



Jan Scarbrough
*Kentucky
Groom*

BLUEGRASS REUNION SERIES

Kentucky Groom
Bluegrass Reunion Series

By Jan Scarbrough

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Kentucky Groom
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Chapter One

Villa Montalvo

Near Silicone Valley, California

“Aren’t you going to kiss the bride?”

Jay Preston turned to find himself eye to eye with his father’s new wife. Tall and willowy, his stepmother was drenched in white satin, lace, and diamonds. A froth of tulle circled her upswept blond hair like a halo. She smelled of Giorgio perfume and carried a crystal goblet of champagne.

He shrugged his shoulders. “Sure.” Jay had always been a peacekeeper.

The woman’s red lips, tasting of wine, were warm and inviting, assailing him with inappropriate demands. She was his stepmother, after all, only three years his senior, and young enough to be his sister. As the kiss lengthened and his belly twisted with disgust, Jay realized once again this woman was nothing but trouble. And trouble he didn’t want.

“Easy, son.” His father’s hand grasped his shoulder, breaking the unseemly contact, much to Jay’s relief.

Shrugging off his father’s hand, Jay stepped back to be replaced by Carter Preston. With a paunch protruding over his red cummerbund, Jay’s father looked silly in his formal, white tuxedo, starched white shirt, and red bow tie. His reddish gray hair was thinning, and he looked every bit his fifty-something years. Nevertheless, the old man looked happy, turning his smiling gaze on his only son.

“Find your own woman,” he said with a rude wink, seeming not upset by the kiss. He turned his back, sweeping his new wife away as the orchestra played a Strauss waltz.

Jay watched them, knowing from experience that his father’s apparent happiness was transient.

The tinkle of the new Mrs. Preston’s laughter grated like fingernails on a chalkboard. He turned away. Why had he allowed Carter to talk him into coming to the reception? Was he as much caught up in the corporate game as Carter’s other executives who were also in attendance?

Jay declined champagne offered by a white-coated waiter and slipped into a vacant corner of the room. Sitting down, he raked his fingers through his hair and allowed the laughter and music of the wedding reception to settle around him.

How many was it now? Five? The new Mrs. Preston was the fifth bride, all blonds. Jay pondered how she could trust a man like his father. A man who had gone from woman to woman, seeking some form of happiness he never found.

The newlyweds twirled around and around to the lyrical strains of music and the approving applause of guests. Jay recognized the look in his stepmother’s eyes. He had seen it before. *Greed*. The hunger for money and the power it provided, all satisfied by his father’s wealth. Could that be the real reason she’d married him?

As the music ended, the smiling couple separated. A business acquaintance joined his father, clapping the white clad back and pulling his old man away possessively. *Always time to discuss business*. It was a Preston trait that had haunted Jay all of his life.

Now that he was deeply involved in Carter’s company, Jay realized he hadn’t inherited the same characteristic. Business was beginning to irritate him like the sound of the new Mrs. Preston’s laughter.

Drawing his lips together into a straight line, he observed his stepmother gliding through the guests as if she hardly touched the floor. The superiority in her step was evident. The arrogant lift of her chin and her condescending glances, looking down her nose at her guests, told Jay so much. The French had a term for it. *Nouveau riche*. It made him nauseous. Like a revolving door, women had paraded through his father’s life—except for his mother Martha, Carter’s first wife.

“Hello, Jay,” a tiny voice said.

Jay dragged his gaze away from the party and looked down into the wide hazel eyes of his little sister. Her bronze red hair and fair complexion reflected his coloring. Her straight nose, a

mirror of his own, was dusted with freckles. Jay grinned at her, glad again he didn't have freckles, for although they looked cute on a girl, they would have looked silly on a man of twenty-five.

"Hi, Glory." He opened his arms.

"My name is Gloria Preston," she said with her pert mouth pulled down into an indignant frown, but she climbed into his lap anyway.

Jay encircled her in his arms. She smelled of baby shampoo and chocolate cake.

"How old are you now, Miss Preston?" He rested his chin on the top of her head.

"Eight, and you know it."

"I forgot," he said in defense.

She snuggled closer to him, and he tightened his hug.

"I rode my pony today," Gloria told him.

"Hmmm," he murmured into her hair. "Did you have a good riding lesson?"

She nodded. "Carter said he would get me a five-gaited pony or an equitation horse when I learn to ride well enough. You know, like the one you used to have. And he said I could go to horse shows."

"Good for you." Jay gave her a squeeze.

"They're cutting the cake," Gloria observed matter-of-factly.

"I see that."

Which wife was Gloria's mother? Number three? Jay had conveniently tried to forget that fact too. But he remembered he had liked Gloria's mom. She was sweet. Not like wives two and four.

Crap. How sick that sounded. Ticking off his father's wives as if he were counting sheep. He felt sorry for little Gloria, growing up without really knowing her father. *Hell.* He felt sorry for the fatherless child he had once been, even though he would never admit that to anyone.

"How did you get here?" he asked, wondering why his sister appeared to be without a chaperone.

"Carter sent his limo," Gloria replied with a happy wiggle. "I gotta leave at nine 'cuz it's my bedtime."

What had his father been thinking anyway? Dragging the little girl to his wedding reception without someone to watch her? Carter's irresponsibility disgusted but didn't surprise him.

“Ladies and gentlemen, family and friends,” the new bride cooed into the orchestra’s microphone. “We are so glad you could share with us the happiest day of our lives.”

“What’s her name?” Gloria turned her big eyes up at Jay.

“Lori, I think.”

She looked away. “She’s pretty. I hope I’m pretty like that when I get married.”

Gloria’s innocence turned Jay’s heart. “You’re pretty right now, sweetheart.” He kissed the top of her head.

The bride giggled into the microphone as a crowd gathered around the newlyweds, making it impossible for him to see them. It didn’t matter. He knew the routine.

“Do you want a piece of cake?” Gloria’s hair was silky soft.

“I had some already,” she admitted. “The caterer gave me some. He made extra. It’s chocolate.”

“Oh.”

His sister was certainly self-reliant. She might appear timid, but she got her way most of the time. She did with him, anyway.

A smattering of laughter and applause resounded through the reception area. The deed was done. The old queen was dead. A new queen was crowned. Long live the queen!

How cynical he had become.

“Friends, come and enjoy.” Now his father spoke into the microphone. “And then join us on the dance floor.”

The orchestra struck up a very poor rendition of “She Loves You.” Somehow the strings just couldn’t replicate the throbbing sound of guitar chords or the Beatles’ strident singing. Holding hands, Carter and Lori tripped onto the dance floor like a couple of kids. They began to fast dance, throwing their arms into the air, laughing and staring into each other’s eyes. What was it? The Watusi? The Jerk? *Hell*. His father was stuck in a nineteen sixties time warp and wife number five went along with it.

Jay gave his sister another small squeeze. “Want to dance?”

“Sure.” Gloria jumped from his lap, took his hand, and together they navigated through the guests to reach the dance floor.

With dainty steps, she was a good little dancer. Jay felt like a klutz, but he gave it his best.

“They don’t have any good music,” Gloria complained.

“Yeah.” He nodded in agreement and plowed into the back of another dancer.

“Excuse me!” Jay looked around to see a stately, silver-haired woman beaming at him.

“Mrs. Chapman, I was born with two left feet. I’m sorry.”

The woman smiled in response and touched his arm with a bejeweled hand. “That’s quite excusable, Jay dear. You have other talents.”

“Yes, ma’am.” She was making light of his clumsiness. For that he was grateful.

Squeezing his arm once, the woman turned back to her partner, her words loud enough to be heard over the music. “That’s Carter’s son. The smart one. He created Sampson.”

Carter’s son—the boy genius who had bypassed college, going right into his father’s company after high school, the kid who someday would own the multimillion dollar Preston Computer Corporation in San Jose, California.

The pit of Jay’s stomach twisted just as he twisted his body to the rhythm of the music. Skipping college had worked out better than he could have foreseen. Developing systems had come naturally to him, just as horseback riding had been easy years earlier. By putting him to work, Carter had been forcing him to prove himself. And he had done just that by creating Sampson, the wonder software that now resided in every Preston computer on the market.

Part of Jay was smug about his success, but another part, the emotional part, wished his father could accept him for himself. It was almost as if Carter expected him to demonstrate time and time again that he was worthy of the Preston name.

Glancing at the newlyweds who danced nearby, Jay wondered if the Preston name was anything to be proud of.

The music ended. Sweat had broken out along his brow. He grinned down at Gloria.

“Care for some punch?” he asked with a sweeping flourish of his hand toward his sister.

“Sure.”

As the strains of another waltz began, Lori and Carter blocked their path.

“May we exchange partners?” Lori queried, casting a coy glance at Jay.

“Gloria?” Carter inclined his head and held out his hand.

“Sure.” Eyes sparkling, the little girl smiled up at her father.

It hurt Jay to watch the excitement in Gloria’s face. He remembered how, at that age, he had relished the crumbs of attention his father used to throw his way.

Father and daughter stepped away in the awkward imitation of a waltz. Jay found himself face-to-face with his new stepmother.

“Well?” She lifted an elegant eyebrow in challenge.

Jay held out his arms, and she came into them as if she thought she belonged.

“Quite a nice step up from the travel agency,” Jay remarked, as he swept her around the room. He didn’t try to erase the sarcasm from his voice.

She seemed to take stock of him, glancing up at him through narrowed eyes. “Yes, and Carter is such a dear.”

“Isn’t he, though?” Jay mocked her sweet tone of voice.

Her fingers tightened on his shoulders like a snake coiling around its prey. “Don’t mess this up for me.”

Jay laughed at her warning. “You’re assuming a power that I don’t have.” Her lips thinned. “You forget I’ve seen women like you come and go. You think you have a hold on him because the sex is good right now, but don’t count on it. I hope you signed a good prenuptial agreement.”

“It’s different this time,” Lori said with a smug glance.

“That’s what number four said if I remember correctly.”

“You’re his only son. Carter values your judgment.”

“Carter values my judgment when it’s about the newest piece of software I’m working on, one that he hopes will make him another million. He certainly never consults me about his sex life or his choice of wives.” The very thought made him smile.

“You’re disgusting.” Lori’s voice was brittle.

“My sentiments exactly.” Jay inclined his head toward her.

Almost on cue, the orchestra completed its song. Jay dropped his arms while Lori shot him a threatening look, and then turned a sugary smile toward the approaching groom.

“Here we are, dear.” Carter gave Gloria back to Jay.

He felt Gloria slip her hand into his and watched as Carter favored them with a smile that never quite reached his eyes. Lori took Carter’s offered arm, and tipping up her chin, she looked down her nose at Jay as if to say, “I’ll show you.” Jay looked back blandly as she whisked away in a whoosh of satin.

Gloria tugged on his sleeve. “What time is it?”

Jay glanced at his Rolex. “Nine o’clock. I’ll take you to the limo.”

Holding hands, Jay walked his sister through the historic villa and down the wide steps to the driveway. They waited, drinking in the cool May air, the California sun just shutting down for the night. When the limousine arrived, Jay helped Gloria inside and gave her a kiss. All too soon his little sister drove out of his life one more time. He climbed the steps to the Mediterranean mansion, feeling the loss of her small, warm hand in his.

Not wanting to go into the reception, Jay almost turned away, his mood bleak, but he shrugged his shoulders and strolled back inside to take his same seat near the windows.

Somehow, the music seemed louder, the laughter more discordant. Jay crossed his leg over his knee and leaned back. What was the matter with his father? Why had he been unsatisfied with his mother's love and loyalty? Martha had put him through college, for God's sake, sacrificing her own education for his. And she'd loved him silently all through the years, never giving Jay any reason to hate his father. Carter had done that himself.

Sweeping a hand through his hair, Jay narrowed his eyes. For some time now, he had longed for that kind of devotion from a woman, the kind of devotion Martha had for Carter, even until her death. Watching his stepmother move through the thinning crowd, Jay wondered how he would ever know for sure he had inspired that kind of devotion.

The thought hit him like a poorly pitched baseball. He was Carter Preston's son. Heir to the throne. A rich boy, and all the women he dated knew it.

Jay rubbed his ankle against his knee. He was fair-minded enough to concede being Carter's son had helped get him into the business in the first place. Granted, his father's company paid his large salary and gave him a bunch of perks, but it had been a fair trade. In return Jay had come up with the idea for Sampson, and he'd made himself indispensable to Carter and the business.

Jay expelled a deep breath. Who was he kidding? As much as he wanted to deny it, he was still Carter Preston's son. His reputation always preceded him. Women knew about his father's millions. And his own. That knowledge had colored their view of him.

Like the slap of cold air on a frosty morning, Jay realized he might never know the love of a good woman. A woman who would love him for himself. Too many of the women he had dated had resembled his new stepmother. They were after the Preston money, not the Preston man. Jay smiled at the irony. He and his father had more in common than he cared to admit.

Yet Jay rejected the comparison once more. He refused to behave like Carter Preston, chasing the phantom of happiness as if he were some sort of cat chasing a mouse. Sadly, Jay knew

he would never find his true love as long as he was Carter Preston's son. The realization deepened his foul mood.

"There you are." Carter's booming voice startled him. Jay climbed to his feet. "What are you doing?"

"Thinking."

Carter placed a forceful hand on Jay's shoulder. "Are you ready for the Ballard meeting on Monday? It's your first time to meet with a client alone. I'm sorry I won't be there." His father winked. "I'll be on my honeymoon, you know."

"Obviously." Jay held his gaze steady.

Carter slightly shook his son's shoulder. "You know this is a wonderful opportunity for us."

What was he fishing for? "Maybe the meeting is too important for you to miss," Jay suggested.

Carter winked. "And miss my honeymoon?"

"I could use a break too."

"A break?"

"Yes, a vacation. I'm burned out."

"I didn't get a break when I was your age. Worked day and night to put myself through school and then went right into the business," Carter said, his voice rising.

Jay broke away from his father's grip and turned to confront him, his gaze strafing the older man's face. "And right into the bed of another woman."

Carter frowned. "What kind of crap has your mother been feeding you?"

"My mother is dead, remember? And she never fed me anything. I've always had two eyes." Jay stood his ground, his heartbeat soaring in his ears,

Carter's eyes narrowed and his voice lowered. "Have you got something to say to me, boy? What is it?"

"You make me sick," Jay spat. "You run around like some horny tom cat, bedding women and leaving them when your fancy turns. You don't care about the children you leave in your wake, or the other lives you hurt."

"Is that all?"

“No.” Jay should have heard the warning in his father’s voice, but he couldn’t stop himself. “I’m not even sure I like computers, let alone want to spend my whole life developing computer systems for your stupid company.”

“You ungrateful little bastard,” Carter said through clenched teeth.

“Bastard? No. I was born three years after you married my mother. I seriously doubt that I’m the bastard.” The audacity of his words shocked even him. A strange exhilaration surged up Jay’s spine, and he lifted his chin in defiance.

That’s when Carter slugged him. A sudden pain reeled him backward from the well-delivered punch to his jaw. It took less than a second to realize what his father had done, and even less time to maintain his balance and right himself. Jay glared at the man who had fathered him but who had never been a father. Heart in his throat, Jay balled his fist, wanting to strike back. He squared his shoulders.

“I guess the truth hurts,” he said quietly.

Lori had rushed to her husband’s side, and now clutched his arm. “Carter, what’s wrong?”

Carter stood like stone. The only movement was the flex and release of the fist that had hit his son. There was something in his eyes akin to regret, but whatever it was, he didn’t act upon it. Instead Carter turned to his wife.

“It appears that my son doesn’t appreciate the opportunities I have given him.” He did not look at Jay. “Since that’s the case, I wash my hands of the ungrateful son of a bitch.”

Lori’s look of triumph was obvious. Carter turned and drew her away—never looking back.

“He can find out what it’s like to make it on his own” Carter said to his new wife loud enough for all to hear.

“So build your kingdom without the prince,” Jay shouted at the retreating back.

His father’s words left him reeling more than the blow to his chin. Had Carter disowned him? A sluggish, fearful pain crawled through his stomach. Jay slowly opened his balled fist, splaying his fingers out wide.

As suddenly as the fear came to him, Jay experienced a great surge of relief. The mantle of the Preston fortune was gone. He had a chance to discover for himself if he could make it on his own merit in a field far away from computers.

Somewhere in the crowd, the bride threw her bouquet. His father didn't know it, but he had just thrown his son a symbolic bouquet. Maybe he could find someone who would love him for himself alone.

For the first time in his life, Jay Preston was free.

Chapter Two

Wildwood Stables

Near Prospect, Kentucky

“I think you’ll like my mommy,” a small voice said.

Jay glanced from the horse he was brushing into the sincere blue eyes of a blond-headed girl. She was taller than his sister Gloria, and looked older, maybe by two years. But, like Gloria, she had a seriousness about her that made her seem more mature for her young years.

“What makes you think so?” Jay asked.

“She’s very pretty,” the girl answered quickly. She paused a minute, as if trying to figure out why a guy like him would be interested in her mother. “And she’s smart.”

Jay answered in a seriousness to match the girl’s own. “I like smart women.”

The girl brightened at his comment. “She’s very good, too.”

“It’s important for a mother to be good,” Jay agreed.

“She doesn’t date much.”

“Oh?”

At that moment, the horse Jay was grooming snorted and stamped an impatient hoof. Turning back to the big animal that was cross-tied in the spacious stall, Jay raked the hard brush over the horse’s dark brown coat.

“Do you like being a groom?”

Jay looked down once more, this time not pausing in his work. He found the question intriguing, for in the week he had been at Wildwood Stables, an American Saddlebred show barn,

he had not thought about liking the job. He'd just been grateful Mary Wilder had given him one and not asked many questions.

Pausing, Jay glanced at the little girl. He did like the hard work and long hours of a caretaker's job. He didn't mind rising early or the minimum wage. He had wanted to change his life, and he'd done that—big time. The physical work beat sitting behind a computer for ten hours a day.

"Yes, I like being a groom." Jay nodded and extended the hard brush toward the child. "Hand me the soft brush, will you?"

As they exchanged brushes, they exchanged smiles. The little girl blushed.

"What's your name?" Jay turned back to the show horse.

"Jessica Mercer, but you can call me Jesse."

"Nice to meet you, Jesse. My name is Jay."

"I know." The girl's timid giggle gave away her obvious interest in him. She turned and scampered away.

Jay smiled to himself. Was he the object of a pre-teen crush?

Finished with the soft brush, Jay began to gently pull a comb through the animal's black tail untangling the coarse strands of horsehair. It was a good thing he liked children, because this new job brought him into close contact with several horse-crazy little girls whose parents had bought horses for them to show.

Jay shrugged at the irony. If Carter hadn't insisted on riding lessons and competing in shows, he would never have gotten this job in Prospect, Kentucky, as far away from Silicon Valley and Carter Preston as he could get.

"Mommy, come meet Jay."

The little girl was back, and she had her mother in tow. Glancing over the rump of the horse, Jay watched Jesse haul the reluctant woman toward the open stall door. Give the lady credit. A matchmaking daughter might be embarrassing, but the mother met Jay's gaze directly with a friendly smile.

At the moment of eye contact, Jay was speechless.

Jesse's mother had honey blond hair, long and straight, with sun-streaked highlights running through it. She wore it pulled back from her face, caught at the nape of her neck by a thick band. Her bangs touched her darker eyebrows, setting off expressive eyes, blue like those of her daughter.

She had a fair complexion, also tanned by the sun. What struck Jay most was the unaffected aspect of her appearance, the sincerity in her eyes, and the way her hand strayed to her daughter's shoulder, supportive and loving. Much as his mother Martha had supported him.

When she spoke, Jay heard the woman's words as if from a distance. They were soft, like the fluttering of angel's wings, with a touch of a Kentucky accent.

"My daughter tells me you're the new groom."

"Yes, ma'am," he answered, wondering why his own voice sounded like a shrill schoolboy.

The horse chose that instant to grow restive. He kicked out with a hind leg, a metal shoe striking the wall with a resounding bang.

"Hey," Jay complained to the bay gelding, glad he'd been standing away from the offending hoof.

"Are you okay?" the mother asked.

"Yes. You can never take one of these horses for granted. I wasn't anywhere near his hoof."

"I warn Jesse all the time, but she sometimes forgets Dr. Doolittle weighs a thousand pounds." She ruffled Jesse's hair.

Jesse shook her head in protest of her mother's touch. Jay moved around the horse and ducked under the cross ties.

"Dr. Doolittle is your pony?" He dropped the comb into the grooming box on the ground.

"Yes, isn't he wonderful?"

"He's the best five-gaited pony in the barn." Jay grinned, knowing Doolittle was the only one in the barn. "Will you hand me that rag?"

Jesse's mom picked up a terry cloth towel from where it hung across a saddle. As she handed it to him, her fingers brushed his. Started by the touch, Jay glanced at her.

She blushed as prettily as her daughter. There was something oddly familiar about her.

Jay cleared his throat. "Thanks, Mrs. Mercer."

"Carrie," she said, inclining her head slightly.

"Carrie," he repeated and lapsed into silence, staring at her, mesmerized by the delicate-texture of her honey-bronzed skin.

After a while, the silence grew uncomfortable. Yet he couldn't snatch his eyes away from her face. He watched as she licked her lips, almost as if she too were transfixed.

"My mommy isn't married," Jesse spoke up, breaking the silence.

“Really?” Jay snapped out of his strange absorption.

He turned his back on them, glad for an opportunity to recover his equilibrium. Wasn’t married, huh? Lifting the towel, Jay wiped the horse’s nostrils.

“Jesse, why don’t you go see if Meg is still here?”

Did he detect confusion in Carrie’s voice? Jay heard Jesse scamper down the aisle away from them.

“I’m sorry about my daughter. She has a habit of playing matchmaker.”

“I’m not,” Jay said, turning abruptly to catch a look of dismay in her eyes. “Sorry, that is,” he added and dropped his gaze as he draped the towel over the side of the box and picked up a hoof pick.

He stood and searched her eyes, a stab of anticipation playing havoc with his heart. Silently, she watched him.

“She’s a cute kid.” His voice sounded winded as if he had jogged around the block.

“Sometimes she’s too cute,” Carrie’s eyelashes fluttered over her wide eyes as she looked down at the dirt floor.

He thought her disarming. She seemed open and honest. Shy. Not like the women he usually attracted. And she didn’t look old enough to be a mother, for she was slender, wearing denim jodhpurs that clung to her legs and hips like a leather glove fit a hand. Her black riding boots looked almost like expensive running shoes, and her white t-shirt, that said “American Saddlebred” on its front, betrayed her pleasing figure.

“Do you ride?” He took a step toward her, ignoring the tight knot in his stomach.

“Yes, I’ve ridden for years.” Her voice caught as she stared up at him.

He towered over her. Jay swallowed hard, strangely wanting to put his hands on her shoulders and draw her to him. But he remained immobile. His fingers clutched the hoof pick. Swallowing again, Jay turned back to the horse.

“I just love it.” She hesitated a moment. “In fact, I made sure Jesse started taking lessons at three. We couldn’t afford two horses, so I take lessons, my weekly horse fix.” She paused again. “I never want to live my life through my daughter.”

“I can relate to that,” Jay said, thinking of how his father prided himself on his son’s programming genius. Grasping the horse’s hind leg, he rested the hoof between his knees and cleaned the caked dirt from around the horseshoe. “You know, you look familiar to me.”

Carrie ogled the hip pockets of Mary Wilder's newest employee. She fought the wry twist her mouth took, slightly amused by her reaction to the young groom. Stepping away from the open doorway, she hid herself behind the lower part of the wooden stall and looked at him through the metal bars of the upper part. She clutched the cool metal bars with sweaty hands, not minding the dust and dirt on the bars. Oddly, she felt a need to hold on to something strong—like a lifeline.

Carrie remembered Jay. How could she forget that shock of red hair? Or the way he set a horse—long-legged, poised, like a knight in a medieval fantasy novel. He had attended Mary's summer riding camp one year when she was a senior in high school. The barn girls gossiped and giggled about him behind his back. Guys generally didn't ride saddleseat, a uniquely American style of riding that was developed in the South. It was a girls' sport. Like most of the girls, she'd had a crush on this suntanned kid from California. But she'd been too old for him even then. Had he forgotten her?

"Mary says you're from California."

"Mm," he murmured, concentrating on the hoof.

What else had Mary said about him? Jay was down on his luck, and she was helping him out. What could have happened? Years ago, she assumed his parents were wealthy if they could afford to send him to Kentucky for summer riding camp. If she recalled, Jay had stayed and ridden in the World's Grand Championship that August.

Jay dropped the hoof and switched to the front one. "Your daughter is a lot like my little sister," he said.

"How old is she?"

"Eight."

Yes, the hip pockets of his jeans had much to recommend in them. She hadn't been intrigued by male anatomy in years, not since she'd married her husband who was much older—and surely not since his death. Was she attracted to Jay Preston? The question brought her up short. Carrie swallowed hard.

"Jesse is ten," she said to ease the sudden strain she felt.

He stood up and turned to face the metal bars, his hazel eyes glinting with appreciation. "You don't look old enough to have a ten year old daughter."

Carrie's heart gave an unwelcome jump at the compliment. She felt her face grow hot. "I was a young bride. Jesse was born when I was eighteen, just out of high school."

Jay whistled through his teeth and turned back to his work, picking up the horse's far-front hoof.

What was it about Jay that always captivated her? Maybe it was his hair. Carrie had never seen hair quite its color—like flames of copper. Maybe it was his intelligence and sense of confidence that attracted her. Whatever had happened to him was a mystery. He certainly seemed out of character as a lowly stable groom.

Jay dropped the third hoof and went to the fourth. Carrie watched his swift, quick strokes. When the work was done, he stood up and came back toward her. She was glad for the protection of the wooden part of the stall, for at least he couldn't see her trembling knees.

After unbuckling the cross ties from the wall and removing the horse's halter, Jay came out of the stall to stand beside her.

"I'm twenty-five myself."

His gaze told her he wanted her to know that not much distance separated them in age.

"Yes, I know."

"You do?"

"You don't recognize me, do you?" There was an awkward silence. The chains of the cross ties clanked in his hands. Carrie wished for the protection of the stall that had separated them. "I used to be Carrie Fletcher." She glanced down, but felt his eyes on her every movement. "You and I attended Mary's summer camp. I was a senior in high school."

"Damn!" The light of recognition ignited in his eyes. "You're the girl with that champion walk-trot horse! I always admired her *and* you."

"Yes." She felt the smile in her voice. "That was me, but a long time ago."

He picked up the grooming box. "Come on, I've got more horses to tend to."

Jay walked down the aisle, and she drew along side, matching him stride for stride. Why did she feel like an awkward teenager—insecure and eager to please? She hadn't felt this way in years, as if little lightning bolts charged throughout her whole body.

"Are you divorced?" he asked.

"No, my husband died."

"I'm sorry."

“Thank you. It hasn’t been pleasant for me or for Jesse.”

They reached the tack room. He went in and put away the equipment. Weak-kneed by her unexpected reaction to the man, Carrie leaned against the doorjamb. The thoughts of Tate’s death and their subsequent financial struggle sobered her for a moment, but she didn’t want to stop feeling young and attractive. Like Scarlett O’Hara, she told herself she would worry about money tomorrow.

Jay finished his task and turned to look at her. “Do you come to the stable in the morning?”

“Only in the summer. I’m a teacher.”

He seemed to catalog the information. “What do you teach?”

“Eighth grade English.”

He whistled. “I don’t envy you. It must be hard work with all those teenage hormones going off at one time in the classroom.”

“It can be challenging.”

“Now I remember you. You were good at everything you did. I envied the hell out of you.” Jay’s eyes twinkled. “Even today you are Wonder Woman in disguise. A very beautiful, blond Wonder Woman.”

What a charmer. What a rogue. “I think you, sir, have been affected by an occupational hazard.” She lowered her lashes to hide her amusement.

“What might that be?” He stepped nearer.

“You have been shoveling too much horse manure,” Carrie said with all sincerity.

Jay threw back his head and laughed.

Chapter Three

Wildwood Stables

A week later

“How do you like my new groom?”

Carrie turned to look at Mary Wilder. They both stood in the middle of Mary’s indoor training arena. Jesse circled them aboard Dr. Doolittle. The five-gaited pony trotted around the corner and sped down the straightaway.

“Why do you ask?”

“You’ve been at the barn quite a bit this week,” Mary replied. “I was wondering if my groom was the drawing card.”

Heat swept Carrie’s face. Was it that obvious? “I don’t know what you mean, Mary.”

“Jesse, lift those hands,” Mary instructed, “and urge Doolittle on.” She then shot Carrie a sharp glance. “You don’t need to deny it.”

“Deny what?”

“Deny you find Jay attractive.”

Carrie shifted her stance and looked away. “He is a good looking young man.”

“And?”

“And charming.” *Charming?* That was an understatement. He had certainly charmed the socks off her.

“I remember you girls giggling about him at camp that summer.”

Carrie's heart began to hammer. "That was a long time ago." A long time ago and a life time away.

Yet why did her stomach clench tight when Jay leveled one of his unsettling looks at her? Why did heat inch up her neck when he smiled? It was purely physical, she told herself. It had to be. She was a widow with a child to raise and a business to sell. She couldn't afford a silly school girl crush to add complications to her life.

"Come in and line up," Mary called to Jesse, who rode into the center of the arena and halted in front of them. She touched the pony's shoulder to have him pose. Obediently, Doolittle stepped forward one step leaving his back legs in place to stretch out his beautiful body. "You did a good job today, honey," Mary said as she circled the pair.

Jesse lifted her chin and raised her hands, her fingers curling lightly around the reins. A dull ache settled in Carrie's heart. Her daughter resembled Tate. At times, it was like living with her dead husband's ghost.

Mary adjusted the position of Jesse's right boot, but other than that she had no comment except for a terse nod. "Take Doolittle back to his stall," she said.

Jesse nudged Doolittle out of his stance. She smiled happily at her mother, acknowledging the good job she'd done. Horse and rider turned toward the doorway that led to the stable area. Carrie and Mary followed.

"Don't be so defensive about Jay, honey." Mary clapped a gentle hand on Carrie's shoulder. "I'm just teasing."

Not at a point where she could trust her emotions, Carrie had a hard time making light of Mary's needling even though the stable owner had become her friend as well as her riding instructor.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," Carrie said with a shrug. "I don't want to feel this way. It's just too soon after Tate's death."

Mary nodded in understanding. "Of course it is. Tate has been gone less than a year."

"I have Jesse's welfare to consider." Carrie's voice faltered. "I can't afford to be attracted to someone like Jay."

Mary gave her shoulder a final squeeze before she dropped her hand. "Don't let appearances fool you," she warned. "Jay's a fine young man, and he comes from a good family."

They turned the corner into the aisle between the stalls. “If he comes from a ‘good’ family, why is he here?” Carrie wanted to know.

“I told you earlier. He’s down on his luck.”

“Is he in trouble with the law?”

The question drew a laugh from the stable owner. “No! Nothing like that.”

“Then what?”

“Why don’t you ask Jay? It isn’t my place to break his confidences.” Mary left Carrie standing in the middle of the aisle.

Control yourself. You don’t need another summer flirtation.

She’d done that once before.

Carrie took a deep breath and expelled it slowly. The last time was when she was eighteen and had gotten pregnant with Jesse.

* * * *

Jay positioned himself at Doolittle’s head while Jesse dismounted, his gaze drifting down the long dirt aisle to where Carrie was standing. He struggled with the sense of euphoria he felt every time he saw Carrie Mercer. The woman had an uncanny ability to make his heart gallop like a horse free in a field.

“Wipe that smile off your face, Preston, and get to work,” Mary ordered.

“Ma’am?” Jay hadn’t even noticed his employer’s approach. He hid a guilty smile and led Doolittle into his stall.

Mary stopped at the door as he was putting on cross-ties and stripping the saddle from the damp horse. “After you take his tack off, I need Meg’s horse for the next lesson.”

Jay’s gaze connected with Mary’s, and the amusement in her eyes almost knocked him sideways. Good old Mary. She was perceptive and had a wicked sense of humor. Her way of telling him she’d seen him eyeballing Carrie was to hassle him about his work ethic.

“Yes, ma’am.” Jay raised a right hand in salute.

“You’re incorrigible.” Mary said with a huff and left him to do his job.

Jay chuckled and hefted the saddle onto the wooden rack outside the stall. Then he hurried to the next stall. Meg’s horse was a big chestnut with a trimmed mane. Jay put on the bridle, tightened the saddle girth and led the gelding into the aisle.

“Here we go.” Mary gave ten-year-old Meg a leg-up.

Horse and rider moved away, and Jesse scampered after them.

"I need the walk-trot horse next," Mary told Jay before she followed the two girls toward the arena.

"Will do." Jay reentered Doolittle's stall where Carrie stroked the bay gelding's neck.

"Doolittle's hot," Carrie said, her voice sounding far away, distracted.

"Oh, he's not so bad."

Carrie left the stall and stood at the door. Jay picked up the aluminum sweat scraper, and ran it over the pony's glistening body. It made a whisking sound. He worked for a moment, feeling Carrie's gaze upon him like an approving nod.

Was she interested in him? It was tough to know, because they had only seen each other at the stable. He hardly knew anything about her. He only knew that being around her made him feel happy for the first time in years.

Jay glanced up at her. Their gazes joined briefly, and then she looked away.

"Is anything wrong?" he asked.

"Wrong? No. What makes you think something's wrong?"

"You're awfully quiet." Jay dropped the scraper into a bucket of liniment and water and picked up a wet sponge.

"I'm just thinking," Carrie said as if shrugging off his concern.

Jay squeezed the excess water from the sponge. Her blond hair was tied back from her face. What would it be like to kiss her full lips? Would she respond? His fingers itched to touch her heavy hair, to unbind the braid, to stroke it.

Jay swallowed hard and dabbed the sponge onto Doolittle's back. His insides felt like jelly. He needed to act if he wanted things to progress between them farther than heated looks and flushed faces.

"Mommy, Mommy!" Jesse dashed down the aisle and slid to a halt in front of her mom.

"Meg's mother asked me to eat dinner and spend the night."

Carrie smiled down at her daughter. Jay watched their interaction—how Jesse rocked on her heels with excitement, how Carrie's fingertip brushed a strand of hair from Jesse's eyes. What if Carrie touched him with that same kind of tenderness?

"That's fine with me," Carrie said. "I'll come in a minute and make arrangements with Meg's mom."

“Yippee!” Jesse gave her mother a quick one-armed hug and then darted away.

Jay dropped the sponge into the bucket, threw a cooler over Doolittle’s back and stepped out of the stall. “So you’ll be free tonight,” he stated.

Carrie looked up at him. Anticipation reflected in the cool blue of her eyes. He couldn’t hide his smile.

“Have dinner with me.”

“Dinner?”

Jay mimicked Carrie’s earlier action with her daughter and moved a piece of hair away from her eyes. The touch caused her cheeks to flush. His fingers tingled, and his heart opened wide. “Yes, dinner. It’s a meal people usually eat in the evening.”

“I know, silly.” She tried to sound light and casual, but it wasn’t working.

“Can I pick you up at six?”

Her eyes shifted as if to study his face, trying to read his motivation. I’m sincere, he wanted to say. Trust me.

“Yes.” She nodded, holding her breath.

* * * *

Dinner with Jay. No, a *date* with Jay.

Carrie glanced across the table at him. How was she going to eat? Her stomach hurt. Her mouth was dry. Her tongue felt furry.

All around them, the Mexican restaurant buzzed with activity. Carrie ignored it all, concentrating instead on Jay’s intriguing eyes. He sat across from her, his gaze never leaving her face. He smelled of tartly cool lime aftershave and looked handsome in expensive khaki pants, navy blazer, white shirt, and maroon power tie. Carrie bit her lower lip. She stared back at him, watching how the flickering candlelight played games with the laugh lines near his eyes.

The waitress brought tortilla chips and salsa.

“Are you a mild or a hot person?” Jay asked, his eyes gleaming.

She could take the question two ways. Deciding not to misread his intentions, Carrie dipped a chip into the sauce. “I like the mild.”

He grinned and selected a chip from the bowl. “I like it hot,” he said, scooping up a red glob of sauce from the other bowl.

“I would expect a person from California would like it hot.”

He winked. Carrie dropped her gaze, dipping a chip into the bowl and knowing they were talking about more than salsa.

They ate a few minutes with only the crunching of the chips breaking the silence. The companionship seemed amicable. Unstrained. Carrie wondered about that. This was her first date in a very long time. She was nervous, sure, but excited as well, and flattered by the look of genuine appreciation she saw in Jay's eyes. Appreciation she had rarely seen in the eyes of her husband.

"So, where are you from in California?" Carrie asked after a while.

"Up North," Jay answered and bit into another chip.

He didn't offer further explanation. Carrie shrugged mentally, wondering about his reluctance to talk about himself. Maybe it had something to do with whatever he was hiding, and as Mary had explained, the hard times he was having. Maybe she could get him to talk about that little sister he seemed to love.

"You said you have a little sister." She allowed her voice to rise, giving him permission to speak.

Jay's eyes lightened. "Gloria. She's my half sister actually." He sipped some water and then leaned back to survey her.

Carrie fought down a blush. It was terrible the way her face betrayed her every response to his sexy eyes.

"Half sister?"

"Yes. My father, shall we say, has a way with women." There was a slight narrowing of his eyes and tenseness in his mouth. "Fortunately, for all his marriages, he's only fathered two children."

"You and Gloria?" Carrie sat forward and rested her arms on the table.

"Yes." He nodded. "Gloria is a cute kid, but I'm afraid she's growing up just like I did."

"And how's that?"

"Without a father."

Carrie dropped her gaze. This was too close to home. Jesse was going to grow up without a father. And there was nothing she could do about it. She felt the familiar pang of regret in her heart.

"You're thinking about Jesse." Jay's statement left an opening for her response.

"Yes." She looked up at him to see compassion now in his eyes.

“Kids are resilient and can grow up okay without a dad,” he said with a fleeting smile.
“Look at me.”

“But you were just objecting to Gloria not having a father,” Carrie pointed out.

Jay looked away, took a deep breath and settled his gaze once more on her. “You’re right. Kids need two parents. But look at it this way, Jesse lost her father because he died. Gloria and I still have a dad, one who concentrates on his job or his newest wife, one who conveniently forgets his own kids until he needs us.”

Carrie heard the bitterness in his voice. “It’s still a loss whether from neglect or because of death,” she said.

Jay nodded agreement. “Yeah, but the indifference is hard to understand when you’re a kid. Years of indifference hurt more than when my father finally actually disowned me. *That* was anti-climactic.” He rubbed his jaw and then placed his fist on the table for emphasis. “But I’m a big boy. I can handle it. It’s Gloria I worry about.”

Carrie reached out and covered his fist. The physical connection with him was like stitching another thread through a piece of embroidery. The picture was far from complete but taking shape. Carrie could imagine him as a small boy—his wide hazel eyes revealing the hurt he felt because of his father’s callousness.

“How many times has your father been married?”

“Five. He married the last Mrs. Preston a month ago.”

“Wow.” Carrie shook her head.

“Yeah,” he acknowledged. “Wow.”

“I guess you’ve experienced a lot of loss in your life, because every time he divorced, it was another loss for you.” Carrie sat back, breaking physical contact with him, giving him space.

“Yes, I suppose so,” Jay reflected. “Yet the hardest loss was when my mom died last year.”

“I didn’t know.”

“How could you?” he asked with a shrug. “We haven’t been able to do much talking at the barn.”

She had to admit Jay was right. She hadn’t known about all the sadness in his life. No wonder Mary said he was down on his luck. No wonder he needed a friend like Mary who would give him a job.

“How did she die?”

“Breast cancer.” His voice was muffled.

“I lost Tate to cancer too.” Tears stained her eyes, and she was unable to stop them. She hadn’t realized how close to the surface her own sorrow lay.

Married to Tate for ten years, it had been hard to lose him. He had been a loving father and had provided well for them. Although she loved him for that, there had been a distance between them, not a true husband and wife relationship. Tate was never her true love. She had paid for her mistake by trying to make the best of the situation for Jesse’s sake.

It was Jay’s turn to reach for her hand across the table. “I’m sorry.”

She smiled through the tears and swiped her other hand across her eyes. “Looks as if we have something in common.”

“I hope that isn’t the only thing.”

Their gazes united once more. Carrie drank in the empathy she saw in his eyes. For the first time in a long while, she let herself be comforted—let the human touch soothe her soul. She didn’t have to be strong right now. She didn’t have to hide her grief and regret. Jay understood. Just as she understood his grief.

The waitress arrived laden with a tray of burritos, refried beans and rice. Carrie sat back, turning her head briefly to wipe more tears from her eyes. When she turned back, Jay was poised to dig into the meal.

“You okay?”

“Yes.” Her voice sounded strangely husky.

“I’m glad. Let’s eat.”

Jay dived into the meal as if he were a kid eating ice cream. Carrie enjoyed his enthusiasm as much as she savored her own dinner. They talked about the stable, the horses, and the kids. Jesse’s first little horse show was next weekend. One of the biggest horse shows in the country was in Lexington two weeks from now. In the end, he had her laughing. She felt good but completely selfish to indulge herself.

When the waitress left the bill, Jay pulled out his wallet. Carrie took a final sip of water, her gaze resting intimately on him. She saw his frown. His eyes flickered her way and then retreated to stare at the wallet.

She sat forward. “Jay, what’s wrong?”

He pulled a long, white piece of paper from an inside fold and held it up. “I forgot to cash my paycheck, and I don’t carry credit cards.”

His face flamed with embarrassment, turning as red as his copper-colored hair.

Chapter Four

How could he be so stupid? Why had he forgotten to cash his paycheck? Jay's gut tightened in panic, and he felt his face grow warm. He fumbled through his wallet, knowing he had canceled his credit cards before leaving California in an attempt to start fresh. Now he must confront the truth that he didn't have any cash or credit cards. He had to admit to Carrie he didn't have a way to pay for dinner. Jay took a deep breath and stared at her across the table.

"I suppose you'll have to wait while I wash dishes." He hoped his joke covered his chagrin.

She gazed back at him, wide-eyed, her lips slightly parted. Jay swallowed with difficulty. She was so damn beautiful.

"I've been so busy since coming to Kentucky that I haven't opened a checking account or gotten a credit card," he hurried on to explain.

Carrie tilted her head and smiled at him with a distinct look of understanding. "And I don't suppose the restaurant will take your paycheck?"

"I doubt it."

Jay let his gaze connect fully with hers, and he saw the humor in her eyes as well as the warmth.

"That's okay. I have a debit card." Carrie stretched out her hand and covered his.

"This is embarrassing. I usually have money on me." He shook his head. "Will you let me borrow some? I'll pay you back tomorrow."

"With interest?"

Jay lifted an eyebrow. "With double interest."

Carrie briefly squeezed his hand and then sat back, as if disconcerted. Was it from the contact? The simple act of touching? Or the fact he'd made such a fool of himself?

“Fine,” she said. “I suppose you’re a good credit risk.”

She couldn’t know anything about him, Jay realized, and was just taking him on faith. How ironic. Carrie didn’t understand he was one of the best credit risks around. Trouble was he’d left all that behind in California. He had wanted to get as far away from Preston Computer Corporation as possible.

A knot constricted in his chest. He wasn’t telling Carrie the truth about himself. That bothered him. Yet wasn’t that what he had wanted? To find a woman who could care for him because of himself? Not because of his money? If he had purposely planned this, he could not have come up with a more perfect test.

Why did he feel like such a jerk?

Carrie took the bill, glanced at it and slid her card onto the table. They waited for the waitress to pick it up and return it. Carrie signed the receipt and said, “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

Jay was more than happy to leave. He jumped up and pulled the chair out as Carrie stood. Walking beside her through the restaurant, he touched her elbow and guided her around a waiter laden with a tray of food. Somehow, when they stepped out into the muggy June night, his hand found its way to hers. Her grasp was cool, her fingers long and slender. Another knot caught in his chest, and he felt like a sixteen-year-old on his first date.

But she was quiet. Too quiet. Jay opened the door for her, and she slipped into his battered Mustang, the one he had bought just a few days ago. Maybe he’d blown it with that stupid incident in the restaurant. *Damn! Of all the rotten luck.*

Climbing into the driver’s seat, Jay started the engine and revved it. The heady “vroom” sound pierced the night. Backing out of the parking spot, he twirled the steering wheel with one hand and stepped on the gas again, shooting out of the lot and into the flow of traffic.

What was he doing? Gunning his car like a high school kid? Carrie sat ladylike, hands folded in her lap, her lips in a tight smile. What kind of impression was he making? Suddenly he wanted to disappear into the floorboard.

Instead, he took her home.

Opening the passenger side door, Jay had his apology ready.

“Will you come inside?” she asked as she stepped out of the car.

Her invitation surprised him. He couldn't get the words out and just nodded like a dolt, his nerves vibrating throughout his body.

Carrie's house was in the older part of Louisville, Kentucky—a large, two-story wooden structure from the turn of the century painted a cool shade of blue. Inside the spacious living room with high ceilings and tall windows, she had decorated with the same cool blue, which found its way to the sofa and the throw rugs that scattered across worn hardwood floors.

"I'll make some iced tea." She dropped her purse on a chair. "If you like."

"That will be fine." Jay glanced at her as she went toward what he assumed to be the kitchen.

Stuffing his hands in his pockets, he strolled toward the central focus of the room, a fireplace surrounded by an antique mantle painted off white. Pictures dotted the mantle—Jesse as a baby, Carrie and Jesse, and Carrie on her wedding day.

Jay studied the picture. Carrie looked so young, but not as happy as a blushing bride should look. The white veil framed her face, showing the gaunt angles of her cheeks. She'd put on weight since then. The added maturity had smoothed her features, making her look even younger than the girl in the picture. This would not be something suitable to point out to her though, Jay reflected with a suppressed grin.

The last picture on the mantle must be her husband. Jay stared at it, surprised to see a man much older than he had expected. Tate had a serious look in his eyes, his lips pulled into a grim line. What was a man like who wouldn't even smile for a photograph?

Yet he had been Carrie's husband and probably had smiled at her with love. For a stark moment, Jay felt a stab of jealousy.

"Here it is." Carrie walked into the room carrying a large tray with a rainbow-colored pitcher and two tall glasses balanced on it.

"Let me help you." Jay took the tray and set it down on the coffee table.

She licked her lips, pulled a tiny smile and nodded toward the sofa. "Have a seat."

"Thanks." He perched awkwardly on the edge of the sofa.

Carrie poured the tea into one of the tall glasses. "Sugar?"

"No thanks."

When she handed him the glass, their fingers brushed briefly. The jolt of longing startled him. His face flushed hot once more. Trying to compose himself, Jay gulped the tea. A sprig of mint tickled the tip of his nose.

“This is good,” he said. “Do you grow the mint?”

“Yes, it’s refreshing on a hot night, isn’t it?” Carrie sipped from her glass and set it down on a coaster on the end table beside her chair.

Jay clutched his chilled drink. The sides of the glass began to sweat and so did he. What would he say now? All of his confidence had dissolved like a scoop of sugar in a hot drink. He felt young. But for heaven’s sake, she was just three years older. It might as well be twenty the way his tongue was suddenly tied to the roof of his mouth.

Maybe she sensed his discomfort. She appeared so cool, just as cool as the soft green of the wingback chair where she rested her head. She looked in control. So calm. Her eyes shifted as if searching his face for something. Jay bit his lip and offered a tentative smile. Their gazes locked once more. His heart began to beat double and then triple time.

Carrie took a breath. “Don’t be upset about what happened back there in the restaurant.”

“Easy for you to say,” he said with a toss of his head.

“Well, in fact, it is.” She twisted her hands in her lap. “You must think that everyone who owns a horse at the stable has a lot of money.”

Jay watched her, but didn’t say anything. Where was she going? She seemed to be apologizing to him when he was the one who needed to get down on his knees and apologize.

“It costs so much to board and train a horse.”

“And pay my salary.” Jay grinned, trying to ease the strain by poking fun at himself.

Carrie nodded slowly. “Since Tate’s death, it’s been tough. With his life insurance money, I paid off the house, thinking I could make it on my teaching salary if I didn’t have a house payment.”

She climbed to her feet and began to pace. Jay put his glass down on the tray and watched her. Leaning forward, he rested his arms on his knees and grasped his hands together.

“I don’t know if I did the right thing. It’s so hard to know.”

“You just have to do the best you can at the time,” Jay commented, caught by the tension in her eyes and the pucker of her brow.

Carrie sighed. "It's Tate's business that has me troubled. I have a broker trying to sell it for me. If he can sell it within the month, I'll have money to keep Doolittle for the rest of the summer show season. If not, I'll have to sell Jesse's pony."

"Whew." Jay sat back. He knew what it meant for a kid to have his horse sold from under him.

She turned to look at him, her face pale. "I don't want Jesse to lose her horse, Jay. She lost so much when her daddy died. I want to keep her life as normal as possible. Losing Doolittle will break her heart."

It just about broke Jay's. To see Carrie torn up about her daughter made his heart wrench. He rubbed a hand through his hair. He and his mom had often been almost broke, but all Martha had to do was say something to Carter. The money for the braces or the senior prom date had always trickled in. Maybe his dad hadn't been there emotionally, but money had always made a difference in his life. He'd wanted for nothing.

Carrie didn't have that option. Jesse's dad was dead. It was up to Carrie to provide for her child, and she was alone. For the first time in his life, Jay realized what it meant not having enough money. Ironically, he had plenty of money sitting in the bank. He could help out this courageous woman who stood before him, her wide eyes bright with unshed tears.

She seemed to shake herself. "The only reason I told you that," she said as she came to sit down beside him, "is to let you know that I'm not one of the typical well-to-do barn mothers. Don't let what happened tonight bother you. It doesn't bother me."

Jay rubbed his chin and surveyed Carrie's face. "You were so quiet on the way home. I thought I'd ruined my chances with you, because I couldn't pay for dinner."

"I was just trying to make up my mind if I should tell you about my finances. I decided to tell you, because I was afraid you would be embarrassed about what happened. I don't want you to be."

Jay's heart lurched. He swallowed. She had been concerned about him. He was touched and still a bit mortified because of what had happened.

"I don't think I've been so embarrassed since I forgot my lines in a school play and ran off stage," he admitted.

"You didn't?"

“Sure did.” Jay nodded, glad now to see the sparkle in her eyes once more. “I had a crush on some girl in the audience. I couldn’t remember a thing I was supposed to say when I walked on stage. That ended my acting career.”

Carrie laughed, and Jay joined her. Somehow, the tension was broken. The compatibility restored.

“How old were you?”

“Sixteen.”

Carrie chuckled. “Oh, my. And what happened between you and the girl?”

“Nothing, of course. I heard through the grapevine she thought I was a klutz. I recovered though.” Jay’s gaze fastened on her.

“Jay, I can see you now running off that stage.”

“Hey, being from California, I still mourn the end of my acting career.”

“Must be tough,” she quipped.

“Not as tough as what you’ve just gone through.”

Carrie shrugged. “It’s my daughter I worry about.”

They lapsed into silence. Jay watched her every movement, the quick flicker of her eyes, the way she licked her lips. She was so lovely. So enticing. She held him in a spell just because of her nearness. He saw the gentle rise and fall of her blouse. He smelled the intoxicating scent of her lavender perfume. Slowly, as if in a trance, he reached out and touched her cheek, brushing away a tendril of blond hair. The texture of her skin was like fine satin. She lowered her gaze, her dark lashes hiding her eyes.

Jay traced the angle of her jaw and placed a fingertip under her chin. Deliberately, he lifted it. A thousand electric volts shot through his body, causing his fingers to move as if under a stranger’s command. She raised her lashes and stared straight into his eyes. Warning bells clamored in Jay’s mind. Slowly, he leaned forward and touched his lips to hers.

Carrie’s mouth invited more than just a simple kiss. Jay closed his eyes, losing himself in the pure delight of the physical connection. She leaned forward, and Jay shifted his hands to both sides of her face, holding her, kissing her, taking her breath from her body.

“Oh, my.” Carrie broke the contact first, sitting back against the cushion of the sofa as if exhausted. A hand strayed to her lips. She touched them, almost reverently.

Jay was jealous of her hand. He wanted to reach for her once more and draw her to him. He wanted more, so much more. He let out a long breath and reached for his glass of tea. The bitter liquid couldn't douse the fire he felt, but it banked it like smoldering embers.

He cleared his throat. "I was about to apologize for that." He put his glass down on the table. "But I won't because I'm not sorry I kissed you."

"Neither am I."

Her admission sent shivers through his body. Jay drew his fingers through his hair one more time. "Strange as it seems, I think I'm falling in love with you."

Carrie's eyes grew wider, like those of a deer caught in a spotlight. Now he realized his own confession had been a mistake. He didn't want to scare her.

"Oh my," she said again, and then she pulled herself up like the fighter she was. "I certainly feel attracted to you, but love? I just don't know. It's much too early."

"Don't you believe in love at first sight?" Jay asked with a grin, hoping to ease the awkwardness he felt developing once more. "But it's not as if we didn't know each other from camp. We have a history, so to speak."

"I don't know. It's been so long. I was married ten years. I'm just getting over Tate's illness. This has hit me unexpectedly."

"Me too," he said with a nod. "Listen, Carrie, it's not something we need to talk about now. I'm a little overwhelmed myself. Let's just be open to the possibility, okay?"

"I'd think I'd like that," she murmured.

Jay couldn't believe she'd said that. He had told her the truth about his feelings, and she had admitted she cared something for him too. He was blown away—dazed because of the suddenness of the overwhelming love he felt for her.

Was this how it had been for Carter? This instant attraction to so many women? Was this how his father had justified going from wife to wife? Jay didn't want it to be like that between him and Carrie. He wanted more. He wanted long term.

Jay stood up and put distance between them. He strolled toward the fireplace. Tate's serious photograph caught his eye. He stuffed his hands in his pockets, trying to quell his emotions.

"You said you have your husband's business to sell," he commented, turning around to face her. "What kind of business was he in?"

Carrie seemed less edgy. He'd done the right thing to give her space. Jay felt strange warmth as he watched her.

"Tate sold computers," she said.

* * * *

Computers? The irony was like a stomach punch. Driving back to the barn, Jay thought about Tate Mercer's retail business—selling and servicing hardware, setting up systems for small businesses and private individuals. It wasn't something he knew much about. Preston Computers concentrated on producing software for large clients, establishing multi-user networks and large systems—all costing the customer huge bucks. Carter Preston had always been a big player.

After climbing out of his car at the farm, Jay stood a minute to let the night air sift gently around him. Fireflies twinkled here and there, their silent pinpricks of light seeming to mesh with the pinpricks of far-away stars. Only the high whine of insects and the occasional roar of a car on the nearby highway disturbed the quiet.

Jay sighed. He didn't feel like going up to the efficiency apartment above the barn that Mary was letting him use. He didn't know what he felt like doing. He was too keyed up, the events of his date with Carrie still revolving in his mind. He walked to the wooden fence that separated the driveway from the pasture and placed his hands on the top rail. In the distance three horses grazed, their silhouettes stark against the night.

Damn! He wanted to help Carrie and hated seeing her so worried about money and about keeping Jesse's horse. His heart complained, thinking about how disappointed the little girl would be if she lost her horse. He had seen disappointment so many times in Gloria's eyes and hated it when his sister was hurt. More often than not, her disillusionment happened when Carter didn't come for an important event. Changing his father's selfish ways was beyond his control.

Jay's fingers clutched the rough wood. He wanted to do something for Carrie and Jesse. What could he do? Staring hard at the still horses, he couldn't remember feeling so powerless, except when dealing with his father.

Always when he worked with computers, Jay had been in charge. His programming skills had made computers do what he told them to do. There was power to that kind of control—a heady rush to his ego. But he wasn't a programmer now. Just a lowly groom. A groom who couldn't even pay his dinner bill.

Damn! Jay slammed the wooden railing with his hand. For the first time, he regretted not having money. What he needed to do was buy Tate Mercer's business.

The thought brought him up short. It made his palms grow slick on the knotty rail. What if?

Jay's blood ran with ice as he let the open-ended question dangle in his mind. He did have money—a lot of money. It was tied up in California. He had set it up so he couldn't get to it easily, but that could always be changed. Jay raked a hand through his hair. He needed to do something before the end of the month if he was to help Carrie.

Turning his back on the quiet pasture scene, he leaned against the fence and stared at the barn. He was where he wanted to be. He never wanted to go back to California—back to the rat race of Preston Computers—back to pleasing Carter. As he considered the consequences of his erratic thoughts, his breathing grew labored. He didn't have to go back to Carter's company. He just had to get his money out of the bank. Then he could help Carrie.

Selling her husband's business meant Carrie would be able to maintain her daughter's lifestyle. All Carrie wanted to do was make her daughter happy. All Jay wanted to do was see Carrie happy.

What he wanted more than anything was to lift the burden from Carrie's shoulders. He wanted to protect her—love her. That was the crux of the problem. He wanted to love her, but he didn't know how except to buy the business.

He took a quick breath. If he bought the retail business, he must do it anonymously. Carrie would find out he'd been lying to her. He didn't want her to know he was Carter Preston's son and a millionaire in his own right. If he came charging in like a knight on a white horse, she'd have to thank him, and he didn't want her gratitude. All he wanted from her was her love—for himself, not his money, faults and all.

Chapter Five

A small Kentucky county horse show

“Bump him back!” Mary called as Jesse and Dr. Doolittle passed by her as she stood on the rail. “Good girl. Now urge him on!”

Carrie gripped the wooden railing. Hot June sun pelted her, causing sweat to bead on her brow. Or was it just the nerves she felt watching Jesse and four other little girls compete on five-gaited ponies? Horse shows were bad for her health. She was convinced of it.

Horse shows and Jay Preston.

Carrie glanced across the show ring where he was positioned on the rail calling out instructions to Jesse when she passed him by. From his days in competition, he knew a lot about showing horses. Even at this distance, Carrie saw the flame of his hair and the confidence of his stance.

Her heartbeats matched the four-beat cadence of the horses’ racking gaits. She lifted her hand to shade her eyes from the sun. What was it about this man? He drew her into his spell. Shamelessly, she couldn’t get enough of him. Once again, she’d hung around the stable all week.

She had allowed him to kiss her. It had been sweet and satisfying, leaving her longing for more. At the same time, she had felt a surge of guilt. Was she leading him on? Was she lying to him? To herself?

When she had tried to ease his embarrassment over his lack of cash, she had been sincere. What did it matter that he couldn’t pay for dinner? It had been a simple mistake. She had revealed her money problems to let him know she wasn’t really rich like most of these parents. She didn’t

want him to feel bad, that's all. But her candor may have backfired. He was falling in love with her. It was flattering.

Yet did she want the burden of his love?

Carrie lowered her hand back to the railing and squinted against the sunshine. The awful truth was that she couldn't afford to let her heart rule her head. She had Jesse to consider. If she truly cared for Jay, she couldn't lead him on because the hard truth was she couldn't let herself fall in love with a penniless groom.

"She's got this class won," Mary said in a loud voice.

Carrie glanced at her. "You think so?"

"Yes. Here's the line-up."

Five riders stopped their horses in a line facing the audience. Parked out right in front of them, Doolittle snorted and bobbed his head. Jesse settled into the saddle, stretched down her heels and smiled at them. Carrie's heart burst with a mother's pride. The judge started down the line inspecting each horse and rider, much as Mary had inspected Jesse in her lesson.

"She looked great!" Jay came up beside Carrie.

"I know." She stared up at him.

He grinned, and shyly she glanced away as his hand covered hers on the rail.

When the class had been judged, horses and riders retired to the end of the arena to wait. Carrie hated waiting. Nerves made her feel sick. Her mouth was as dry as the hard Kentucky clay.

"Hurry up," she murmured as if the judge could hear her.

Jay squeezed her hand. She looked up at him once more, and her heart rolled over in her chest. He was so dear. So caring. She couldn't let this charade continue. She had to tell him that money mattered. Not to her, but for her daughter.

"And the winner is number two hundred and twenty-six," the loudspeaker said, "Dr. Doolittle owned by Carrie Mercer of Louisville and ridden by Jessica Mercer."

"Oh!" Carrie's hand flew to her mouth.

"Yippee!" Jay vaulted the fence as the announcer finished speaking.

Mary clambered over the rail right behind him. Together they greeted the winning horse and rider in the middle of the open-air arena. Carrie watched as Mary clipped the blue ribbon on Doolittle's brow band, and Jay wiped lather from the pony's neck. Then they both stepped back while the victory picture was snapped. Jesse just beamed. Carrie beamed for her.

She met Jesse at the gate after the victory pass. "Congratulations." The happiness bubbling within her made it hard to stop smiling at her child.

"Thanks!" The little girl was breathing hard. "Isn't it wonderful? That's my very first blue ribbon."

Mary and Jay joined them. "You deserved the win," Mary said. "Look at your nice trophy." She held up a silver plate as the small procession headed down the hill toward the stabling area.

"You really rode well," Jay added his compliment as he trailed behind them.

Carrie turned her head to see him catching Doolittle's long tail and tying it up in a knot to keep it from picking up bits of dirt. He winked at her. Self-conscious, Carrie offered a small grin and lowered her gaze to the gravel road. Jay had a way of making her feel like such a novice. Over the last few weeks, she'd grown accustomed to the way her heart fluttered when he was around, the way her stomach knotted because of his mere glance. She sighed to herself, determined to put a stop to the roller coaster emotions within her and tell him the truth.

* * * *

Carrie dipped her head, suddenly so subdued it made him anxious. At the same time, he relished the way the sunlight cavorted across the contours of her face. Her eyelashes were scant smudges against her cheeks, her sun-streaked blond hair hanging in a long braid down her back. She filled his senses and his heart.

At the barn Jay held Doolittle's head while Jesse slipped to the ground. "I'm hot," she complained.

Carrie stripped the wool riding coat off her daughter's back as Jay led the pony into the stall. By the time he had finished scraping sweat off the animal, sponging him off, and throwing a cooler over his back, the stabling area had cleared. Only Carrie was left sitting in a canvas director's chair where she sorted through Jesse's cosmetic case.

"Where did everyone go?"

She looked up. "To watch the rest of the show."

"Alone at last," he bantered coming toward her.

Carrie grimaced. He ignored her scowl. Leaning over, he kissed her full on the lips.

"I've wanted to do that all week." He straightened and noticed the expression of alarm in her eyes. "What? You don't enjoy my kisses?" Jay cocked his head.

Her gaze slipped away. "It's not that. I enjoy them *too* well."

"Good. You had me worried." Jay's shoulders relaxed.

Carrie looked back at him. He saw her swallow. "Sit down," she said, shutting the cosmetic case.

Jay plopped down on a small tack trunk beside her. "I feel a lecture coming on."

Carrie held the handle of the cosmetic case as if it were a link to safety. Carefully, he removed it from her hands and placed it on the ground.

"Tell me what's wrong," Jay directed, suddenly sobering.

Her gaze returned to his. He saw her draw herself up, gathering courage.

"I'm afraid I may be leading you on," she spoke softly.

Jay placed his elbows on his knees and leaned forward, looking at the ground. "How's that?"

"You told me you thought you were falling in love."

"I did and I am. I thought we agreed you wanted to be open to the possibility of falling in love with me too."

Carrie shifted in the chair. "I do, but I can't."

"That doesn't make a lot of sense," he said gently.

She took a breath. "I care for you. You do something to me. I feel like a kid when I'm near you. A kid on her first date."

"That's the way I feel."

"But I can't let it happen," Carrie explained. "I have Jesse."

Jay sat back and studied her. He waited, his mouth set in a thin line.

Carrie's eyes flickered. She took another deep breath. "What I'm trying to say is I just don't have myself to think about. As much as I would love to be swept away, to be in love, I must consider Jesse's welfare over what I want."

"And Jesse's welfare does not include you having a relationship with me," Jay finished for her.

"I'm afraid not." She avoided his eyes.

Jay ran a hand through his hair. This was too ironic to be funny. He suspected the reason behind her hesitation, but he wanted to hear it from her lips. "You didn't mean it when you said you wanted to be open to a relationship?"

“I did, don’t you see?” Carrie sat forward now. Her hands trembled. “My heart was getting in the way of my head.”

“Is that so bad?”

“It is when you have a child to raise.”

“What is your head telling you?”

“It says that as much as I care about you, Jay, it’s not fair for me to lead you on when nothing can come of it,” Carrie said in one breath, quickly, as if she had to get the words out fast.

“And why is that?”

“I can barely take care of myself and my daughter. I can’t afford to become involved with someone, well, someone who makes a groom’s salary.”

Jay wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. Too much money had been the bane of his former life. Now the lack of it was messing up this one. He felt as if he’d eaten too much spicy pizza and had drunk too much stale beer.

“I see.” That’s all he could say.

“I don’t want to lie to you or hurt you, Jay.” She appeared flustered now. “I just thought I should get it out in the open before things go too far.”

“I understand.”

“Jay, don’t look like that. I’m sorry.” She captured his hands in hers as if trying to make amends. They were cold, like the words she had just spoken.

But he wasn’t ready to give up. “I won’t always be a groom,” he told her and leveled his unyielding gaze into her wary eyes. “I have other resources that I didn’t want to use for many reasons, but believe me, you’re giving me every incentive to rethink my priorities.”

“I know. It’s just that. . .” She didn’t complete her sentence.

Once again, he finished for her. “You’re afraid to take a chance. You don’t want your heart to lead.”

Her eyes grew moist, and she swallowed hard as if to fight back her emotion. “It’s just that over ten years ago I let my heart influence me. It led to a big mistake. Jesse is the result.”

Jay started to understand and gave her a sympathetic smile. “I bet it was the best mistake you ever made.”

She nodded silently. “Jesse.”

“Trust me. You won’t make a mistake by loving me,” Jay said with quiet conviction.

She squeezed his hands and looked back at him with wide eyes. "I'm trying to keep from hurting you."

It finally sank in. She was ending their brief flirtation. Withdrawing his hands, he stood up. "Well, it's not working."

God, why did he sound so petulant? Retreating to where Jesse's saddle sat on its pommel in the dirt, he began wiping lather from underneath the flaps. What a kick in the pants. He was glad Carter couldn't see him now. His father would roll on the floor with laughter because he had broken Carter's number one rule—never let a woman get to you.

Carrie's cell phone played a loud, jingling ringtone, breaking the strained silence. Jay didn't turn around as she answered it. He lifted the saddle and placed it in a tack trunk.

"Oh my, I'm stunned." Jay heard Carrie say. "Thank you. Yes, I'll call you Monday."

He heard the snap as she closed the phone. Turning around, he found her face had paled beneath her tan. Quickly, he went to her. "Carrie, what's wrong?" He grasped her hands, connecting to her. "Is it bad news?"

"No, it's good news actually." Her gaze leveled on his.

"Can you tell me?"

"My lawyer says someone has bought Tate's business."

"Did he say who?"

"No, he doesn't know. He dealt with another lawyer."

Jay was silent. He gently rubbed her hands with his thumbs. Her skin felt like soft velvet. After a long moment, he drew a deep breath. "I suppose this eases your financial pressure a little."

She searched his face. "I guess so. I'll have to think this through. It's so sudden."

"You'll be able to keep Dr. Doolittle now."

Carrie nodded. "Yes, I suppose so."

"Maybe now you'll be able to give me that chance I asked for." His whisper was a plea from his heart. "Remember, I won't always be a caretaker of horses. I'm ambitious."

She hesitated. As if in slow motion she stood. Taking her hands from his, she slipped her arms around his neck. She felt so good. She smelled of suntan lotion. Jay clutched her to his chest. The rise and fall of her breast was like a welcome homecoming.

"Jay, taking a chance is hard for me," Carrie murmured into his ear, "but at this moment, I'll be happy to let my heart have its lead."

Chapter Six

Wildwood Stables

Days later

“Have you ever ridden a five-gaited horse?” Jay asked.

“No.” Carrie looked steadily into his hazel eyes. She sensed his nearness, the soft touch of his breath upon her face, the tangy scent of his aftershave. She felt a familiar tug at her heart and a longing so large that made her insides ache.

“It’s easy, Mom,” Jesse spoke up.

Carrie turned an amused glance at her daughter who had just saved her from falling into an intimate situation, one she’d prefer to avoid at the moment. “Easy for you to say. You’re younger than I am.”

“Aw, c’mon. Don’t be afraid.”

Carrie knew she wasn’t actually afraid, just a bit nervous. She’d always wanted to ride Dr. Doolittle and try out his wonderful slow, four-beat gait. With Mary out of town, Jay had volunteered to teach her weekly riding lesson, so Carrie found herself standing next to this virile man and fighting to avoid what could become a compromising situation.

“You need to be a bit of a cowboy to ride a five-gaited horse.” Jay slid the stirrup iron down the leather with a sharp pop.

“Cowboy? I’ll disregard that politically incorrect remark.”

Jay rolled his eyes. “Okay, cowgirl. I’m ready for you to mount.”

“Yes, sir.” Carrie didn’t mind his good-natured ribbing.

Jay held the horse's head. "You don't need a leg-up do you?"

"No way!"

Doolittle, at just an inch short of full horse status, was able to compete as a pony in children's classes. In all honesty, she could have used a leg-up, but Carrie was not sure she could survive the intimacy of one from Jay—not with her daughter watching. The thought of him touching her leg and tossing her into the saddle did crazy things to her insides. Carrie put her left foot into the stirrup and pulled herself into the saddle.

"Graceful," Jay remarked under his breath.

"Oh, go shovel horse manure," Carrie shot back.

He grinned up at her. Because she had made a conscious decision to let Jay into her life, Carrie felt a measure of control over the situation. Yet when he looked at her like that, she felt her hard-won control slipping. Allowing herself to fall in love was like learning to ride a horse—scary but exciting. Carrie experienced that excitement in the pit of her stomach, and it translated to her legs and hands. As if sensing her tension, Doolittle snorted. Gathering her reins, she nodded, and Jay released the bridle.

Carrie rode Doolittle into the indoor arena at an animated walk. Even the walk was hard for her to handle. After all these years, she was rusty. Doolittle was ready to go and curious, turning his head into the center of the arena like a nosey old maid. Carrie managed to straighten his head as she rode along the rail. She hadn't ridden such a game horse since she quit showing as a kid. It didn't take her long to gain a new respect for her daughter's riding ability.

"Collect him up and ask him to trot," Jay instructed.

Carrie glanced to where Jay stood in the center. Jesse was perched upon Mary's teaching stool next to him. Somehow seeing them together touched her. Almost like it was meant to be. Not a replacement for Tate, surely. More like a big brother to love and guide her special child. Carrie swallowed her sentiment and with her legs, urged Doolittle into a trot. The pony sprang forward and all thought vanished as Carrie concentrated on posting and guiding.

As Carrie posted up and down and circled the indoor arena, Jay watched his new pupil with a fascination born of love. She retained her girlish figure and radiant beauty. He could hardly believe the trim woman, who pressed her knees into the saddle and stretched her heels down expertly, belonged in some small measure to him because they had agreed to date. His heart

thudded like the beat of the trotting horse as he hastily ran a hand through his hair. What would it feel like to have those lanky legs straddle his body?

Jay was barely able to voice his next instructions because of the lack of air he found in his lungs. Fighting to regain his breath and fighting to quell his overactive imagination, he finally forced air back into his lungs. "Okay. You can walk now."

"Thank goodness. Doolittle's much harder to ride than I imagined."

Jesse preened herself on the stool, smiling a knowing smile and puffing out her chest. Jay knew what she must be thinking. Jesse had won a blue ribbon on a horse that her mother found challenging. Horseback riding was proving a common denominator between mother and daughter.

He wished Carter would share his love of horses with his own daughter. Once, a long time ago, he and Carter had shared a passion for showing horses. It had never been enough because Jay had always felt the pressure to win, to be the best, to be Carter Preston's son. But it had been something. Their relationship had changed after Carter had divorced Gloria's mother. Jay had never forgiven him for that. Sure, he could accept his situation in his father's life, but it was hard to stomach Carter's disregard for the little girl.

But he didn't want to think of that now.

Jay called out to Carrie, "When you set him up to slow gait, hold your reins apart, sit deep in your saddle, urge him with your legs, and cluck. Doolittle should do the rest."

Carrie eyed him. "Okay."

She seemed to gather up her nerve again and followed his instructions, the pony going forward with his four-beat gait, hooves striking the ground one at a time. Jay watched as surprise and then pleasure flitted across Carrie's face. Then the intense concentration returned to her eyes as she bit her lip tensely, trying to keep her seat in the saddle.

"Now speed him up. Ask him to rack."

Carrie glanced his way and then applied pressure with her legs, clucking loudly. Doolittle's gentle amble increased into a full-fledged rack. Jay whistled and clapped his hands to make the pony go on faster.

"Ride 'em, cowboy!" Jesse shouted and waved her hand as if she were swinging a lasso.

"Cowgirl," Jay corrected, not hiding his grin.

Jesse stuck her tongue out at him. She could be as spunky as her mom, and Jay felt a surge of love for both of them. Surely, the thousands of dollars Jay had spent for Tate Mercer's business was worth it.

Carrie rode up and stopped in front of him after the lesson. "Good ride." Jay's words of praise settled between them.

"Thanks."

Their looks connected. She was slightly winded, but flushed with the excitement and effort of the ride. Jay perceived her excitement as if it transmitted to him along some mysterious connector. He shook off the tight feeling in his belly, stepping forward to play horse show judge.

"When you're in the line-up, you must remember to press your knees into the saddle." He touched her right knee to show her what to do. "And lower your heels."

His mind and body revved with the contact. Carrie's whole leg trembled at his touch. He deliberately ran both his hands down her calf to her ankle. Then he let his fingers linger on the heel of her boot. He gazed up at her, telling himself that seducing her wasn't safe, not here and now.

She was staring at him with a transfixed look. "Are my hands okay?" Her voice was husky.

Her question came to him as if far away. He felt a strange tingle as if he were floating through another dimension. "No, they should be higher." He touched her gloved hands in an intimate way. "Now look between the horse's ears."

Carrie complied, and he stepped back as much to relieve his tension as to play the horse show game. He made himself circle behind the horse, noticing Carrie's erect posture and the heavy blond braid hanging down her back.

"And the winner is....Carrie Mercer, riding Dr. Doolittle," he said coming to the left side of the horse.

"Class is rigged. Judge was bribed," Jesse teased.

Taking a ragged breath, Jay glanced quickly at the child, but was drawn back to her mother. Carrie watched him. She also seemed to be having trouble breathing. He hoped he was having an effect on her, just as she was having on him.

"Let me help you down." He took the horse's reins in his left hand and stood to the side.

Carrie swung her leg over the saddle, balanced for a second, and then dropped to the sawdust. When she turned, she turned right into his arms. Jay battled the urge to kiss her, to run his

fingers along the soft angle of her jaw, to sweep her off her feet and carry her to some secluded hideaway like an Arab sheik.

“Hey, don’t you two get goofy on me,” Jesse whined.

Carrie blushed and laughed, breaking apart. With Jay leading the pony, together they turned to walk out of the arena. “Goofy” was a good word to describe how he felt. Goofy and reckless. And a whole lot lucky.

* * * *

Carrie felt the thrill of the final night of the Lexington Junior League Horse Show. This prestigious show brought glamour and excitement and bright lights to the Bluegrass. It brought out the equine stars and the human ones. It attracted the rich and the not-so rich, even drawing an eighth grade school teacher and her date, a lowly stable groom.

The thought made Carrie smile to herself and grow warm with a glow of love. For some reason, the disparity in their background didn’t mean as much to her as it once did. Perhaps she was getting to know him too well for that kind of thing to matter.

They made a handsome couple, Carrie decided as she glanced sideways at Jay. With his shock of copper-colored hair and her honey blond braid, they had already caught the attention of several passers-by. But maybe it was more than that. Maybe it was his navy blazer, khaki trousers, pale blue Oxford cloth shirt and maroon patterned tie. Or maybe it was just the looks of love he showered on her as freely as a happy dog wags his tail. Carrie felt surrounded by Jay’s love, protected and warm, as if enveloped in a cushioned cocoon of his own making. She knew she responded to his show of love by a glow that seemed to well within her, transforming itself to the dreamy smile on her face.

“Do you want a corn dog?” he asked somberly.

“You’ve got to be kidding. Ruin our image?” She glanced down at her own elegant, black cocktail dress and spiky heels.

Jay shrugged. “Just a suggestion.”

“I’m sorry. You’re hungry.” She was being selfish because of her enthusiasm about seeing the show.

“You know us growing boys,” he tossed back.

“Growing boys, my foot.” Carrie poked him in the arm with her fingertip.

“Hey, what can I say?” The twinkle in his eye was infectious.

Carrie sighed. “Okay. I’m not interested in the fine harness horses. Let’s go find something to eat, but not corn dogs.”

“And this time, I *do* have money.”

That grin again. Carrie shook her head pretending to be put out with him. She rose to her feet. What a charmer.

They excused themselves and left the box seats Mary had given them. Wildwood Stables didn’t have any riders competing at the Lexington show, so not having to work, Jay had surprised Carrie with Mary’s unused tickets. It was a special date. Not only because Carrie had never seen this fine horse show, but because she was alone, once again, with Jay. Jesse was back in Louisville with a babysitter.

They picked their way up the stairs. Held at the Red Mile, a harness horse track, the area behind the stands was covered with booths displaying every conceivable item guaranteed to attract the attention of wealthy horse lovers. A counter of gold jewelry caught Carrie’s eye, and she glanced up at Jay.

“Go ahead. I’ll see how long the wait is at the restaurant.”

Carrie wandered from the cases of earrings to the table full of sweaters and other riding apparel. She lost herself in looking, a pastime she rarely allowed herself, and reflected about how comfortable her relationship with Jay had become. Sometimes she thought it was too good to be true. Sometimes she thought she would wake up and all of the happiness she felt would be a mere dream.

After fifteen minutes, when Jay didn’t return, she grew anxious. Searching the crowded area for him was like looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack. With a sigh, she strolled toward the restaurant.

She saw him from a distance. Who could miss his striking hair? But as she sped up to cross the room to him, she also noticed the woman by his side—a striking blond with a puff of hair the color of champagne. Her heart took a dive. The woman clutched Jay’s arm like a magnet and stared up at him with calf-like eyes. Even from the distance, she recognized the smugness on the woman’s face.

Stopping, Carrie caught her breath. The woman’s flashy designer dress put her own out-of-date sheathe to shame. With her plain braid and unpolished nails, Carrie suddenly felt dowdy and a

bit like the widow she was. Who had she been kidding anyway? Jay was young and single after all. What had made her think he would care about a woman tied down with a child?

Just as her heart began to rip, the woman turned from Jay toward a balding man old enough to be her father. As Carrie saw the woman clutch this man's arm possessively, she felt relief. Now she saw it. The massive diamond on the other woman's finger shouted "married" as clearly as the look in her eyes.

With another sigh, Carrie focused on the older man. There was something familiar about him. She had seen him somewhere. Curious, she walked nearer, realizing she'd seen his picture several times in Saddlebred magazines. He was a millionaire who had owned a stable of expensive champions, the kind that won the biggest and best shows. He was from California. But that's all she could remember. She couldn't think of his name.

Dismissing him, she turned her attention back to Jay and for the first time noticed the strained look in his eyes and the tense line of his lips. Something was wrong. Her natural instinct to defend her own kicked in.

"Jay." She approached the trio.

Jay looked uncomfortable but held out his hand to her. A few steps away, she took his hand and moved possessively to stand by his side. His fingers felt damp.

"Jay, is this your lovely date?" The old man's eyes seemed to show appreciation.

"Yes, this is Carrie."

Carrie thought his tone sounded constrained. She glanced at him.

"Aren't you going to introduce us?" the other woman purred.

Jay cleared his throat. "Carrie, this is my stepmother Lori, and this is my father Carter Preston."

Chapter Seven

Carrie was dumbfounded. She stood still, her gaze flicking back and forth between Jay and his father. The silence among them was eerie. She couldn't speak herself, couldn't move. She felt the steel grip of Jay's fingers and heard his raspy breathing.

It didn't matter that she could see the similarity to Jay in his father's eyes or recognize the tinge of red mixed in the white of his father's hair. All that mattered was the sense of betrayal that ate at her the way acid ate the face of a penny.

Jay's father inclined his head cordially. "We're about to have dinner. Will you and Jay join us, Miss?"

"It's *Mrs.* Mercer." Carrie quickly filled in the blank. Jay had not told his father her name.

"Ah, *Mrs.* Mercer." His father nodded as if understanding some deep, dark secret.

"We were just going back to our seats." Jay began to pull her away.

"Well, happy to meet you, *Mrs.* Mercer. Maybe we'll meet again soon." The words Jay's father spoke fell over them like a shadow.

"Yes, maybe we will," Jay answered for them, tugging once more on her hand.

Carrie allowed herself to be drawn away, then shuffled down the steps and into her seat. Picking up her program, she gripped it for support.

Jay was nervous. She could tell by the way he ran his hand through his hair and sent sharp glances her way. Carrie couldn't say a word. She couldn't vent the anger and hurt that was beginning to boil inside her like a rumbling volcano. These revelations were too fresh. She had to readjust her perspective—her view of the man beside her.

Slowly, her fingers curled around the pages of the program as the impact of the revelation began to sink in. Jay Preston was the son of Carter Preston, a multi-millionaire. Jay was not a

penniless groom. He was filthy rich like his father. She should have known the truth, because of his appearance at summer camp that year. He was Carter's son and probably had ridden expensive champions all his life. He must have laughed at her devotion to a cheap pony.

Besides, the story he had told her about being at odds with his father appeared to be blatantly untrue. Why would the man stand before them smiling, asking them to dinner, if he had severed his relationship with his son? More importantly, why had Jay lied to her pretending to be Mary Wilder's groom? Anger surged through her, cramping her stomach. Mary had hinted about Jay not being so down on his luck. She'd known the truth. That betrayal chaffed too.

His whole charade of being a groom had been an ugly game. Carrie's heart seemed to stop. She had been the playing piece shoved across the game board. She let out a slow breath. If Jay had lied about his background, what else had he lied about? His love?

"I want to go home." Carrie's voice sounded like dead weight.

Jay looked down at Carrie. He knew what was coming and he feared it. Of all the dumb luck to run into his father. He wanted to kick the old man and his flashy blond wife all the way back to California.

"I want to go home," she repeated.

"Okay, let's go."

She walked ahead of him up the stairs. He caught up with her at the head of the stairs and tried to take her hand.

Carrie jerked away from his attempted contact. "I'm finished playing games."

Damn. He couldn't talk to her as she purposely marched from the crowded horse show facility. He was out of control, and reduced to the groveling idiot he'd always been around Carter. Or at least that's how he felt in the wake of Carrie's anger. He could sense the chill that had settled over her by the tenseness in her shoulders and the grim line of her mouth. Heck, the way she walked, as if trying to flee him, was indication enough.

They reached his Mustang. He unlocked the door and Carrie shouldered past him into the seat. Jay shut the door and took a cleansing breath. As he walked around the back of the car, he glanced up at the twinkling stars, tiny flickers of light in the vast summer sky. When he reached the driver's side, Jay took hold of the door handle and stood quietly a moment. He would not bow and

scrape to Carrie. His days of abasing himself were over when he had left Preston Computers. Maybe Carrie would understand when he explained himself.

Resolved, he slipped into the car where the atmosphere was decidedly chilly. Jay put the key into the ignition and then placed both his hands firmly on the stirring wheel.

“My father and I had disagreed. He’d disowned me. That is why I’m in Kentucky,” he said.

“You were having a cozy conversation just now. It seems your father has had a change of heart.” Carrie’s tone was blistering. She stared straight ahead.

“Yes, it seems so.”

“You lied to me.”

“No I didn’t.”

Carrie turned on him, her eyes blazing. “Oh, don’t give me that. You misrepresented yourself.”

“No, I didn’t. When I came to Kentucky, I had no family, and I needed a job. Mary was kind enough to give me one.”

“Mary,” Carrie spat. “She knew who you were. She didn’t tell me.”

“I asked her to keep my background confidential. She was just doing what I asked.”

Carrie sat back and threw up her hands. “That’s just great.”

Jay removed his hands from the wheel and shifted in the seat to focus on her. “Look, Carrie, I was trying to start fresh. I was sick and tired of my father and everything he represented. I wanted a simpler lifestyle.”

“Great,” she restated. “But did that give you the right to lie to me?”

“I didn’t lie.”

“You didn’t tell me the truth.”

“It wasn’t important.” He touched her arm.

Carrie flinched. “Not important? You completely hid one of the most important parts of your life and let me believe you were a stable groom.”

Jay drew back. “I *am* a stable groom, and I didn’t think my background mattered. I wanted someone to care about me for myself, not because I was the son of a wealthy man.”

“You hid your identity and tricked me and my daughter.”

“I just hid the fact that my father has money. I didn’t lie to you about who I am. You know the real me. You knew me from summer camp.” Jay felt his face growing hot. This was harder than

he imagined. "What if you'd known about my father's wealth? You'd have been just like the other women in my life who said they cared about me because of my father's money."

She considered him for a moment. "You don't get it, do you?"

Jay's gaze connected with hers for an instant. She wore a look of earnestness and hurt. He sighed. "What do you mean?"

"You're so caught up in your selfish view of things that you don't understand I can never trust you again. If you can lie to me about something as important as this, how will I know you haven't lied to me about your love?"

Carrie's indictment blew him away. Jay slid a hand through his hair. "You have to take my word for it."

"Your word isn't good enough anymore." Carrie's voice was like a knife in his back.

How would he convince her? How could he express the ache of love he felt for her all the time? He swallowed a knot of agony and wiped his damp palms on his khakis. Resigned, he turned on the ignition.

"I never wanted your gratitude," he told her as he pulled out of the parking lot. "Just your love."

She didn't say anything. He drove onto the Lexington street and then turned right to head home. Damn. He'd made such a mess of things already that he'd better tell her the whole truth. He steeled himself against her coming fury.

"That's why I didn't tell you about Tate's business."

"What does Tate's business have to do with this?"

"I bought it," Jay admitted.

"You bought it?" Carrie practically shot out of her seat she was so angry. "Why would you do that?"

"Because I wanted to help you." He glanced at her quickly and then returned his concentration to the roadway.

"Help me?"

"Yes, you told me you couldn't keep Doolittle for Jesse if you didn't sell the business," he reminded her.

"But I didn't expect you to buy it."

“I know you didn’t, but I wanted to. I told you I loved you. I didn’t want to see you worried about money.”

“But I thought you didn’t have money.” Her statement was a challenge. “Remember, you didn’t even have money to pay the dinner bill.”

“But I did. It was just tied up in a California bank. I didn’t want to use it here in Kentucky. I wanted another way of life.” Jay’s hands tightened on the wheel.

“So, now you *have* money. Do you expect this sob story about being a poor little rich boy to change the fact you lied to me?”

“No, nothing can change the fact I didn’t tell you everything.” He refused to concede her point.

“You draw a fine line.”

“I suppose so, but you must admit if you’d known about the money, our relationship wouldn’t be the same. As it is, you’ve chosen to work on a relationship with me. By doing so, you put your trust in me when you had no assurance I’d improve my lot in life beyond that of a stable groom.”

“That’s not a fair assessment,” she stated.

“It is and the fact that I didn’t have money was affecting your decision at first. Now does the fact I may inherit millions make a difference?” Jay pressed his point.

“What makes a difference is that you lied to me.” Carrie’s statement was cool and precise.

“That’s your take on it.”

“And my opinion is what counts with me,” she said firmly.

“Even if it’s not true?”

“That’s what you believe. As it is, I can’t justify continuing our relationship.”

Jay didn’t want to quibble. He left the field of battle momentarily, his stomach churning from the disagreement. Turning left onto the Interstate, he accelerated and wished he could race away from his problems as quickly as the car traveled the darkened highway.

* * * *

Surviving the trip back to Louisville was the hardest thing Carrie had done since Tate’s death. She sat with her hands clasped on her lap, her eyes focused on the approaching headlights. The strained silence was heavy with Jay’s unspoken recriminations.

She had trusted the man. Trusted him enough to tell him about her finances and her fears for her child. Trusted him enough to open her heart and take a chance. He said he had his reasons for deceiving her. She had been a schoolteacher long enough to have heard excuses from her pupils, and she had known when to quit listening to them, to force the student to accept responsibility for his actions. Just as Jay now had to be accountable for his lie.

As they approached the city, the traffic grew heavier. Jay took the exit nearest her house. Carrie was relieved. Her ordeal would soon be over, at least this part of it. She wanted to be away from Jay, to have time to think. She wanted to curl into a little ball under the covers and sleep for twenty-four hours, shutting herself off from a world that had suddenly blown up in her face. Not that it would make her problem go away, but maybe it would ease the pressure that thudded behind her eyes. Her faith in him was so shaken that she knew it would take more than mere words to make her believe in him again.

Jay or any other man.

* * * *

Something was wrong. Carrie knew as soon as they turned the corner onto her street. It was not as if she saw or heard anything tangible. She sensed it like a dog senses the coming of a storm.

They pulled into her driveway. The front door was standing open. Inside she saw a strange glow as if strobe lights were flickering inside her living room.

“Oh, my God, Jay.”

Carrie jumped out of the car as it rolled to a stop. She didn’t need his strangled cry of “fire” to know what was in her heart. Together they ran to the porch where an intense heat and a shroud of smoke met them.

“Jesse!” Carrie screamed and started up the porch steps.

Jay grabbed her arm and swung her around. “You can’t go in there.”

She faced him, anger blocking the fear that threatened to override her sanity. “You can’t tell me what to do! My daughter’s in there!”

“Let’s go around the back. Maybe we can get in that way.”

They had just left the porch when the babysitter ran around the side of the house, her eyes swollen with tears and her face smudged with dirt.

Jay caught her in his arms. “Where’s Jesse?”

“We were making pop corn on the stove and then went back into the living room. We forgot about it until we heard the smoke alarm.” Words tumbled from her lips.

“Where’s Jesse?” Carrie shouted above the strange roar that was her burning house.

Jay glanced at Carrie and then back to the girl. “Did Jesse get out with you?”

“No,” the teenager said strangling back a sob. “She yelled something about getting a ribbon and ran upstairs.”

“My God.” Carrie jammed a fist into her mouth.

“I ran around the house, and she’s at her bedroom window. She’s too scared to jump.”

“Show me.” Jay released the babysitter. Over his shoulder he cried, “Carrie, call 911!”

They disappeared around the house. *911*. Why hadn’t she thought of that? Her heart pounding in her throat, Carrie ran to the car and fumbled through her purse for the cell phone. When she reached the emergency service, a voice on the other end told her the fire department was already on its way.

Thanking God, Carrie tossed the phone onto the seat and sprinted around the house. She heard the distant wail of a fire truck and prayed they would reach them in time. Red and orange flames darted from the open door and the rancid smell of smoke clogged the night air.

What she saw when she arrived behind her home halted Carrie in stark terror. The babysitter stood petrified beneath Jesse’s window while Jay slowly scaled the wrought iron trellis of morning glories that was anchored into the wooden shingles. Carrie swallowed hard and clutched her hands. That trellis was old—almost as old as the house. It was not meant to hold the weight of a man.

“Jay, be careful,” she called out to him.

He glanced down briefly and smiled—the sweet, sweet smile she had grown to love.

Carrie’s heart turned over as he began to climb again. She didn’t see Jesse, but the window was wide open. Already a trace of smoke had found its way out the opening.

Jay reached the window and Jesse’s head popped up. Carrie saw the tears streaming down her daughter’s soot-streaked face and the blue ribbon clutched in her hand. Jesse ducked under the raised window and climbed out to sit on the sill. Carrie watched as Jay braced himself to help Jesse turn around so that she could climb down the trellis. His body shielded hers as they began their descent, covering Jesse so completely that Carrie couldn’t see her beloved little girl.

She lifted another silent prayer.

It was as if she were in some horrible trance observing a scene made for a cheap, Grade B movie. A strange detachment overwhelmed her as though her mind couldn't take any more fear or accept any more heartache. In this strange void, Carrie saw the old rusty trellis give way. Jay held Jesse to his body, cradling her, and then they both toppled from the second story.

Chapter Eight

A Louisville hospital

Her hand outstretched, Mary came across the floor of the intensive care waiting room.

“Carrie, I’m so sorry.”

Carrie experienced a strange passivity as if a warm numbness had seeped through her veins. She looked up and greeted the barn owner. “Thank you for coming.”

Mary sat down beside Carrie and took one of her hands. “How’s Jesse?” she asked, genuine concern in her eyes

“She’s okay. Jay cushioned her fall. They treated her for smoke inhalation and plan to keep her overnight. I just checked her. She’s sleeping.” Her nerves stretched taut, Carrie spoke slowly. “It’s Jay I’m worried about. I don’t know how to get in touch with his father. We ran into him in Lexington tonight so he’s in the area.”

Mary nodded. “I’ve gotten in touch with him. He’s on his way.”

Carrie let out a slow breath. “Thank you, Mary.”

“Your house?”

“I suppose it’s gone. The firefighters were still there when I left for the hospital with EMS.”

“Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Being here is enough.”

Mary squeezed Carrie’s hand, and then released it to settle back in the hard hospital chair.

Although her body felt like it was operating in neutral, Carrie’s mind was in overdrive. Overwhelmed by a sense of guilt as if she could have stopped what had happened, her mind

replayed the events of the night—the disclosure of Jay’s background, their disagreement, the discovery of her house engulfed in flames and her daughter trapped inside. She heard again the snap of the trellis played out against the horrible roar of the fire and the terrifying scream that had rolled from her throat as Jay and Jesse fell.

In an appalling realization, Carrie knew Jay might have given his life to save her daughter.

The ultimate sacrifice. The ultimate gift. Her body tingled with the understanding. She tightened her jaw. Jay had claimed he had only wanted to help her because of his love and caring, and that’s why he had purchased Tate’s business. Now he had saved her precious child. She could never repay him.

Carrie placed her hands on the arms of her chair, clutching them with a firm, white grip. Jay hadn’t wanted her gratitude. He now possessed more than that. She was indebted to him in a way that tied them together forever.

At the same time, she couldn’t let her thankfulness replace her earlier decision. Nothing changed the fact that he had lied to her. What a bitter irony. She had been forced to trust him with her daughter’s life, but she still chose not to trust him with her love.

Carrie let out a pent-up breath as the attending physician walked out of ICU. He looked tired and concerned, but smiled reassuringly. “Are you Mr. Preston’s wife?”

Carrie rose. His wife? Her heart began to ache at the paradoxical question. “No. Jay isn’t married. However, his father is on his way to the hospital.”

“He has no relatives here?”

“We’re friends. He works for me,” Mary explained.

“I see.”

“Is he going to be okay?” Carrie’s question echoed through the empty, impersonal waiting room.

“We don’t know yet. He’s just come out of surgery and remains unconscious. I really can’t tell you any more until his father arrives.”

“We’ll let you know when he gets here,” Mary said.

The doctor nodded and disappeared behind the swinging doors. They sat down to wait.

Carrie’s eyes felt like hot sand. She wiped a weary hand across them while her thoughts tumbled in chaotic disarray. It didn’t sound good. What if Jay died? How could she reconcile her feelings with the rational judgment she had made to terminate their fledgling relationship?

Moreover, she knew if Jay died, her heart would break, never to be repaired. She swallowed hard against that certainty.

Jay's father arrived a few minutes later. He had aged ten years in the few hours since she had last seen him. His glamorous wife hovered in his shadow, looking out of place in the stark confines of the waiting room. Mary and Carrie stood to greet them.

"Mary, how's my son?"

"He's just come out of surgery we understand. Let me find the doctor," Mary offered and stepped to the door leading to ICU.

Carter turned to Carrie. "How are you doing?"

"I'm okay."

"And your daughter?"

"She'll be fine," Carrie told him, knowing her child lived because of his son's courage.

"Thank God for that."

Mary returned with the young doctor. He introduced himself to Carter, which gave Carrie an opportunity to see the Preston magnetism in action as the two men shook hands. No wonder Jay had charmed the socks off her in such a short time. He came by his talents naturally.

"When your son fell," the doctor said, "he hit his head. The injury to it is our greatest concern."

Carrie felt dizzy. She sank to her chair trying to follow the doctor's explanation as she stared fixedly at the two men.

"When the brain is injured, it begins to swell. Because the brain is in the skull, this swelling causes parts of the brain to compress, and blood flow and oxygen to parts of the brain decreases. Our best neurosurgeon has already removed a large hematoma and repaired several damaged blood vessels. In short, we have tried to break the cycle of bleeding and swelling. We are hoping your son's body will now repair itself."

Carter's face looked grim. "His chances?"

The doctor inclined his head. "Unfortunately, we'll have to wait and see."

What kind of answer was that? Carrie choked back an angry retort and leaned against the back of the seat, a pang of fear surging through her heart.

"I can let two of you see him for a few minutes," the doctor said as if he knew he needed to soften the blow he had just delivered.

“Thank you, doctor.” Carter turned to his wife. “Lori, it’s late and you’re tired. You must consider the baby. Have the driver take you to the Brown Hotel and send him back to get me.”

“You don’t want me to go in with you, Carter, dear?” She clung to his arm.

“No, I think Mrs. Mercer would like to see Jay.”

Carrie flinched because of the hostile look Carter’s wife directed at her. It didn’t matter what the woman thought. Jay was all that mattered. Her breath became shallow as she tried to still the nervous twitter in her stomach.

“I’ll walk out with you, Lori,” Mary said.

Lori’s uncertain gaze flickered once more toward her husband. “Thank you,” she answered, accepting Mary’s offer.

Carrie watched them leave and turned with resignation to watch Carter come toward her. In tight-lipped silence, he held out his hand. His unwavering gaze locked with hers. Taking a deep breath for courage, Carrie gave her hand to him and rose to her feet. The doctor was holding the ICU door open for them.

As they walked through the door, Carrie was struck by an eerie sense of familiarity. Maybe it was Carter’s piercing hazel eyes or the sturdy feel of his once-lanky frame by her side. Whatever it was, she was reminded that Jay had more in common with his father than even he would admit.

From the moment they entered its doors, the crisp efficiency of the intensive care unit overpowered her. Nurses scurried about their duties amid the pungent smell of antiseptic and the gentle hum of life-saving machinery. Carrie dashed a quick glance at Carter and wondered if he was as steady as he appeared. Calm herself on the outside, she knew on the inside she was slowly falling apart.

The doctor pushed back a ghost-like drape. “Don’t be frightened by all the equipment or the bandage on his head. He’s holding his own right now.”

“Thank you, doctor,” Carter said with a voice hardly audible.

“The nurse will ask you to leave in five minutes.”

Carter nodded and stepped around the bed, giving Carrie the direct path to Jay’s side. Her hand shook as she touched his cool arm, his tender skin splotched purple from IV needles. The man who had evoked such disturbing responses from her now lay perfectly still and vulnerable with a white bandage wrapped turban-like over his head. A nasty looking tube snaked down his open mouth and the harsh, thumping sounds of the respirator droned with monotonous rhythm.

A sudden wave of nausea engulfed Carrie as she studied Jay's bruised face, swollen almost beyond recognition from fluids. His copper-colored lashes were dark against the pallor of his cheeks.

"My God, he's on life support."

Carrie looked up at Carter's blunt words to find the man staring with wrenching anguish at his only son. He must have felt her gaze, for he lifted his eyes to meet hers.

"I wasn't prepared for this," he admitted.

"Neither was I." Carrie's voice was as thin as a veil of gossamer.

A stark regret settled in his eyes. "I can't believe I might lose him."

Carrie touched her lips with the tip of her tongue. Dread tightened in her stomach. She didn't know what to say.

"What will I do if he dies?" Carter's question was a soft groan.

Carrie lifted her chin. "He won't die."

Carter met her gaze. "How can you be so sure?"

"How can you be so sure he will die?" Anger flashed through her, and she bit back a harsher comment.

Despair was written on his face. "I've made so many mistakes with Jay. I just want time to make it up to him."

As she gave Carter a thoughtful stare, Carrie's jaw tightened. The man's selfishness was mindboggling. Yet as her gaze shifted over the rugged plains of his face, she knew instinctively that more lay beneath Carter's words than simple remorse.

"When the doctor says he can be moved, I'm taking him back to California." Carter must have read the question in her look, because he hurried on, "I know the doctors there. He'll have the best care my money can provide. If or when he recovers, he may need therapy. I can provide the best for him."

"Money isn't the only thing Jay needs," Carrie said softly.

Carter had the decency to drop his gaze, but not before Carrie saw the flicker of shame cross his eyes. He ran a hand through his hair, a silent testimony to the link between the two men. Carrie had seen Jay make the same gesture many times.

A certainty settled over Carrie as if she had been touched by the fingers of a guardian angel. She knew what Jay would want.

When she spoke, it was with calm deliberation. "Leave him here, Carter. Jay has been happy in Kentucky. Don't tear him away from where he's been happy."

Before Carter could respond, a nurse pushed back the curtain. She looked sympathetic but firm. "You can see him again in another hour. We'll let you know if there's any change."

"Thank you." Carter ducked his head and moved past the nurse.

Carrie let her fingers linger a second longer on Jay's cool arm. Fighting back tears, she fled from the reality of the room.

When she rejoined Carter, he sat with his head in his hands. Carrie walked toward him, feeling the agony emanating from him like a tangible thing. She sat down beside him. Again she was at a loss for words.

"You talk with such assurance about Jay. Do you know my son well?" Carter asked. He lifted his head and his eyes captured hers.

Carrie's brow furrowed. "Well enough."

"I've known him all his life, but I still don't know him."

There it was again. The paralyzing regret. Carter shoved a hand once more through his thinning hair.

"Jay isn't hard to get to know," Carrie ventured, suddenly able to speak with authority. "He wants what most of us want out of life—to love and be loved."

Carter's eyes narrowed. "I can relate to that wish, but I've never understood what love is."

Carrie leaned toward him and tried to muffle an unbidden wave of anger.

He studied her face before he went on, "I suppose Jay told you about my many marriages."

Carrie's gaze shifted self-consciously. "Yes, he did speak about them."

"He held them against me." When Carrie didn't respond, Carter grew silent a moment. She heard him expel a breath. "We argued about it at my wedding reception. I hit him in the jaw."

Carrie looked at him, surprised. She knew Jay as little as his father.

"I disowned him." Carter's acrid words dangled between them.

"He told me that."

Sitting forward in his chair, Carter clutched his hands together and glancing sideways, searched her face. "Tell me. You said my son was happy. Was he getting along okay?"

"He enjoyed his work at the stable."

Carter sat back. “That’s another thing I did wrong. I forced him into programming. I had plans for him run my company some day.” He shook his head. “I never realized how much he hated it. But he was so damn good at it. Damn talented.”

Carrie found it hard to witness the man’s soul-searching. She felt uncomfortable like an unwanted guest. “Maybe it wasn’t the programming he objected to.”

Carter dropped his gaze as if he knew what she was driving at. “Does he love you?” The unexpected question sounded harsh.

Carrie shivered in her skimpy black dress. “He said he did.”

Carter nodded and looked at her once more. “I knew it as soon as I saw the way he looked at you at the horse show. You’re a lucky woman.” His voice caught. “He hated me so much.”

Carrie shook her head. Her heart hurt as if she’d just run a marathon, and she experienced a deep regret—probably the same aching regret Carter faced at the moment. “I don’t believe Jay hates you.”

He searched her face. “Do you love him?”

She fought off his probing question, reluctant to answer given her recent argument with Jay. Drawing a deep breath, she touched the arms of her chair. Truth was important. She had seen the destruction of lies in her marriage and preferred candor to the kind of half-truth Jay had given her.

In a thin, reedy voice, she answered, “Yes.”

Carter shifted in his chair. “Jay’s a lucky boy.” He turned his head away, and Carrie barely caught his next words. “Luckier than I am.”

Anger pulsed through Carrie’s fingers. She gripped the chair. The arrogance of this man! Why was he allowing self-pity to distract him from the real issues—Jay’s recovery and his own lack of involvement in the lives of his children? Sure, tragedy often changed a person’s heart as it appeared to be changing Carter’s, but Carrie refused to sympathize with him.

“Do you love your son?” Carrie asked without forewarning.

Carter didn’t answer for a moment letting her question sink in. “I suppose he told you that I don’t love him.”

“He told me you were never there for him when he was young.”

Carter passed a hand over his face and shut his eyes briefly. When he opened them, he stared straight at Carrie. “My father was an alcoholic. I grew up dirt poor and at loose ends myself. I vowed I would never be without money and that my kids would have the best money could buy.”

Carrie gazed keenly back at him, but didn't comment.

Carter continued, "Okay, I can see by your expression you've made your own judgment."

"I have my opinion," she hedged.

Carter frowned, climbed to his feet and began to pace. "My personal history doesn't justify my bad relationship with Jay, you're thinking. I should have been a better father, but I always had his welfare at heart. I pushed him. Tried to make him the best he could be."

"You've just admitted you regret forcing him into computers," Carrie pointed out.

"I know I was wrong. Hell, is that what you want to hear?" Carter stood in front of her glaring down at her like a sharp-eyed bird of prey.

"You don't have to get defensive with me." Carrie's head began to pound. "It's Jay who needs to hear your apology."

Like a deflated balloon, Carter sank back into his chair. "I've never known how to tell him I love him."

Carrie moved a hand to touch his arm. Carter looked at her with such pain that she wondered if his heart had already broken.

"You've just gone about it wrong," she said with sudden conviction. "You don't just say I love you, throwing money or empty words at the person you love. You show your love by spending time with your loved ones. You do things together."

Carter turned his head, avoiding her eyes. "But I had to make a living."

"A living, but not a fortune."

"It's not that easy." He turned back to send her another defensive glance. "I did what I had to do."

Carrie withdrew her hand. "Sure." She raised a shoulder to shrug, knowing he would never fully admit his failing. "If you want another chance with Jay, let's just hope God gives it to you."

They were quiet a minute. Then Carter touched her arm. "I've changed my mind, Mrs. Mercer. If Jay comes out of this, I want you to care for him. I don't want to drag him away from Kentucky and the woman he loves."

* * * *

Feeling wrung out like a twisted washcloth, Carrie stood silently beside her sleeping child in the private hospital room. Her mind lethargic, she couldn't bring herself to face what she had to face—Jay's life-threatening injury and the devastating loss of her home. Besides, her conversation

with Carter had exhausted her, making her even more frustrated. She doubted anything she said had affected him. In his stubborn pride, Carter defended his hurtful actions. Much like his son had defended his own lie. The similarity was striking.

Bone weary, Carrie kicked off her heels, the hospital floor cold beneath her stocking feet. She didn't understand Carter. How could a parent forsake his duty for so many years? How could he neglect his own child? With her remaining energy, Carrie reached down and brushed a blond tendril of hair away from Jesse's brow. The child's delicate skin was cool against her fingertips.

Some people would fault her judgment. To them, Jay's failure to tell her the truth about his past would not be seen as a problem. No one was really hurt after all, they'd say. But Carrie couldn't reason that way. She wanted a man she could trust. A man who could accept her and have faith enough to know whatever he told her would rest safely with her.

Jay's lack of trust spoke to his lack of acceptance of her as a woman, as a human being.

Her thoughts brought tears to her eyes. Or maybe it was the strain of the evening. Or the fact her daughter's breathing rose and fell in a gentle rhythm. Jesse was safe and sound, and Carrie said a small prayer of thanks.

The treasured blue ribbon lay on the night table. Picking it up, Carrie felt the smooth satin fabric and touched the rosette with the plastic picture of a horse in its center. With the ache of love, she leaned down and touched her lips to the cool forehead of her baby. Then she carefully placed the ribbon on the pillow beside Jesse's head.

Chapter Nine

Two weeks after he had almost lost his life, Jay looked at the world from his hospital bed with a strange sense of disconnection. The various tubes that had dripped fluids into his body and the catheter that had drained them out were now gone. The white turban-like bandage on his head remained as well as the bruises on his arms, now turning green and yellow as they healed.

The only constant in his life was Carrie. With eyes heavy-lidded and a sweet lethargy enveloping him, Jay watched her as she stood at the hospital room window. Sunlight threw a blanket of light across her profile, illuminating the delicate skin of her cheek and the sensuous curve of her mouth. Her hair was pulled back from her face as if it were too much trouble to deal with, and her blond braid lay heavily on her shoulder.

He was intensely and physically aware of her slim figure, almost gaunt now from loss of weight. Her hands rested lightly on the windowsill, and the curly upturn of her lashes fluttered against the brilliant light. When she turned toward him, her eyes held a haunted look.

His chest felt tight. He wanted to take her into his arms, love her, protect her, and let her know it would be all right. But the languor that engulfed him prevented his action. He felt as if lifting his arms would be too hard, too much effort. She gazed steadily at him.

Carrie didn't have to be here with him, but she was and had been with him every day since the fall. Her mother had come for the first week to watch Jesse. Now Mary took care of the little girl, for Carrie and Jesse had moved into the vacant doublewide mobile home on Mary's farm. They had to. There had been no place else to go.

Jay's eyelids drifted over his eyes. Carrie had lost everything in the fire. Everything but Jesse. In his mind, he heard again Carrie's terrible scream, and relived the terror of the fall, the

horrible sinking feeling as the trellis broke under the added weight. He couldn't stop it. He couldn't save Jesse. Instinctively he had sheltered Jesse as they fell.

Then everything had gone black.

After that, he had lost three days of his life. Three days that held no meaning for him. It was an odd feeling and maybe part of the reason for his detachment with the world around him.

Jay smelled the faint fragrance of Carrie's perfume. That part of his world, at least, was still vitally intact. His senses seemed sharper, he thought as he heard the soft in and out of Carrie's breathing. With expectation, he opened his eyes. She was standing beside his bed—her eyes hooded, her face grim.

"I thought you were asleep." Carrie touched the edge of the bed, but avoided touching him.

He searched her eyes. "You don't have to be here, you know," he said, his voice still raspy from the breathing tube that had snaked down his esophagus.

"I want to be."

"Do you?" His question was a subtle indictment, reflecting the resentment that flared suddenly in his heart.

"Of course I do." She looked away as if to hide something and then turned her eyes back to his.

Jay knew she wasn't telling the truth. Funny, wasn't it? Truth supposedly meant so much to Carrie. Or it did when it concerned his own omission of fact—that he had bought her husband's business or that he and his father were millionaires.

Only Carrie's sense of duty kept her in this room. He had saved Jesse's life. She owed him one. What she didn't owe him was her love. He hadn't wanted her gratitude, then or now. He just wanted her love—for himself. Ironically, gratitude was all he had from her now.

Because of the fire. Because of Jesse.

Details of their argument evaded him. What he remembered with awful clarity was an overpowering sense of frustration, an emotion so demanding that even now it pestered him like a persistent gnat.

The nerves behind his eyes began to throb. Slowly Jay curled his fingers into a fist, his gaze resting on Carrie like a brand. She must have felt his abrupt anger, for she shifted in her stance as if his look made her uneasy. He hated her wariness. Yet he was too weak physically to make an issue of it.

Didn't she know that he had just wanted to help when he bought Tate's business? He didn't want her to go it alone. Sure, he may have gone about it the wrong way. Maybe he shouldn't have interfered. Their relationship had been too raw.

But he'd never felt like this about another woman—this irresistible impulse to protect. His love had made him impulsive. Should he be punished for that?

"I know you're only here because you feel you have to be," he told her in a quiet voice.

Looking down at her hand resting on the crisp hospital sheet, he gently took it into his. Her fingers were cold.

"You gave me my daughter's life," she said in a voice equally as cool. "I can never forget that."

"I did what anyone would do." He pressed her fingers.

"No, you were brave beyond reason." Her gaze grew intense. "If I had lost Jesse, I'd have lost everything."

"I know," he said.

Carrie took a deep breath. "I can never repay you for what you did."

"Yes you can. You can forgive me." It was his turn to look away.

He felt her hand grow still. Then she tried to pull it away, but he held it, surprising himself at his ability to do so.

"Let go of me!"

Jay released her hand and, with sadness, watched as she drew it away.

"Carrie, I'm sorry."

She winced. "I don't want your apology."

"Then I don't want your gratitude."

"Well, you've got it." She snapped and swung away from the bed.

She paced the room, and Jay's misery increased. This was so hard—to watch her pain and see the stubborn set of her mouth. She wouldn't give in. She wouldn't let him help. His stomach clenched.

"Maybe you should do a little forgiving yourself." Carrie surprised him with the suggestion as she came back to his bedside. There was fire in her gaze.

Jay's eyes narrowed. He was bone-weary. "I don't understand."

"Maybe you should try forgiving your father."

“Carter has nothing to do with this.”

“He has everything to do with this.”

Anger hammered Jay hard. “I don’t understand what you mean. How could he? We ran into him and his wife by chance. He didn’t even know I was in Kentucky. He didn’t even come see me after the fall.”

“You’re wrong. Carter came here the night of the fire.”

Carrie’s revelation dumbfounded him. Jay stared at her in puzzled silence.

She must have understood his shock, for her attitude softened. Eyes shaded, she moved nearer to his side and touched his arm with a tentative hand, making his breath go shallow.

“When we thought you wouldn’t live, he was right here in the ICU with me. He stayed until we knew you’d make it. He wanted to take you back to California with him.”

“Why didn’t he?” Jay asked in a querulous voice.

“I talked him out of it. I told him you’d want to be here, in Kentucky, where you’d been happy. I told him I’d take care of you.” Her fingers brushed his arm once more. His skin felt on fire. “I hope I didn’t do anything wrong.”

Their gazes connected in swift communication. He laid his hand over hers. “You were right. California holds nothing for me.”

Carrie nodded. Seeming uneasy by their contact, she pulled her hand from underneath his and moved away once more.

“He calls every day to check on you.”

“He doesn’t talk to me.”

Carrie turned to glance at him, giving him a knowing grin. The fire in her eyes going smoky. “Until a few days ago, you couldn’t talk to anyone.”

Jay would not allow himself to be humored. “Good to know he cares.”

She swooped on him like an avenging angel. “That’s what I mean. Listen to how you said that! The childish anger. The bitterness. You need to forgive your father before you can expect me to do the same with you. Maybe if you straighten out this hostility you have for Carter, you’ll come to understand why you couldn’t trust me with the truth about yourself.”

Jay scowled. “You sound like a psychologist. Go ahead and analyze me. Why didn’t I tell you my real identity?”

“How in the hell do I know? I just know your father isn’t a bad man, only a weak one. He’s had your best interest at heart, but he went about it the wrong way. I don’t know.” She shrugged. “I do know that all of our parents let us down sometimes. They’re only human, not the gods we think they are when we’re children.”

“So, the Preston charm has worked on you too,” Jay stated sarcastically.

“Oh!” Carrie’s hand curled into a fist. “You’re so blind. I can see why you two don’t get along. You’re so much alike.”

“And how is that?”

“You both are searching for happiness by trying to be who you aren’t—Carter by trying to recapture his youth and marrying women half his age, and you by disguising yourself as a penniless stable groom.”

“I haven’t hurt anyone by my actions,” Jay said.

The fire seemed to leave Carrie’s face, snuffed by his denial.

“Only me,” she said.

Jay stared after Carrie as she left the room. Having heard the hitch in her voice, he realized that she was telling the truth. He *had* hurt her.

* * * *

Had she been too harsh on Jay? Carrie shaded her eyes from the glaring afternoon sunshine. A light film of perspiration had broken out along her upper lip, and she felt the crevice between her breasts growing damp. She didn’t care about the heat. For some reason she welcomed it, welcomed its piercing honesty. Its consistency.

Lowering her hand, she gripped the rough railing of the paddock fence. In the distance Mary’s horses grazed with dreamy contentment. She envied these creatures their placid existence. Food, water, a run along the pasture fence. Basic elements. Not like the complications that crowded her life.

Tomorrow she would bring Jay home to her borrowed house with its borrowed furniture and cheap decorations. Carrie clutched the jagged surface of the railing. How would she cope with a man whose doctors wouldn’t let stay by himself? A man who still had the power to ignite her emotions.

Her fingers bit into the wood. How could she offer Jay her love? She had told Carter she loved him. And she did. But at the same time, she knew she couldn't trust him. It was a curious ambivalence.

Carrie let out a long sigh. She'd thrown out a challenge to Jay. *Forgive your father.*

What had made her do that? Was it because, in her heart of hearts, she believed he would never find a way to forgive his father? If he did, she would be forced to deal with her own lack of mercy. Perhaps she didn't want to forgive Jay, for in doing so, she would have to deal with her own emotions. Was she afraid to love again so soon after Tate's death? This revelation was like a heavy weight. Carrie could hardly breathe.

She had loved Tate once upon a time, loved him so much that she didn't protect herself when it had counted. Yet somehow, theirs had been a cheerless, though dutiful marriage. Carrie had to admit that her husband had been an honorable man. He'd married her and provided for her and their daughter. Their love had been little more than swift, mistaken passion. It had died with the birth of Jesse. Would the love she now experienced die the same kind of hapless death?

Carrie turned her back on the horses and pushed away from the fence, striding briskly back to the dreary, doublewide mobile home. As she walked, her mind played hopscotch over the ironies of life, the ironies no adult ever revealed to a child.

For no matter how hard you try, your life never ends up like you plan when you were growing up.

Chapter Ten

Wildwood Stables

Old caretaker's house

Stretching out his legs on the coffee table, Jay rested his shaved head on the top of a worn living room sofa. Shutting his eyes, he honed in on the dinner-making sounds coming from the kitchen—the sizzle of frying hamburgers, clatter of dishes, Jesse’s laughter. He was overpowered by a sharp sense of smell—grease from the burgers, lemon from newly polished wood, the sweet smell of Carrie’s perfume that drifted like a specter throughout the double-wide, prefabricated home.

He was staying with Carrie for the next few days before going back to his apartment over the stables. Was he up to the challenge?

Jay was determined to win back Carrie’s love and knew full well he must court her again. It had been easy the last time. She had been open and trusting. Now she was closed off, distant. He regretted that distance. Somehow, he would overcome Carrie’s misgivings and win her trust back.

Then the smoke alarm went off.

Jesse screamed a bloodcurdling scream that penetrated the recesses of Jay’s heart. He jumped to his feet. A thin layer of smoke from frying hamburgers clung to the ceiling, setting off the alarm. Jay spotted the smoke detector in the hallway, reached up and detached the nine-volt battery.

The agonizing noise of the alarm ceased, but not Jesse’s cries. Jay was stunned by the sight of Jesse huddled on the kitchen floor wrapped in her mother’s arms.

Carrie glanced up at him, and he understood at once the haunted look he had seen in her eyes at the hospital. It had been because of Jesse. Jay went to the stove and removed the heavy black iron frying pan from the heat.

“It’s okay, honey,” Carrie crooned to her daughter. She folded the little girl in her arms and rocked her back and forth as a mother would rock an infant. “Jay’s taken care of it. It’s just the smoke from the frying hamburgers.”

Slowly Jesse’s sobs subsided. When she raised her eyes to Jay, he was startled by the depth of trust he saw in them.

“Thanks,” the little girl mouthed.

“Hey, no problem.” Jay shrugged off her thanks, knowing it was time to lift everyone’s spirits. He grinned at the two of them. “When do we eat? I’m starving. Hospital food was really the pits.”

Jesse scrambled to her feet and dove at Jay, wrapping her arms tightly around his waist and burying her head against his body. Jay reached down and stroked the girl’s blond head. He had no words of comfort. Just his presence seemed to be enough for Jesse.

His gaze caught Carrie’s as she looked up at him from where she still sat cross-legged on the floor. It was as if she said thanks with her eyes. Damn! Gratitude again, not love.

Forcing back his disappointment, Jay bent his head, slowly disengaged Jesse’s embrace, and stooped down to be on her eye level.

“How about eating our hamburgers outside?” he asked. “I saw a nice picnic table under a big shade tree. How about cleaning it off for us?”

Jesse glanced at her mother who was scrambling to her feet. “Good idea,” Carrie echoed. “Take that damp rag over there.”

Jesse nodded. As she closed the door behind her, Jay stood up frowning. “She’s a changed child.”

Carrie glanced at him and turned to face the stove, tears in her eyes. “She’s been that way since the fire. She’s so fearful and timid. I can hardly leave her.”

“I see that.”

“I’m trying to be patient with her,” Carrie explained. “The doctor suggested a child psychologist, but my insurance won’t cover it.”

“I can pay for it.” The words were out of his mouth before he considered them.

The muscle in her jaw clenched. "I don't want your help."

"I don't mind. I've got plenty of money, remember?" It was the truth, damn it. Trouble was, it was again the wrong thing to say, and he recognized in his offer the same sort of action his father would take. It bothered him.

"Yes, I know." Carrie turned from the stove with a plate of fried hamburgers in her hands. She shoved it at his midriff. "Here, take this."

"If you won't take money from me, I'll loan it to you."

"I could never pay it back."

He shrugged. "Then consider it a gift."

Her anger flared. "Like buying Tate's business? I don't care for your gifts. They come without the truth attached."

Jay walked to the door. She knew how to hurt a guy. "Some people would appreciate it."

Carrie caught up to him, and touched his upper arm, causing him to pause and turn toward her. "Wait, Jay. I *do* appreciate what you've done for me. It's just that I want to make it on my own."

Breath caught in his throat as he glanced down at her. She was so delicate, so vulnerable. A poignant ache throbbed in his chest. He placed the plate on the top of a nearby television, freeing his hands and then lifting a finger, caught a tendril of her blond hair and brushed it away from her face. Carrie's lips were pressed together in a tight, hard line, but he noticed the movement of her throat as she swallowed.

"We're a pair, aren't we?" he asked. She stared up at him with her wide doe-like eyes. "You feel indebted to me because of Jesse, and I don't want your gratitude. Then you tell me you want to stand on your own two feet, and I fuss at you because you don't want my help."

Her eyes grew wary. He traced a fingertip from her eyebrow down the curve of her cheek to the line of her stubborn jaw. "It's just that I love you so much." The admission ripped from his gut. "I want to show you that I love you. I want to do things for you, help you. It hurts when you won't let me, and it hurts when all you'll give me is your grudging gratitude. I want your love. I had that for a while. I know I did."

"I don't want to hurt you, Jay." Her voice was soft like the texture of her skin. "But I can't."

"Shhh." Jay pressed her lips with his finger. "Don't tell me what you can't do."

He wanted her so badly. Slowly he lowered his head and replaced his fingertip with his lips. Gently at first, he begged her forgiveness with his kiss, his tongue darting softly into the warmth and sweetness of her mouth. She sighed deeply within her throat as she responded to his plea. Caressing her face with his hands, he held her carefully, afraid to break the tenuous link that bound her to him for the moment.

A clatter outside warned them before Jesse burst through the door. Carrie broke away, turning from him, her hand straying to her mouth.

“Table ready, imp?” Jay asked Jesse. He was shaken beyond belief by the short kiss.

“Mary has turned her mares and foals out. They’re grazing right next to the fence.”

Jay was glad to hear the excitement in Jesse’s voice.

“Great, let’s go take a look.” He picked up the hamburgers.

“Jesse, take these paper plates and bag of chips.” Carrie handed them to her. “I’ll bring the lemonade and buns.”

Jay held the door open and Jesse ducked under his arm. Glancing back at Carrie, he saw her standing in the kitchen doorway, a look of wistfulness in her eyes and a shy smile upon her lips.

* * * *

What was the matter with her? Carrie leaned her elbows on the picnic table. Why had she let Jay kiss her like that? She was leading him on and giving him hope.

Jay and Jesse stood together at the pasture fence. The little girl bent down and pulled up a chunk of grass, offering it to an inquisitive chestnut colt that lipped the grass from her hand and snorted for more.

What was the old saying? The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. Carrie wondered if that applied to her relationship with Jay. Was she wrong to expect more from him? Jay was human. He wasn’t perfect. After her disappointing marriage, was she too wary about this man who had disappointed her already? He was good and kind, having her welfare at heart. But could she trust him? Or was she too stubborn to try?

Her mind was so jumbled and cluttered. She was tired of trying to figure it all out. Tired of the worry and the heartache.

Twilight scattered all around them, full of the night sounds of crickets and the muffled hoot of a distant owl. Pinpricks of light flickered in the air as fireflies came out to search for mates. Jay

and Jesse left the fence. While Jesse skipped around them, cupping lightening bugs into her hands, Jay returned to the picnic table and straddled the bench, sitting down across from her.

"I'm going to need to go in," he said, his eyes enigmatic in the falling gloom. "The bugs are eating me alive."

"Are you tired?"

"Yes."

It was his first afternoon home from the hospital. Of course he must be exhausted. Carrie scanned the pale planes of his face. He looked like a sheared sheep with stray tufts of red hair standing up on his head. She allowed her lashes to lower over her eyes, and in her mind's eye, she remembered his warm, moist breath and the softness of his mouth. With that memory, her throat grew dry. In self-defense, her eyes flew open, only to find his gaze stroking her face.

"You're so beautiful." His words were as hot as the night.

Carrie felt herself flush. "You don't sound too tired to me."

"I can't help it."

"You certainly can." She fixed him with a determined glare.

It made him laugh, the warm admiration showing in his eyes. And then he rubbed her bare leg with his. Slowly. Up and down, making her skin feel hot. The muscles of his calf were warm and hard. A fire-like glow lit in the pit of her stomach.

"Jay!"

"Yes?"

"Cut it out. There's Jesse." Carrie inclined her head toward her daughter, reminding him of her presence.

"She can't see anything," he said with his endearing smile spreading across his face.

"But I can't" Her breath rasped harshly in her throat.

"I told you not to talk to me about *can't*. You don't know the possibilities having me in your life will open up. There will be no *can't* between us."

"Don't play games with me." His leg still touched hers, causing a connection between them that she didn't want.

"I'm not playing games. I'm dead serious." His voice was quiet as the humor went out of his eyes. "I want the magic back. The spark we had before the fire. Call me selfish." He shrugged, his gaze locked with hers. "I want you."

It had been a long time since anyone had talked to her like that—since she had seen that look of yearning in anyone’s eyes. Carrie glanced down, self-conscious. She wanted him too. *Admit it.* On some primeval level the two of them connected. She swallowed. As he rubbed her again, an exquisite shiver shot up her leg.

Carrie jumped up and placing her hands on the table leaned forward with a scowl. “Look, this is hard enough. Don’t make it worse.”

“You didn’t have to invite me into your home.”

“You’re wrong. I had to invite you, so be a good guest, please.”

His gaze riveted her, throwing her a teasing challenge that made her shudder. “You’re right. I’ll behave.” Jay stood up and cleared the table.

The wind was knocked out of Carrie’s sails. For a moment, he had taken away the fight with his acknowledgment. She felt a strange loss. Picking up her plate and gathering the dirty utensils, she carried them into the house. In her heart, she knew the battle couldn’t be over so quickly.

Because conflicting feelings of desire and hurt, love and anger still raged inside her.

* * * *

The heart-stopping scream reverberated throughout the house, awakening Carrie from a hard sleep. She shot to her feet. Jesse! Another nightmare. Carrie hadn’t expected one tonight. Her daughter had been so happy earlier, watching television with them after dinner and going to bed late.

A light was already on in Jesse’s room when she got there. Carrie burst into the room to find Jay sitting on the bed and holding her child in his arms. The little girl’s head was tucked under his chin, her heavy sobs already subsiding. Jay wore a pair of shorts and an undershirt, revealing very manly muscles beneath the thin, white cotton.

Carrie stood there and watched the two of them. Her daughter—so young and innocent, so much a part of her. Her very life. And Jay—the brash young man who had charmed his way into her family. Into her life.

Was he making himself irreplaceable at least to Jesse?

In that instant, Carrie loved him more than she had ever loved another man.

“I was still awake,” he said quietly, looking up to catch her gaze. “She’ll be okay. I’ll stay with her until she goes back to sleep. I sometimes sat with my sister like this when she was little.”

Carrie nodded and then moved away. She was tired, and a nagging voice kept asking her why she was letting Jay back into her life when she had already decided he wasn't to be trusted, let alone loved.

Chapter Eleven

Morning light was a hushed alarm clock drifting slowly between the cracks of Carrie's window shades. She sat up in bed and fisted the sleep from her eyes. How she hated mornings. In less than a month, she would be going back to school, rising at five-thirty to make it to the classroom by seven. The prospect of an early wake-up call was not pleasant. Yawning, she crawled out of bed.

Barefoot, Carrie padded toward the bathroom, her sleep-clogged mind slowly recognizing the unexpected aroma of coffee. The door was slightly ajar, and before she became fully aware, Carrie pushed it open.

Jay stood at the sink and looked at her through the mirror. In the instant it took for her face to flame, Carrie noticed how his pajama bottoms cupped his well-defined butt and how the muscles of his shoulders and arms were sculpted like some sort of Greek god. Her lungs suddenly lacked air. She wondered if the sharp pain in her chest was the early signs of a heart attack. When Jay turned around with white shaving cream bisecting his face and a bright smile on his lips, Carrie felt the quick burn of desire.

"Good morning," Jay said with much too much enthusiasm.

"What's so good about it?" The teasing glint in his eyes irritated the heck out of her.

"Oh, not a morning person, are we?"

Jay was too perky. "No." Carrie backed out of the bathroom. "I'm sorry to disturb you."

He towed his face and followed her out, grabbing his t-shirt. "I hope I didn't wake you. I tried to be quiet."

Carrie refused to answer him. Jay tossed her another amused look and swept her a mock bow. "Go right in. I'll finish later."

Carrie glared at him. The urge to slap his handsome face was as irresistible as the urge of nature's call. Head high, she marched past and closed the door, making sure he heard the click of the lock.

Jay smiled at the forbidding look on Carrie's face. She needed a little shaking up—just a little to get her out of the doldrums and perhaps to take her mind off her troubles. Whistling under his breath, he put on his shirt and went into the kitchen. He filled a mug full of coffee and handed it to Carrie when she came out of the bathroom.

“Coffee? Black?”

“Thanks.” She took the mug.

“I guessed right. You don't take cream and sugar, do you?”

“No.” Her fingers closed around the mug, and she brought it to her nose, allowing the steam to bathe her face.

Carrie's gaze still said she was spoiling for a fight. Their eyes clashed for a moment before she looked away, moving with unconscious grace toward the sofa. She sat down and drew her feet underneath her.

There was nothing particularly revealing about her long, cotton pajamas. They were a deep forest green, not a bit revealing. Jay couldn't see through the fabric. Yet for some reason, the way she sat, all balled up on the sofa with her fingers wrapped around the mug and a challenging look on her face, threw Jay into a tizzy. She was too darn sexy with her blond hair tousled from sleep and draped over her shoulders.

“Do you always get up this early?”

“Grooms always get up with the sun.” Jay returned to the kitchen and came back with his own mug of coffee.

“But you weren't always a groom.”

“No I wasn't.”

The coffee was as hot as Jay's reaction to Carrie. He sat down across from her in a chair, and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and cradling the coffee mug.

“How did you have the money to buy my husband's business?” she asked. “Did your father give it to you?”

He considered her thoughtfully. Carrie didn't know. Couldn't know. They had argued and then the accident. He hadn't been able to explain. Suddenly Jay wanted her to know all about him. Not just about his disagreement with his father or his pretending to be a groom, but he wanted to tell her about the positive and important things he had done with his life.

"Have you heard of a computer program called Sampson?"

Carrie shrugged. "Vaguely."

"I wrote it."

Jay sipped his coffee. This news didn't seem to impress her. He could tell she didn't care about computers.

"Sampson is the multilevel software installed in all Preston Computers. It rivals the giants of the industry with its simplicity and ease-of-use. It's one factor that has raised Preston's share of the industry by twenty-four per cent within the last two years."

Carrie was bored, but this had been his passion. "The point," he went on, "is that I made a lot of money from the program. It made me pretty damn rich."

The irony of his words clogged Jay's throat. Here he was bragging like some multimillion-dollar-a-year sports star when his whole purpose for leaving California and Preston Computers was to find a woman unimpressed by his wealth. Well, he'd done it. Here she sat, her feet drawn up beneath her with the curves of her hips and thighs emphasized by the soft fabric of her pajamas. Carrie didn't care about his money. She had made it clear she didn't want his money or him. Jay felt like a hypocrite trying to use his wealth to win her over.

This was crap. His stomach felt cold and hollow. Jay stood up. He walked back into the kitchen and emptied his mug into the sink.

When he returned to the living room, Carrie was watching him with a quiet regard.

"Tate loved computers," she said. "He was like a boy with a toy whenever he was working on one." She lowered her feet and sat forwards still clutching her mug. "I could never understand his fascination, but he made a comfortable living for us. He was a good man."

Jay thought he saw a shimmer of love in her eyes for her dead husband. A painful jealousy stabbed his gut. He wanted that same look of love to be for him. What made him think he could so quickly replace Carrie's husband? She was recently widowed. Of course, he couldn't expect her to transfer her allegiance overnight. Maybe it *was* enough to have her gratitude.

“I used to be like that,” Jay kept up the conversation. “With a father in the business, I always had the biggest and the best computer. I taught myself to program and skipped college to develop software applications for Carter.”

“You must be a genius.”

“No, I just loved it, like Tate did.” Jay sat down across from her again. “But to tell you the truth, since coming to Kentucky, I haven’t missed it.”

“Your fingers don’t itch to go back into programming?”

“No.” *They itch to get a hold of your lovely body.*

Carrie rubbed her nose with the back of her finger and sat back against the sofa to regard him once more from under veiled lashes. She looked so darn desirable.

“In fact, I kind of like the horse business,” Jay said. “Maybe it will be my next venture.”

“Bob Flynn, the manager, told me you had never stopped by Tate’s shop.” Carrie’s statement held a hint of concern.

Jay shrugged. “I guess I was avoiding the whole computer world for a while. But that’s a mistake I need to remedy as soon as the doctors let me drive.”

The phone rang, and Carrie got up to answer it. Jesse stumbled from her room. Half asleep, she crawled into Jay’s lap with a strange familiarity. He hugged her tight, accepting her trust and fighting a pang of sadness. He missed his sister Gloria.

When Carrie returned, she paused at the sight of them and then crossed to the sofa and sat down. Her light blue eyes looked almost pale with the worry he saw written in them. Jay bit back his curiosity and waited.

In a moment, Carrie lifted her chin. “I need to ask another favor.”

“Anything. You know that.”

“Babysit for me. I need to go into Louisville and talk to my lawyer.”

“I don’t need a babysitter,” Jesse announced.

“We’ll walk over to see Dr. Doolittle,” Jay suggested, ruffling the child’s hair. “It will help me get my strength back.”

Carrie’s look carried a quick caress—so quick that it surprised him. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

“I’ve got to get ready.” She stood.

“Sure.” As she went into the bathroom, Jay watched her go—the slight sway of her hips and the movement of her mass of blond hair against the small of her back. Concerned about his reaction, he gave Jesse a gentle shove off his lap.

“Here, imp, let’s go make breakfast.”

Together they went into the kitchen and amid much laughter fixed bacon and eggs—something Jay would have rather been doing with Jesse’s mother.

* * * *

Carrie’s observation had made Jay feel guilty. Why hadn’t he stopped by the shop he’d just purchased? The next day when Mary drove into Louisville, he hitched a ride.

Bob Flynn, the manager of Mercer Computer Mart, was in his late-fifties. He had probably been a computer programmer when the industry was in its infancy, making him the kind of pioneer Jay had learned to respect. He liked the manager right away.

“Mr. Preston, I’m honored.” Flynn’s handshake was firm.

“Mr. Preston is my father. Call me Jay.”

“Jay.”

“I’m sorry to have neglected you.”

Flynn showed Jay into the office situated in the back of the crowded retail business. “With what you’ve just survived, it can be expected. Saving Jesse made us all give thanks.”

Jay shrugged as he sat down. “You would have done the same thing.”

“I don’t think I could have made it up the trellis.” He laughed referring to his rather bulky frame and potbelly.

Jay shrugged again trying to dismiss the man’s praise. He felt uncomfortable. He’d only done what needed to be done.

“I’m here to talk business, to see if there’s anything you need, anything I can do. My lawyer has kept me apprised of things. You seem to run a tight ship.”

Flynn sat behind his desk. “Business is good. We’re selling a lot of computers, the Preston brand being our bestseller.”

In spite of himself, the news pleased Jay. At least his father had never slighted his customers.

“So with the business in the black, are you sure you don’t need more capital?”

“If you’re offering gifts, I’m not the one to turn them down.” Flynn grinned and picked up a pencil to twirl in his fingers. After a moment, he continued. “Actually, your purchase paid off the outstanding creditors. As it was, you got a deal. This store was worth more than you paid for it, but because of the debt, you got it for what amounted to ‘fire sale’ prices.”

Jay sat forward. “Kind of an ironic term, don’t you think?”

“Ironic, but accurate. There’s potential in this store and in Tate’s dream that he never fulfilled.”

Jay cocked his head. Tate Mercer had a dream? “Go on.”

“Because he got sick so suddenly and it took him so fast, Tate never got to act on his idea. But I’ve done some checking into it. Couldn’t get into it myself, not with Mrs. Mercer so bad off, but just maybe with your help...” Flynn let his words hang between them.

Jay’s gaze flicked over the man’s face. He didn’t need to urge him on, because Flynn dropped his pencil and leveled a direct look right at his new employer. “You know computers,” he said. “I know computers. It was Tate Mercer’s idea to purchase computers for large companies. Be the middleman, so to speak. Take a small percentage, but offer excellent service. With your money, it’s something I can make happen.”

Jay sat back. He liked the idea. It was innovative. Brash. Something his father might have thought of.

“Why didn’t you approach Mrs. Mercer with this idea?”

Flynn shook his head. “Like I said, the poor woman was far too swamped with debt. She had her own troubles. Frankly, your purchase of the business was a godsend.”

“And she was grieving for her husband.” Jay wasn’t the first man in Carrie’s life.

With a shake of his head, the store manager picked up his pencil once more. “Sure she grieved, but she was more worried about Jesse and her reaction to her father’s death.”

“You make it sound as if she didn’t love her husband.”

Flynn’s gaze shifted away, defensive. “Now don’t get me wrong. She loved her husband all right, but I always thought their marriage was more one of expedience.”

“I don’t understand.” Jay found himself not breathing.

Flynn looked away again looking embarrassed. “It’s not something I ought to be talking about.”

“If you want to implement this project of Tate’s, you’ll tell me.” Shades of Carter coming out, Jay thought to himself, but he needed to know what Flynn meant by “expedience.”

The manager considered him for a moment. “Let’s just say Tate had to marry his wife.”

“I knew that.”

“But theirs wasn’t a marriage of love. Just respect, I’d say. I don’t think they had the passion you’d expect from most married couples. He was much older, too”

A hard knot twisted in Jay’s belly. Maybe that’s what was wrong with Carrie. Maybe having married for convenience once in her life, she wanted to be darn sure before she married again. Disguising himself as a groom had, on one hand, brought him the woman of his dreams, only to lose her when she had found out the truth. God, he hated ironies.

Jay drew a hand threw his hair, and glanced once more at his manager. One very selfish part of him was glad Carrie had not found the love of her life in her first marriage. This gave her the chance to find it in her second.

Chapter Twelve

Wildwood Stables

Late July

Jay and Carrie were silent as they walked after eating dinner and doing dishes. Rain threatened the Western sky—big, black clouds crowding the horizon. The late July air was muggy and the leaves of a distant hickory tree were still.

Carrie's face was taut with controlled emotion, closed off. Like her heart, Jay thought with a renewed sense of irony. Yet there must be more to it. She had been quiet and distant since coming from the lawyer two days earlier. Maybe she had learned something from the lawyer. Something she was keeping from him just as she kept hidden her love for him.

Jay's hand fell on her bare arm. "Rest a minute."

Carrie sucked in a deep breath as if to steady herself. "Sure, why not?" Her mood was somber, just like the haunted look again in her eyes.

They stopped by the paddock fence. Jay leaned his back against the rough wood and lifted a booted foot to hook his heel on the last railing. He gazed at the doublewide trailer that was now their home, the expanse of hillside, and Mary's training barn. Carrie turned her back on the paddock as well.

"If Tate could see Jesse and me now."

Carrie squeezed her eyes shut. Jay wanted to help. He wanted to charge in on a white horse and rescue the woman he loved. Knowing not to press her, not to hurry her, he ground his teeth together and waited.

She opened her eyes and turned toward him, pressing the wooden railing as if she needed something to rest against for support. "I want to thank you one more time," she said.

Jay gazed at her. His body tensed, aching with his hot awareness of her. "It's not necessary."

"But it is." Carrie touched his arm with a tentative finger. "You've been marvelous with Jesse."

Seeing the despair in her eyes, Jay reached out and brushed a strand of hair from her forehead. "Jesse will be okay. Don't worry about her. She's tougher than you think."

"I wish I could be certain."

Jay smiled. "I'm not a parent, but I imagine that's the hope most parents share. You want what's best for your child. It's normal."

Carrie twisted her head away from him. He thought she might be crying, for when she spoke, he heard tears in her voice. "I've put Jesse first in my life from the moment I knew I was pregnant. She was my responsibility."

"You married, and Tate made a good life for her."

"Tate made the good life. He's gone now." Carrie's tone had turned bitter.

"Don't sell yourself so short. You've had a little setback with the fire. You're a bright woman. You'll get it all back." Was he saying the right words?

She spun around. "You don't understand. My lawyer tells me I'm so deeply in debt that he wants me to declare bankruptcy! I don't have enough money to rent my own apartment, let alone keep Jesse's horse." Carrie glared at him, the color in her cheeks rising. "What am I telling you for?" she asked herself, and then flung away from the fence, striding toward the trailer.

"Wait a minute." Jay hurried to catch up. "Carrie, wait!"

"I promised myself I wouldn't say anything to you," she shouted at him. "Damn you, Jay Preston!"

Jay grabbed her arm, spinning her around. "I said wait a minute." His grip on her arm must have hurt, but she lifted her chin and glared at him as if she were royalty.

For a moment, they stood frozen, incapable of doing more than sizing each other up. Jay felt a wrenching squeeze of his heart. "Tell me what's wrong," he said softly.

Her eyes blazed. "I've already made it clear there's nothing you can do for me."

“I’m only trying to understand what your lawyer was talking about. Why are you in debt? Surely you had home owner’s insurance.”

“Not enough as it turns out,” Carrie said, shaking herself free of his grasp. “And I owe for Tate’s funeral and his medical bills that mounted during the last months of his life. I had hoped selling the store would get me out of debt, but it only got the immediate creditors off my back.”

“I see,” Jay said as she turned from him once more.

“I don’t understand all the implications of what my lawyer was telling me. I just know the bottom line—Jesse loses her horse because I can’t afford to keep it. Doolittle is the one thing I wanted to remain the same for Jesse, but maybe, if Mary lets us live here for awhile, it won’t be such a disappointment.”

Jay felt an ache in his chest he didn’t think would go away. He reached out and caressed her averted cheek, softly, with one gentle fingertip. “Carrie, look at me.”

She turned to look at him, eyes wide with anguish and anger at her situation. In the distance, thunder rumbled. Night was quickly closing in around them.

“You have much to hold against me, I know.” When she started to say something, he stopped her with a fingertip pressed against her lips. “Hush,” he said. “Hear me out. I’ve done much to wrong you, but maybe I can make it up to you.”

He cupped her face with his hands, and felt the intensity of her eyes upon him. “You married Tate a long time ago because you needed a home and a father for Jesse. I can give you the same thing. You married for convenience once. Marry me now—for the same reason. For Jesse.”

Carrie’s flesh tingled where Jay’s eyes caressed her. Her heart skittered against her breast as she looked at the sincerity that burned in his eyes. She couldn’t believe he had proposed. Slowly, she swallowed, her brows drawing together.

“You can’t mean it,” she stated in a hushed voice. “Knowing that I can’t love you.”

“Knowing that you *won’t* let yourself love me,” he whispered. “There’s a difference. I don’t for one minute believe you don’t love me.”

Sweat broke out along her lip. The feel of his hands against her face was torment. She fought down a shudder. Jay was right, but she couldn’t admit it. Instead, she stared into his hazel eyes, trying to see into the depths of his soul.

“Do you know what you are doing?”

He watched her carefully, his smile fading. "I'm proposing."

"Do you know the responsibility you would be taking on?"

"I've thought of that." His thumbs rubbed her skin, sending shock waves down her spine.
"I've got one thing going for me. Jesse already likes me."

"But you'd be her stepfather."

"You don't think I can handle that? You think I'm too young?" He smiled once more.
"Carrie, in many ways I'm old beyond my years."

She fought his beguiling touch, his voice, his words. Something in the back of her mind flared to the surface. What had happened to her desire to make it on her own? A nagging voice told her not to give in. To remember Jay's dishonesty. To remember that ultimately he couldn't be trusted because he had once lied by omission.

But another voice reminded her she could trust Jay. Vivid memories of the fire flashed through her mind. She had trusted her daughter's life to him. Because of Jay's presence in the family these last few days, Jesse's laughter had returned. Her little girl had come back to her.

Carrie's gaze flickered over his face. The light was failing, but she could still see the angle of his cheekbones and the softness of his lips. Was that the gleam of love in his eyes?

She had married for convenience once before. Jay was right. It might not have been heroic, but it had been practical. She hadn't regretted marrying Tate, not really. Oh, deep down, there had been regret because passion was missing, but she had made her bed, so to speak, and she had to lie in it.

Carrie felt the warmth of Jay's breath upon her face. He was so close. So deliciously near. Could she do it again? Marry again for practicality, not love? What would be the harm? She would provide Jesse both a father and a home. She could pay her debts. She could have security. It didn't seem to Carrie that she had much choice.

As she searched Jay's eyes and listened to his breathing and the chirping of crickets, the thought came to Carrie that perhaps she could let herself give in. Perhaps she would give Jay what he wanted—a marriage of convenience.

She would give him everything but her heart.

* * * *

They were married two weeks later. While they were on their honeymoon Carrie's mother and stepfather had come from Southern Kentucky to take Jesse home for a visit. Mary Wilder and Bob Flynn had stood up with them at the civil service.

All the way to the A-frame retreat on the edge of the Smokey Mountain National Park, Carrie had asked herself time and time again why she had agreed to this insane bargain. Bankruptcy couldn't be that bad. Tons of people declared it every day. Surely, she could have thought of another alternative. The strained silence in the car was oppressive. They didn't have anything to say to each other. Yes, this had been one big fat mistake.

It was almost dark when they pulled up the gravel driveway to the chalet. Carrie glanced quickly at Jay, his features tense from the long drive. For better or worse, richer or poorer, he was her husband now. She had made her bed once again, and she was going to lie in it. The irony of her errant musing brought her an inward smile. She hadn't thought about the honeymoon when she'd made this particular bed.

"Well, here we are," Jay said when he cut the engine.

Carrie felt her heart pounding in her chest. "Yes."

His fingers clutched the steering wheel. Jay stared straight ahead for a moment and then seeming to draw in a breath for courage, turned to look at her, his eyes shadowed. At once her heart paused as she gazed at the agony on his beloved face.

He cleared his throat. "I thought coming down here would be a good idea. I thought we needed time alone."

"Yes." Why couldn't she say more? What kept her tongue tied like a girl on her first date?

"But, if you don't want to. I mean, if you don't want," Jay couldn't finish his sentence.

"I know what's expected of me. I've been married before." The words sounded too harsh even to her ears. Jay's already pale face whitened even more.

"Look, I coerced you into this. If you'd rather not, er, go all the way, I'll understand. This is a business arrangement after all. Something mutually beneficial to the both of us."

"You didn't hold a gun to my head today, Jay," Carrie said softly. "And I'd say I got the best part of the deal. You just got a widow with a bunch of debt and a pre-adolescent child."

"I tricked you into this, using your financial trouble to lure you."

"Shhh." Carrie stopped him with a fingertip against his lips. "You haven't lured me into anything. We both had a choice. Now let's go make the best of it."

Carrie's smile was touched with sadness. Jay could tell she was putting on a game face. A thousand times, he had wanted to back out of this marriage. What had he done? Carrie didn't want to marry him, wouldn't have married him, if she hadn't needed his money. Now he was no better than Carter. No better than the man he had vowed not to imitate.

"I'm sorry it turned out this way." Jay's voice carried the sincerity he felt. His optimism had vanished during the last two weeks. Now he felt young and inexperienced. Naive. Stupid. And they were feelings he didn't want to have in front of the woman he loved.

Carrie cocked her head to the side. "I know what it is. You've got cold feet," she teased. "What's the matter? Are you still a virgin?"

His breath hitched. "As a matter of fact, I am."

Chapter Thirteen

Carrie sat cross-legged on the king sized bed. A single light illuminated the master bedroom of the chalet, and from the bathroom the steady hiss of the shower drowned out the thudding of her heart. Still clad in her shorts and tank top, Carrie couldn't force herself to get ready for bed. Slowly, she licked her lips.

Jay's revelation had stunned her. Her new husband was a contradiction. She cast a surreptitious glance at the bathroom door. Imagine, at twenty-five, he had never slept with a woman. It made her feel old and worldly wise, too experienced. She wondered at the man she had married.

"I wanted to keep it special for my wife," he had told her as they had walked into the chalet. "Marriage is a holy covenant between a man and a woman. I wanted it to mean something."

Holy? Covenant? She marveled at his words. Perhaps his mother had stressed the importance of marriage. Perhaps seeing his father's many wives had given him the idea. Whatever had caused his convictions, Jay Preston's old-fashioned ideals had certainly made Carrie take another look at him.

Did he believe what he said about marriage? Why then had he offered her this sham of one? Carrie lifted her hands and began to unbind the heavy braid hanging down her back. Maybe Jay was some sort of knight-errant, reincarnated from a distant past. He took his pledge to care for her and Jesse seriously. Just how seriously did he take his wedding vows?

More importantly, how seriously did she take them? Once again, confusion nauseated her. She shook her head from side to side, shaking the plaits loose and hoping to jar some sense into her brain. Jay deserved a good wife. He deserved to be loved. When she had taken her vows, she had

promised both. No matter her misgivings, she realized she wanted to fulfill her pledge to this man who had brought her so much.

Tilting her chin up, she ran her fingers through the tight hair of her scalp, releasing the blond tendrils around her face. With quiet deliberation, she stroked her cheeks and rubbed the tenseness from her neck. She shut her eyes for a moment and breathed deeply. When she opened them, it was with a renewed sense of purpose. Carrie jumped from the bed, drawing her tank top over her head and unsnapping her bra. Now in a hurry, she slipped out of her shorts and panties, and dropped them onto the floor.

Opening the bathroom door, Carrie was met by steam and the smell of soap. Jay's shadow against the shower curtain made her pause for just a moment. Her stomach began to flutter, not with nerves but with anticipation. Tossing her hair, she shut the door and went forward quietly, pulling back the curtain and stepping into the tub.

Jay was letting the hot water hit his face and sluice over his body. Sensing her, he spun around. Color spread across her cheekbones as she watched the startled look in his eyes. He stared at her, water striking the back of his head. The steam made it hard for Carrie to breathe. Or was it Jay? His very maleness was so wet and tempting. A sweet burn began in the spot between her legs. She swallowed once as they stood staring at each other. Transfixed. Immobile.

Carrie glanced down to see the proof of his wanting. She took the bath sponge from his hand and lifted it to his chest. With lingering strokes, she began to circle the wet, copper curls on Jay's chest. He sucked in a quick, hard breath.

Raising her gaze to his face, she saw another proof that he wanted her in his eyes. Her own need flared. Jay took a step toward her, touching her shoulders, drawing her near in the narrow tub.

And then they slipped and toppled sideways, with a loud whoosh, pulling the shower curtain over with them onto the floor.

"Oh, my!" Carrie said with a laugh.

"Are you okay?"

Jay's arms circled her slippery shoulders. Their legs and feet were tangled together hanging off the side of the tub. Carrie looked down at Jay, who had cushioned her fall much as he'd cushioned Jesse's. Her breast pushed up against his wet chest, their noses near to each other, their lips ever so close, her soaking hair creating a curious drape over both their bodies.

"I'm worried about you."

“I’m okay.” Jay started to laugh, making a throaty rumble that wouldn’t stop.

Carrie choked with laughter too. It was infectious, like her desire only moments before.

“Don’t tell anyone,” he begged through his hiccups. “It will spoil my reputation.”

“I promise.”

Jay hauled his legs off the side of the tub, and for a brief instant, as he was trying to untangle legs and feet, his thigh brushed against hers.

The laughter ceased. Carrie looked into his eyes. The shock of desire was written in his gaze. Suddenly she burned with fever. Air refused to find her lungs. Somehow Jay made it to his feet, hit the faucet with his hand to turn off the shower, and pulled her from the floor. He crushed her to him. He was wet. The whole length of him. Wet and hard. All thoughts of being the teacher left Carrie’s mind. She just responded, as women had done for centuries. Jay’s instinct was right. He kissed her and then released her quickly, taking her by the hand and leading her into the bedroom.

Carrie had already stripped the bedspread away. A vast white sea of crisp sheets awaited them, and Jay pulled her down with him on the bed, letting her settle on top. She straddled his thighs and rubbed the burning spot against him. Back and forth. Back and forth. He groaned. With her hands by the side of his head, Carrie lowered her mouth to his. To his warm and moist lips that she captured like a wild thing. His response equaled hers, surpassed it, and he conquered her tongue like a warrior knight.

She was wet too, in intimate places, and hot with a passion that surprised her. She wanted to be taken fast. Positioning herself, she directed him into her wetness and pushed down on him, letting him fill her with a burning fullness.

“Carrie!”

Jay’s gaze caressed her and then his lashes drifted over his eyes and his face grew tormented with need. Carrie gulped air, watching him enjoy her. She could make it sweeter. She could play the wanton and drive him to insanity. Slowly she began to move. Up and down, undulating with the power of her womanhood. He writhed beneath her, and she broke out in sweat, her breath now coming in quick gulps.

She could selfishly control its flame, just as she controlled his growing inferno. Jay thrust into her, and she wiggled, pressing harder on him, causing him to moan her name.

“I can’t stop. I can’t stop!” he cried out, his eyes flying open.

“Jay.”

“Oh, oh.”

Carrie shut her eyes as Jay shuddered beneath her, and bearing down, rubbing harder, she brought her own passion to its culminating peak in a soft groan of exploding awareness.

Her arms suddenly incapable of holding her body weight, she collapsed along the length of him, with him still inside, and turned her head to the side.

“Oh, Carrie, I love you,” Jay murmured into the tangle of her hair.

By the time Jay’s breathing had grown regular in sleep, Carrie’s heart had stopped beating wildly. She turned her head to look at his relaxed face, the angular plane of his cheekbones, the soft pout of his mouth, and snuggling up near his neck, she whispered, “I love you too.”

And the words filled her with a deep fear.

Chapter Fourteen

The Kentucky State Fair

Late August

Carrie wrinkled her nose at the odd mixture of horse manure and corn dogs wafting in the hot August air—scents to be expected at the Kentucky State Fair where the weather was like a steam bath. The mammoth, air-conditioned exhibition buildings, beginning to stir with fairgoers, were inviting because of the heat. Carrie, Jesse and Jay headed into the North wing, where temporary horse stalls were set up inside.

“Hurry up!” Jesse ran ahead of them.

“We’re coming.” Carrie grinned because of her daughter’s enthusiasm and glanced up at Jay who was walking beside her.

He winked, which caused a sudden flutter in her stomach. Looking away, she realized Jay had made all this possible—their morning trip to the fair to watch Jesse’s friends ride in the horse show. By rights, Carrie should be in the classroom. Because of her marriage to Jay, she had resigned her position so she could spend more time with Jesse. They still lived in Mary’s prefabricated home. Yet that would soon change. They were shopping for their own house.

Carrie wished she could feel completely happy about the situation, but she was reluctant to let go of her mistrust. Shutting her heart to Jay during the day, she kept him at arm’s length, preventing the emotional intimacy she craved. Only at night did she open her heart and give into her desires. Only then did the powerful intimacy that blazed between them take over.

She cast a veiled look at Jay, his hair now returning to its copper thickness. Her attitude wasn't fair, but life wasn't fair. A person made the best of things and tried not to hurt people in the process.

A stab of remorse thrust at Carrie. In doing her best for Jesse, she was hurting Jay. She knew it by the look that sometimes flashed in his eyes. Sure, they had arrived at a silent agreement, but her standoffishness disturbed him. Carrie didn't want things to be that way, but it was. And she let it go on because she didn't quite know how to fix it.

Mary had reserved ten stalls for the week of the fair, each one covered in green and navy gauze fabric, the Wildwood Stables colors. All competing stables decorated their stalls in the same manner, transforming temporary metal stalls with vibrant colors and giving their homes for a week an elegant appearance. Each stable provided a reception area where clients and guests could gather with chairs and end tables, pictures of champion horses, and an array of colorful ribbons hanging on display.

Jesse had already scampered into the reception area where her friend Meg sat in front of her mother.

"Be still or I'll never get you ready," Meg's mom said. She was trying to pin her daughter's unruly hair into a bun.

Carrie could well relate to the harried look in the woman's eyes. Getting a ten-year-old dressed and coifed to ride in a horse show was stressful at best. Carrie had never gotten a child ready to ride at Freedom Hall in the biggest horse show of the season—the World's Championship.

Jay had promised Carrie that Jesse could ride at the State Fair next year. Carrie's heart constricted with guilt as she remembered his promise. How could she keep taking from him without giving something back? He was the most generous man she had ever known. Even Tate could not compare, for even though her first husband had provided the security, he had cut off his heart, keeping it from her and keeping her isolated.

The comparison hit Carrie hard. Her fingers curled into fists as she tried to catch her breath. The chit-chat between Meg's mom and Jay passed unheard over her head. Tate had made their married life a miserable charade. She was doing the same to Jay.

Shame warmed her cheeks and tightened her stomach into knots.

"Mom," Jesse said, "we've got to go if we want to see the first class,"

“I’m ready.” Carrie flashed a look of encouragement toward Meg’s mom and joined her family to the walk into Freedom Hall and the show arena.

Her family. The concept was still overwhelming. Jay was a warm and loving father just as Jesse’s own had been. Ironically, he wanted to be a warm and loving husband. If she would let him, Carrie thought, her head beginning to pound.

Jay dropped back a step to watch Carrie and Jesse. The two women in his life were like mirror objects of each other. He never tired of seeing the sway of Carrie’s hips or the swing of her braid against them. Recollections of her unbound hair tickling his nose and straying across his chest were enough to cause his eyes to twinkle with arousal.

“C’mon, Jay.” Jesse turned to urge him on.

Carrie glanced back, and after a slight hesitation, offered her hand. Startled by the open invitation, he caught up to her and took it. Her cool hand, clasped in his, grew warm from the contact. Hers was a firm grasp. Even when he pressed her fingers gently with his own, she didn’t let go. She continued walking, holding his hand, as if he had belonged by her side forever.

Time was on his side, Jay knew that. Time and persistence. He had the tenacity of a good computer programmer. If one thing didn’t work, there was always another way. Maybe the back door approach would do more for him than a full-fledged frontal assault. Jay smiled at the erotic thought that popped irreverently into his mind.

Morning sessions at the horse show were free, so the three of them strolled up the long ramp to the second section of seats that ringed Freedom Hall. An arena made famous by University of Louisville basketball games until the new arena opened downtown, it had been transformed into a show horse venue. Green sawdust blanketed the floor. The judges’ table in the center of the show surface was flanked by yellow mums. Around the brightly lit arena, the names of horses who had won the five-gaited World’s Grand Championship were proudly displayed.

They found seats directly overlooking the arena as one class ended. Exhibitors led a group of weanlings out of the ring and up a long ramp to the makeup area beyond. The gates closed behind them.

“Kimberly Moreman is in this next class,” Jesse told them. “Eight and under walk-trot equitation.”

She had the slick horse show program on her lap. It was so big that it looked like a department store catalog.

When the gate opened, high-stepping equitation horses with trimmed manes entered the arena ridden by children in formal wool riding suits and Derby hats. Chins and hands high, the eight-year-olds circled the arena in perfect imitations of their adult counterparts. After the last little girl rode down the long ramp on a big chestnut horse, the gate closed and the class was underway.

The last entrant circled beneath them. The proud lift of her head attracted Jay. A navy Derby almost obscured her copper-colored hair, which was pulled back into a bun like all the others.

Suddenly Jay's throat grew tight and dry. "That's Gloria," he said in a controlled whisper.

"Gloria?" Carrie gave him a surprised look. "Which one?"

"There. The last one."

They both sat forward to clutch the railing. "What's she doing here?" Carrie spoke the question on Jay's mind.

"I don't know. But she has the rest of those little kids beat."

Sure enough, when the announcer called out the pick of the judges, Gloria Preston's name was first. As she rode to receive the blue ribbon, Jay pressed Carrie's arm. "I'm going to try to catch her. I should have enough time because she must make a victory pass."

Carrie's eyes searched his. She squeezed his arm. "Hurry up."

Jay nodded and shot out of his seat. He ran all the way down the ramp and toward the back of the arena, his mind whirling with a thousand questions. What was his little sister doing in Kentucky?

He reached the makeup area behind Freedom Hall just as Gloria rode up the incline from the arena. Jay slipped past the guard into the area reserved for exhibitors. "Glory!"

His sister twisted in the saddle and looked back at him. "Jay?"

"Yeah." Jay joined her, letting his fingers touch her wool riding coat to make sure she was real. "You were terrific. I knew you would win."

She was smiling. "Carter let me come. Aren't you glad? I won a blue ribbon."

"I'm so happy for you."

"Are you coming back to the barn with me?" she asked. Gloria's trainer stood nearby, and smiled when he looked her way.

“Tell me where you’re located. I’ll find you.”

“Barn T,” the trainer said. “Come along, Gloria. We must get out of the way.”

Gloria waved goodbye. When Jay turned around, Carter was standing right behind him.

“It’s good to see you, son.”

Jay’s stomach felt cold. “Is it?”

Carter had the grace to flush. “Yes it is. I was worried about you.”

“You could have called.” His tone was bitter. In his mind Jay heard Carrie accusing him of childish anger. He swallowed hard.

“Mrs. Mercer kept me informed.”

“Mrs. Preston now,” Jay said, unable to hide the touch of pride in his voice.

“Congratulations.”

“Thanks.”

The sizzling heat and humidity behind the arena was suddenly unbearable. Jay clutched his fingers together into a fist, a subconscious gesture of self-defense. He was on the defensive with Carter—tense, closed up, with his breath rushing raggedly in and out of his lungs. He hated his feeling of impotence, looking at his father eye-to-eye, neither one giving in. They stared at each other for long moments.

Carter was the first to speak. “We’re in the way here. We’d better move.”

“Sure.” Jay followed Carter out of the exhibitor’s area and back into the air conditioned building.

Something inside of him changed, and his anger flared once more. It might be childish, but it was the way he felt. In silent defiance of Carrie, he confronted his father.

“What are you doing here?”

“As hard it may be for you to believe, I brought Gloria here to show. I had no idea she was such a good rider.” The pride in Carter’s voice was evident.

“How could you know?” Jay ran a hand over his close-cropped hair. “You never were around to watch her.”

Carter’s gaze shifted over Jay’s face as if assessing where he stood. “I can understand why you’d say that.” He glanced away. “However, I have been trying to do a better job of parenting.”

A chill of disbelief ran down Jay’s spine. “Why the change of heart?”

Carter looked at him again. “When I almost lost you, I realized a lot of things.”

Jay stood his ground. "Like what?"

"I realized I had been a bad father to you and that maybe you'd never forgive me."

"Go on."

"I realized I had a little girl I hardly knew, and with another child on the way"

Jay wasn't surprised. "Congratulations," he said but didn't mean it.

Carter winced at Jay's bitter tone, but continued, "I decided I wasn't too old to turn over a new leaf."

"Congratulations." What did Carter want? Did he want him to strike up a band to play a victory march? He stood his ground, hostile and skeptical.

Carter nodded as if he expected this reaction. "If you can, son, drop by and see Gloria. She'll be pleased. She has missed you."

"I'll try."

Carter turned to leave. "Good bye, son."

"Did you bring your wife?"

"No. This was just a trip for Gloria and me," Carter told him.

Jay watched him disappear into the crowd. His mind was a jumble of emotions. Wiping a sweaty palm on his jeans, he turned to find Carrie staring at him as if he were some sort of two-headed monster.

Chapter Fifteen

“The man was trying to apologize.” Carrie wore a look of scowling disapproval on her face. “Why did you make it so hard for him?”

On guard immediately, Jay refused to justify his actions. Hell, he hardly understood them himself. “You don’t know that.”

There was a quick narrowing of her eyes before she turned away.

“Wait a minute.” Jay caught her by the arm. “Don’t leave me like that.”

Whipping around, Carrie met his eyes directly. “You are so blind. Carter may not have intended to apologize, but he *is* making an effort with Gloria. Do you think that woman we met in Lexington would stay home unless Carter had put his foot down? He wanted time alone with his daughter.”

Jay’s brow furrowed. “Buying her an expensive horse and bringing her to Louisville? That’s not making a change. Carter was always buying me expensive horses.”

Her hands clenched into fists, Carrie lifted her chin. “Maybe that’s the only way he knows how to say he loves her.”

“Damn fine way to express it. Love is not money. I’ve heard you say that.”

“It certainly helps, though, doesn’t it?”

She was talking about them, about their marriage. The sound of sarcasm in her words made his heart wrench. He turned his troubled gaze from her. Sickened with mind-boggling regret, he had to acknowledge the truth. He’d bungled everything. He had tried to buy Carrie’s love. That made him no better than his father.

“You certainly have no qualms about taking what I offer.”

Carrie took a step backwards as if he'd just slapped her. She squared her shoulders and looked him straight in the eye.

"You're a pigheaded fool, Jay Preston. You can't see the forest for the trees where your father is concerned. Carter is not perfect. At least he's making an effort. Sometimes I think Jesse is older than you are."

Jay froze. What was wrong with him? She was right. Trying to hurt his wife wasn't very mature.

As she glared at him, Jay drank in the sensual beauty of her blue eyes, her dark lashes and brows tantalizing against her clear complexion. He wanted to cup her face in his hands and smooth the fine texture of the skin along her cheeks. He wanted to feel the long line of her body against his. He wanted her to be open and caring all the time, not just at night when they turned out the lights and made love.

What he wanted he couldn't have. Instead, Jay was smack dab in a nightmare of his own making, viewing with dismay a wife who would always be a wife in name only.

"I've left Jesse long enough." Carrie turned on her heel. "I've got to get back."

Jay stood shaking, confused. He took a deep breath, his hands curling and relaxing by his side. Instead of following her, Jay spun around and headed the other way. He would find Barn T and Gloria. At the moment, it was the only thing that made sense to him.

* * * *

Hot sunshine hit his face as Jay left the air-conditioned building. For some reason, he relished the intense heat that sucked out all the tension from his body. His brain did double time as he walked toward the permanent horse barn complex.

Jay clung to his righteous indignation as if it were some precious jewel. He had the right to hold a grudge against his father. The man had deserted him and his mother, making her life miserable.

Yet he recognized something pathetically sad in his father, and it bothered him. Just as Carrie's anger bothered him. What had she said? Carter wasn't perfect. No parent is perfect. They all struggle to do their best. Part of Jay didn't believe her—didn't want to believe her. It would change his view of Carter to consider him as a flawed adult, trying to do the best for his child. No, the Carter he remembered was selfish and never around long enough for him to believe in that scenario.

Perspiration lined his lip. He squinted against the sun. Granted, Carter's money had always been there. Not his emotional support, but his financial. And that had made his and Martha's lives easier. He had to give his father that much credit, even though it pained him to do so. Money couldn't buy love.

At a concession stand, a little boy was buying a pink fluff of cotton candy. Jay noticed the child and his mother pull a piece of fluff from the stick. As he crossed the road and headed into the horse barn complex, Jay thought about Carter's love for him. It was short-lived like the little boy's cotton candy, enticing but quick to dissolve in the mouth.

But another thought brought him to a standstill right in the middle of the road between two barns. The muscles of his jaws moved. His breath was labored. Thing was—he had survived. He had gotten past it, made a success of his life, created an important computer application, and even saved a child's life. He was no longer like the little boy eager for his cotton candy.

Slowly Jay drew himself up and walked on, his heart racing with a new awareness. Carter wasn't the best father. Jay could get over that. Let it go. It didn't matter anymore in the grand scheme of his life. Carrie was right. He hated to admit it.

He was an adult, and he could choose his reactions. He could choose to let go of his anger and give Carter the benefit of the doubt. Carter wasn't the one who mattered any more. Carrie mattered. And Jesse. And his life with them.

Jay found Barn T and the California stable where Gloria's horse was trained. When he reached the reception area, what he saw made him pause. Gloria stood in front of Carter while his father brushed out the tangles in her red hair.

A poignant ache touched Jay's heart. Carter Preston, multimillionaire computer mogul, was brushing a little girl's hair. It was as amazing as it was incongruous. Jay couldn't suppress his grin.

Gloria hopped from foot-to-foot. "Stand still," Carter ordered causing Gloria to pull a frown.

"You don't do it good."

"Give me a chance," Carter said. "I'm trying."

"Here, let me help." Jay stepped forward. "I've had a lot of experience with a little girl's hair lately."

"Jay!" Gloria beamed.

It was hard to ignore the obvious pleasure on Carter's face. Jay fought down a flush of shyness and matter-of-factly, took the brush from his father.

"You see, Carter, you've got to be a bit more gentle. Like this."

Carter grunted. "You were always showing up your old man."

Jay slanted him a glance. There was a gleam in Carter's eyes. Something had changed. He felt a subtle difference. But as he looked at Carter, at the hard lines near his eyes, at the sag of his chin, he realized his father would never say he was sorry. Yet he was trying. Carrie was right. The man was trying to change.

"I've come to see if Gloria wants to go to ride the rides with us. I've promised to take Jesse, my stepdaughter."

Gloria turned bright eyes on her father. "Can I go, Carter?"

"I don't see why not," Carter replied.

Jay took a breath and looked at his father. "And I wondered if you two would like to join us for dinner. I hear they make pretty mean burgers at one of the food pavilions."

Carter's expression softened. "We would be honored to accept your invitation, Son."

Chapter Sixteen

Wildwood Stables

That night

Gathering clouds blotted out the moon. Carrie sighed. Sitting on the top of a picnic table outside Mary's prefabricated house, she rested her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands. She was tired with a tiredness that, like the August heat, sucked the energy from her soul. She drew a deep breath and lifted her head to stare into the darkness surrounding her. The constant noise of cicadas and other night creatures, and the silence of grazing horses were her only companions.

Jay had surprised her by turning up at their seats with his sister Gloria in tow. After that, she had scant time to reflect on its meaning. Jay treated everyone to a corn dog and lemonade for lunch, and after that they rode rides. Carrie's mind still whirled like the tilt-a-whirl the girls had ridden over and over again. It was a wonder they had kept the corn dogs down. And then they had played the Midway games for an hour, after which Jay had given up and just bought each of the girls a stuffed animal. They had seen the world's tiniest horse and the bearded lady. And then they had met Carter for dinner.

Both men had been polite and cordial. She didn't understand the truce they'd called, but she had been gratified. Finally, Carter had invited them to his box for the night's horse show. So she had a right to be exhausted. Exhausted and perplexed.

What did this mean? Reconciliation between father and son? It was a cautious one at best. Carrie wondered about it, just as she wondered how this tentative relationship between the two men would change her marriage.

“Jesse wants you to tuck her in,” Jay said, coming up behind her.

“Oh!” Carrie jumped. “You startled me.”

He came around the table and stood in front of her. “I’m sorry.”

Carrie could not quite see his eyes in the darkness. But she sensed the very maleness of him as he stood there, immobile, his gaze fastened on her face. He looked grim, but she couldn’t make out the familiar planes of his forehead or the curve of his jaw. Her breath caught as she stared at him.

“I guess I ought to check on Jesse.” Carrie started to get up.

“Wait.” Jay touched her arm, his hand warm upon her flesh. “I’ve let her read a book, so she’s okay for a few moments. I need to talk to you.”

“Okay.” Carrie settled back, giving him a thoughtful look.

Carrie’s knees touched his legs. That’s how near he was to her. A familiar twang of desire assaulted her senses. She couldn’t help it. He did that to her. She tensed at the thought, preferring the safety of her own anger than the uncontrollable passion Jay caused within her body and heart.

There was a slight hesitation before Jay said with firmness, “I want to apologize to you.”

“Oh?” Carrie reacted with surprise.

His voice was tight. “I was wrong not to tell you everything about my past. I thought I had very good reasons, but they were selfish ones. I’m sorry if I hurt you.”

Carrie was unmoved. “Why apologize now?”

Jay remained silent a moment and then caught her hands, his fingers transmitting all the pain he must be feeling.

“I saw my father’s lack of attention as lack of love,” he explained. “I didn’t understand what you told me about Carter being imperfect. I grew up angry. Carter created a hole in my heart. Maybe it was as much because of my anger as his selfish neglect. I don’t know.”

Jay squeezed her hands. His voice grew low and thick with passion. “But I’ve filled that hole with my love for you, Carrie. You and Jesse are all that are important in my life now.”

A tremor of skepticism ran through Carrie’s mind. Why couldn’t she move? Why couldn’t she react? At a time when most women would collapse into the arms of the man professing undying love, she sat stone-like, her own heart hard. She told herself she was reluctant to trust again. Where had it gotten her the last time? With Tate, she had been a wife in name only. Once upon a time Tate had told her he loved her.

“Did you say these things to Carter too?” she asked.

Jay tensed. She could feel it in his fingers and hear it in his words. “What do you mean?”

“Did you tell your father you were sorry for all those years of anger?”

“Not exactly.”

“Not exactly?”

Jay’s voice betrayed a rising anger. “No, not in so many words.”

“You’ve come to terms with Carter in the short span of one day, and now you expect me to fall headlong into your arms?”

“It would be a nice ending to an incredible day.”

“Well, it won’t happen.” Carrie pulled her hands away from his. “Your apology comes too little and too late. You hurt me. Just when I was beginning to trust again, you violated my trust by your betrayal.”

Jay reacted swiftly. He caught her chin in his hand, forcing her eyes to meet his. Even in the darkness, Carrie saw the angry glint in them. She felt the rude pinch of his fingers and heard his ragged breath.

“It’s too hot, and I’m too tired to play games,” he told her. “This has been a hard day. I may have not said the words to my father that you expect me to say, but he understands. And I understand that he and I are both trying. What about you, Carrie? Where’s the same spirit of fairness in you?”

Carrie jerked her head free and pushed up from where she sat on the table, jumping down to the ground. She rounded on him. “Don’t touch me like that again.”

“You’ve treated me like a plague for weeks. All I want is to make you a good husband and Jesse a good father. I want to love you. But you’ve thrown up barriers. I don’t know why, and I’m beginning not to care.”

“Just like you didn’t care who you hurt with your lies?”

“You keep throwing that up to me. I’ve said I was sorry. I’ve done the best I could. I’m not perfect, but I guess you are.”

“That was a cheap shot.”

“No cheaper than your arrogance,” Jay pointed out with horrible cruelty. “You told me I had to forgive my father. Then you would think about forgiving me. Well, now it’s time to think

about it Carrie, because I don't want this sham of a marriage to continue. Either you love me like I know you can or I'll go back to California tomorrow."

Carrie shook with fury—with the knowledge that his words held truth, a painful truth.

"I must check on Jesse."

She took the safe way out, shouldering past him and running toward the doublewide.

* * * *

Carrie shut the door, resting her back against it as if that would bar Jay from her. How could it when he was in her heart and in her soul?

With brutal clarity, she recognized her own stubborn frailty. An unexpected fear knotted her stomach. *Divorce*. It was an ugly word. Jay was serious, and she was heartsick with dread.

Quietly, she crossed to the door of Jesse's room and pushed it open. The little girl's light still shone above her pillow, but her daughter was asleep. Carrie tiptoed into the room, removed the book from her slackened grasp and flipped out the light.

"Mom," Jesse said when Carrie turned to leave.

With great love in her heart, Carrie came back to her daughter. "I thought you were asleep."

"You didn't give me a kiss."

"I'm sorry." She had to smile as she bent down and touched her lips to Jesse's forehead.

"That's where Jay kissed me." Jesse's words were dreamy, her eyelids drifting shut. "If you want to sell Dr. Doolittle, you can."

Surprised, Carrie asked, "What would make you say that?"

"I know you and Jay don't have much money. It doesn't matter to me about Doolittle."

"It doesn't?"

"No, not as long as I have you and Jay."

"You go to sleep, and we'll talk about it in the morning."

Moved, Carrie kissed Jesse again and left the room. She closed the door to Jesse's room and stood in the middle of the living room floor. The knowledge of Jesse's selflessness washed over her like a wave. She had never told Jesse about Jay's wealth, preferring for her to get to know him without that prejudice.

Jesse thought they were still in financial trouble. In her own way, she was trying to help by sacrificing her horse. So much for Carrie's attempt to keep things the same in her daughter's life. Jesse was willing to sacrifice. Was she?

Cold shivers swept Carrie's body. She had been wrong, horribly wrong. With a gut-wrenching acceptance, she acknowledged her own stupid mistakes. She admitted her stubbornness. Now she was about to lose the person she held most dear next to her daughter.

"Jay," she said softly.

Carrie ran from the house through the darkened night. Jay had taken her place on the picnic tabletop. She crawled up on it and sat down beside him. They remained silent a while.

Finally, Carrie gathered her courage. "Jay, I was wrong too." He sat there, unmoving. Not quite meeting his eyes, Carrie plowed ahead. "I wanted you to suffer as I had suffered. Tate had hurt me by his indifference. Then you hurt me by your lies. I wanted to hurt you."

"You've come to that conclusion in the time it took you to put Jesse to bed?" Jay's indictment echoed hers.

Carrie lifted her chin. "Yes."

"How special." Bitterness tinged his voice.

She turned a tortured gaze upon him. What if she had hurt him so badly that her words had no effect? After all, Rhett Butler walked away from Scarlet O'Hara. What if Jay deserted her? She'd been a fool, a blind, stupid fool.

"Jesse said something to me just now that made me see I was wrong."

"From the mouths of babes."

"Stop it!" Carrie grabbed his arm and shook it. "Listen to me."

The clouds that had hidden the full moon parted, and for the first time, Carrie caught a glimpse of Jay's features lined with weariness. There was grief deep in his heart that transmitted itself through the look he gave her.

"I've been trying to get you to listen to me," he said.

"I know and I refused to hear," Carrie admitted. She took a deep breath. "Jesse made me see that I was masking what was important. My daughter didn't need a horse and the trappings of her old life to make her happy and secure. She needed me, and then you. Jay, she needed us together as a family."

He was slow to reply. Instead, he took a fingertip and pushed a strand of her hair away from her eyes, gently brushing the tears away as well. Carrie hadn't realized she was crying, but now, with the warmth of his fingers against her skin, she choked back a sob.

"Oh, Carrie," Jay said.

And suddenly she melted into his arms. Her tears now coming childlike, her words wet with emotion. "Jay, if I lost you, I couldn't go on living. I was so scared in the house when I thought I had really ruined our marriage. What would I do if you weren't my husband?"

He smoothed her hair. "What would I do if you weren't my wife?"

"We'd be pretty miserable."

"Yes."

Jay lifted her face, cupping it in his large hands, stroking her cheeks with his thumbs. "Let's not be angry and closed up again. Promise me."

"I promise." The words were hardly out of her mouth before his lips captured them. His tormented kiss drew her breath away.

"Tell me you love me." His harsh whisper contained all his fear and heartache.

Carrie lifted her hands to his face, her fingers lingering against the corners of his damp eyes. Over his shoulder, the moon showered silver light upon them, throwing his beloved face into shadows.

"I love you, Jay Preston," she murmured and offered him a watery smile. "I've loved you since you presented your backside to me while you were picking that horse's hoof."

Jay returned her smile. "And I've loved you, Carrie Preston, ever since you accused me of shoveling too much horse manure."

"Show me," she said. "Show me how much you love me."

Jay climbed to his feet and pulled her up beside him. "It will be my pleasure," he said.

Together they walked back to their temporary house. When they got to the door, Jay swept her into his arms, carried her over the threshold and straight to bed.

The End

About the Author

Jan Scarbrough lives in Louisville, Kentucky, along with two dogs and four cats. Dreams do come true! On January 2, 2000, she married Bill, her soul mate. When she's not writing, Jan takes riding lessons every week on her favorite horse, the American Saddlebred. She also volunteers at The Luci Center, a therapeutic riding center.

Jan says, "The process of becoming a published author has been fun. My best friends are fellow writers. Who else will check a point plot for me or understand GMC and POV?"

Jan Scarbrough is a member of Novelists, Inc., Romance Writers of America and the Kentucky Romance Writers, where she served as president, secretary, and newsletter editor. Jan is currently the web mistress of the KYRW chapter's award-winning web site.

To learn more about Jan Scarbrough, please visit her at www.janscarbrough.com.

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They thought the boys they loved were out of their lives. They were wrong.

KENTUCKY COWBOY — She had dumped him in high school because he was a risk-taker.

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A contender for the world title, professional bull rider Judd Romeo defies death for a living. Now he must deal with the death of his mother by settling her estate. Returning home to Kentucky, he runs smack dab into the arms of his high school sweetheart, a woman he has never forgotten.

Veterinarian Mandy Sullivan learned early on that risk-takers are trouble. Having custody of her sister's child, she is working hard to be both mother and father to the abandoned girl, and doesn't count on trouble showing up next door.

Mandy discovers she can't avoid the famous cowboy she's never quite put out of her mind. When Mandy's sister comes back threatening to take away the little girl she loves as her own, will Mandy realize Judd is not the same man he was back then?

KENTUCKY WOMAN — She had loved him when she was a teenager, but they never connected.

*Winner of the 2007 San Diego RWA's *Spring into Romance* Contest

*Second Place in the 2007 PASIC *Book of Your Heart* Contest, Contemporary Series Romance

Years of hard work and schooling have paid off for single mom and ex-jockey Alexis Marsden. She now has a desk job she loves and she's paying her bills—barely. But she can't give her son everything he needs, especially a father. When the big brother of her child's father asks her to marry him, does Alex give up her hard-won independence and settle for an old-fashioned marriage of convenience?

Workaholic banker Jackson Breckinridge has spent his life meeting the expectations of his parents and protecting his younger brother. When his brother fathers Alex's child, Jack must protect his parents from the truth and fix his brother's screw up. Marriage to the childhood playmate he's loved

since his school days is just the right thing to solve his problems. He accepts her terms for a marriage of convenience, but he longs to convert it into a one that's for real.

KENTUCKY FLAME — She had his baby, but he left not knowing the truth.

Horse trainer Jake Hendricks arrives to take charge of Royalty Farm from his one-time mentor. After the main barn goes up in flames, Jake must do everything he can to save the farm that is already under financial pressure from a greedy local real estate developer.

After gathering the courage to leave an abusive marriage, horse trainer Melody O'Shea returns to Royalty Farm when her father needs her help. Coming home to the famed American Saddlebred farm is bittersweet because it is also the home of her daughter, the secret child she gave up for a private adoption.

Mel doesn't count on Jake being there. The man left her nine years earlier not knowing she was carrying his baby. Forced to work with Jake to save her daughter's home and heritage, Mel grapples with the mistakes of her past and her love for a man who once rejected her, but who she never forgot. When danger escalates, Mel's life is in jeopardy and she must work with Jake to solve the mystery that threatens her safety and the safety of the daughter they both love.

KENTUCKY BRIDE — She rejected him once, but he's willing to try again.

Champion equestrienne Aimee Elliott wants to be taken seriously. An over-protected only child, she's tired of being just window dressing. Refusing financial support from her parents, Aimee goes to work for a horse trainer. For the first time, she's free of her parents' control. Determined to marry for love, Aimee can never be sure if a man loves her for herself or for her father's millions. Besides, she's unsure if she can make it without Daddy's money.

Camden Brennan owes the man who adopted him a lot. Now CEO of his father's heavy equipment company, Cam stands to win a million dollar contract-if he can convince eccentric Ray Elliott to accept his bid. Too worried about the behavior of his only daughter to concentrate on negotiations, the road construction magnate makes it clear to Cam that he'll show his gratitude to any man who marries his daughter and takes her off his hands.

Realizing if he captures the hand of the wayward Miss Aimee Elliott, he'll also capture the biggest deal of his life, Cam sets out to do just that. Trouble is, six years earlier, their summertime fling ended badly. Aimee is the only woman who's ever rejected him, and the only woman Cam has ever loved.

Also available from Resplendence Publishing

***Ladies of Legend: Finding Home* by Janet Eaves, Magdalena Scott, Maddie James and Jan Scarbrough**

What happens when four writers who love romance get together and create a town, the people who live in it, and the stories of those people's lives? You get Legend, Tennessee — where four women from different backgrounds find purpose, love and their future in a town intent on preserving its past.

Ladies of Legend: Finding Home is an anthology including four novellas:

***Claiming the Legend* by Janet Eaves...** Lilly Peach is running from something so frightening it finally takes a whole town to cover her back.

***Midnight in Legend, TN* by Magdalena Scott...** Lovely Midnight Shelby finds Legend on the Internet after becoming tired of being one of her now ex-husband's "beautiful things."

***Bed, Breakfast, and You* by Maddie James...** Suzie Schul finds home only when the "fling" she had many months earlier shows up with a plan on her B&B doorstep.

***The Reunion Game* by Jan Scarbrough...** Plain Jane Smith reunites with her long lost love by playing a game of "bait and switch" with her famous twin sister.

***Beauty and the Beast: A Ladies of Legend Novella* by Janet Eaves**

Special Agent Polly Chapman has multiple identities... She is known to many as a savior. To others she is a killing machine. But all who know her, or think they know her, believe her untouchable.

Until she's injured.

Now the man sent to piece her back together when "The Agency" considers her broken has only two choices— Catcher Stevens must fix her, or kill her.

***Harvest Moon: A Ladies of Legend Novella* by Janet Eaves**

After her sadistic husband is dead, Winifred Butler believes herself finally free of his horror. But he

continues to torment her from the grave as his secrets and lies, treason and terror, bring Agent Tom Green to her door. She is as determined to keep her past a secret as Tom is committed to bringing her secrets to light. Only one of them can win. So both must fight the attraction to the other, knowing they have everything to lose...

***Murder on the Mountain: A Ladies of Legend Novel* by Maddie James**

In the two long years since her Tennessee state trooper husband's murder, Kate Carpenter thinks she's coped with his death, although everyone in Legend, Tennessee tells her she hasn't. She can't see what the problem is, really. She has her parents, and her best friend Patti Jo, and her students. What else could a twenty-nine year old woman want?

A man, Patti Jo keeps telling her.

Sent to Kate's classroom on an investigation, ATF Special Agent Mike Lehmann uses his drug prevention training as his cover. His mission? To find out what Kate knows about her husband's "death." Recent reports indicate he is alive and that he faked his death because of his involvement in a drug-running operation. Mike's task is to expose Carpenter, and if she's involved, Kate.

And he'll stop at nothing to get the answers he seeks.

***The Christmas Gift: A Legendary Christmas Novella* by Janet Eaves**

Christina Montgomery dreads another Christmas with the questions about her soldier husband, Johnny, hanging over her and her daughter's heads. She believes he died with his small sniper squadron a little over two years earlier, even though his was the only body unaccounted for. The Marine Corp has indicated they are leaning towards calling Johnny a defector. There are even a few Legend locals who believe it, too. This is something Christina refuses to consider. Until one snowy evening, two weeks before Christmas, a man looking very much like Johnny arrives at her Tennessee farm with no idea of who he is.

Stunned, confused, Christina doesn't know what to do with him. Is this man's sudden appearance a Christmas miracle? Or is it Christina's worst nightmare come true?

***Christmas Collision: A Legendary Christmas Novella* by Magdalena Scott**

Rebecca Mayfield, *the* divorce lawyer in New York City, doesn't believe in happily ever after. Why would she? Her beloved husband and law partner died of a heart attack a couple of years ago, and she spends every day of her lucrative work life ending someone's marriage.

Her friend and former client, Midnight Shelby McClain, invites Rebecca to her new "hometown" of Legend, Tennessee for the holiday. Small town Christmas—probably incredibly hokey. But Legend worked some magic in Midnight's life. What might be there for Rebecca?

Her rental car slides off the icy road and is stuck in a ditch. She hikes through the dark in the deep snow toward the only light she can see...from a little cabin on the mountain.

David keeps a vigil each Christmas Eve in a little weekend cabin on the mountain outside Legend. He needs this time alone—away from his high stress life in Knoxville. He does *not* appreciate the interruption of having to take care of yet another lost soul—no matter how cute and spicy the package it's wrapped in.

The power goes off, but the sparks continue to fly between these two strangers... There's something magical about this cabin. Maybe this is the Christmas to find love—and a new beginning—in Legend, Tennessee.

***Home for the Holidays: A Legendary Christmas Novella* by Maddie James**

The last thing Chelly Schul wants is to go home for the holidays. She left her hometown of Legend, Tennessee on a wing and a prayer two years earlier and hasn't returned. Her leaving humiliated her entire family, particularly her sister Suzie, since she ran off with Suzie's (almost-ex) husband.

Legend Police Officer Matt Branson values being alone. Even during the holidays, he enjoys the solitude. Dubbed the town hermit, he tells himself he prefers his "cave" to socializing. His friends say he still pines after that lost love...although he begs to differ.

All that changes the snowy day he pulls over the older model sedan heading into Legend. His gut slams against his backbone as Chelly rolls down the car window and looks up into his eyes.

His high-school sweetheart is back in town—the woman who sent him into his cave in the first place.

***Santa's Kiss: A Legendary Christmas Novella* by Jan Scarbrough**

Actress Dawn Smith's world is crumbling. She's always lived on the edge, seeking thrills, making herself into someone different. That's why her success in Hollywood came so easily for a small town girl from Legend, Tennessee. But things have changed. Dawn needs to get away from the bright lights, but it's Christmastime and that has always meant going home to family. She can't face family this year.

Clint Roberts, former high school football hero and current car dealership owner, is a popular fixture in Legend. Affable and fun-loving, the bachelor is everyone's best buddy. Most people know about his infatuation for one-time Legend girl, now superstar Dawn Smith.

Dawn needs someone to turn to, but she's rejected her family. When Clint shows up on her doorstep in a snowstorm dressed as Santa bearing gifts and food, she welcomes him. Will their night of lovemaking bring Dawn more heartache or can Clint convince the actress that it's time for her to come home for good?

***Where Her Heart Is: A Ladies of Legend Novel* by Magdalena Scott**

Two years ago, Betsy McClain gave up on her husband and her hometown. She packed up her baby daughter and moved to the City. Now she's temporarily back in Legend, Tennessee. But when Betsy agreed to this house-sitting job, she didn't know her favorite room was being renovated, or that her handsome almost-ex-husband was the carpenter.

After his wife and baby left him, Mike McClain was forced to grow up. Now he considers himself Mr. Responsibility. LizBeth Ann soon falls in love with her big handsome daddy, who takes her for picnics and is her "date" for little girl tea parties. But though Betsy, with her big blue eyes and cascades of golden blonde hair, looks like an angel, she seems determined to treat him like the devil. How can they let go of the past so the little family can have a future?

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