed deity of propriety, he could actually be remarkably charming. And there was no point in denying the physical attraction between them. The man was gorgeous, no two ways about that, and her hormones had been singing the *Hallelujah* chorus since the moment she set eyes on him. As far as Jo was concerned, that was all the more reason to stay away from him.

Unfortunately, there was only so far she could go within the confines of her tiny office and she was stuck

with him until she could foist him off on another ghost exterminator whose mojo wasn't on the fritz.

Dammit. Her mojo couldn't be gone. It just couldn't.

Jo began to pace—one step forward, one step back—as much as she could in her miniscule office.

“Jo? You okay?”

“I don't know what went wrong,” she said, fighting down hysteria again. “My mojo has never failed me before. It's who I *am* —” Her voice broke on the last word and she shook her head sharply. She was *not* going to cry in front of awful, judgmental, occasionally charming Wyatt Haines.

“Jo, hey, come on...” He stood, reaching out a hand to her.

She didn't know what he had intended. Maybe to pat her on the back or give her arm a comforting squeeze. But when Wyatt stood, he caught her turning in mid-pace. They both stumbled, tangled against one another. He tried to steady her and one hand brushed against the Girls as the other wrapped around her waist.

Jo looked up into his eyes, startled by his sudden proximity, seduced by the feel of him pressed hard against her.

Then, before rational thought could take control, he was kissing her.

His mouth landed heavily on hers, a full-frontal assault of the lips. The flare of chemistry was sudden, unexpected, and so freaking perfect her brain was instantly wiped of conscious thought.

Her mojo might be going horribly wrong, but *this* felt right.

He teased and coaxed and Jo was with him every step of the way, throwing herself into the kiss for everything she was worth.

He stumbled under the force of her enthusiasm, his feet tangled with hers, and they tumbled down onto the chair. Jo's legs fell to either side of his. He yanked her forward by her belt loops until she was seated, straddling his thighs with nothing but air between them. And not much of that.

Jo wrapped her arms around his shoulders as he palmed the back of her skull, angling her head for better access as his tongue drove to take possession of her mouth. He untangled his fingers from her belt loops and brushed up under the edge of her shirt with his thumb, just the most fleeting of touches across the bare skin of her abdomen. Then his hands were sliding against her jeans again, moving around to cup her ass, two fingers of each hand sliding into the tight back pockets of her jeans to hold her still when every hormone in her body was screaming for her to squirm against him, wriggle closer to his heat.

“You can admit you want it,” he said against her throat. “Everything doesn't have to be a war. Jo Banks against the world.”

God, why is he talking? Didn't he know there are better uses for his mouth? Jo speared her fingers through his hair. He kept it ruthlessly short, completely restrained, but it felt as wild and thick against her fingers as an animal pelt. She gripped his head in both hands and yanked his face back to within a breath of hers. “I like you so much better when you aren't speaking,” she growled against his mouth, her lips teasing his with every word.

He kissed her again, each drugging pull of his mouth dragging her further away from reality.



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