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Love Inspired.
CLASSICS

JILLIAN HART
Heaven Sent
&
His Hometown Girl



Jillian Hart
**Heaven Sent and His
Hometown Girl: Heaven
Sent / His Hometown Girl**

Аннотация

Heaven Sent Hometown Montana was full of memories and matchmakers, but Hope Ashton wasn't interested. Neither was widowed cowboy Matthew Sheridan, busy with triplets. He understood how love could hurt. Yet all they needed was a little faith—and love's promise could be heaven sent. His Hometown Girl Keeping his love a secret was easier when the woman of Zachary Drake's dreams was engaged to another. But now Karen McKaslin was single and looking for happiness...with a small-town mechanic who needed to start believing in his own happily ever after.

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Praise for Jillian Hart and her novels

“Jillian Hart’s first inspirational, *Heaven Sent*, is a moving story loaded with love and a heap of heartache sure to gain fans.”

—Romantic Times BOOKreviews

“*A Handful of Heaven* is a refreshing look at love between two people who weren’t sure they’d find someone again. Jillian Hart’s pacing is excellent and the plot believable.”

—Romantic Times BOOKreviews

“*A Love Worth Waiting For* by Jillian Hart is witty and well written. All the characters are lovable, and readers get two happily-ever-afters for the price of one!”

—Romantic Times BOOKreviews

“The love that develops between [the characters] in Jillian Hart’s *Precious Blessings* is palpable, intense and warm. You’ll hate to see this story come to an end.”

—Romantic Times BOOKreviews

Heaven Sent & his Hometown Girl

Jillian Hart



JILLIAN HART

makes her home in Washington State, where she has lived most of her life. When Jillian is not hard at work on her next story, she loves to read, go to lunch with her friends and spend quiet evenings with her family.

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Heaven Sent

You can make many plans,
but the Lord's purpose will prevail.
—Proverbs 19:21

Chapter One

Hope Ashton leaned her forehead against the wet edge of the lifted hood and tried not to give in to a growing sense of defeat. Her brand-new rental Jeep was dead, and she was stranded miles from nowhere in the middle of a mean Montana storm. Strong north winds drove cold spikes of rain through her T-shirt and jeans and she shivered, wet to the skin.

How was she going to get to her grandmother now?

Just get back inside the Jeep and think this through. There was nothing else she could do. Hope took a step in the dark and felt her left foot sink into water. Cold sticky mud seeped through the thin canvas mesh all the way up to her top lace. She jumped back, only to sink up to her right ankle in a different puddle.

Great. Just great. But hadn't her life been one obstacle after another since she'd received the call about her grandmother's fall? It was emotion, that's all. Frantic worry had consumed her as she'd tried to book a flight across the Atlantic.

She'd come too far to lose heart now—Nanna was only a few miles away. God had granted Hope two good legs. She would simply walk. A little rain and wind wouldn't hurt her.

Lightning cut through the night, so bright it seared her eyes. Thunder pealed with an earsplitting ring. Directly overhead.

Okay, maybe she wouldn't start out just yet. She ached to be near Nanna's side, to comfort her, to see with her own eyes how

the dear old woman was doing, but getting struck by lightning wasn't on her to-do list for the night. Hope eased around the side of the Jeep, resigning herself to the cold puddles, and into her vehicle.

Warmth from the heater still lingered, and it drove away some of the chill from her bones. As lightning arced across the black sky and rain pelted like falling rocks against her windshield, she tried the cell phone one more time on the chance it was working. It wasn't.

The electrical storm wouldn't last long, right? She tried to comfort herself with that thought as the wind hit the Jeep broadside and shook it like an angry bull on the rampage. Shadowed by the flashes of lightning, a tall grove of trees rocked like furious giants in the dark.

Okay, she was getting a little scared. She was safe in the Jeep. The Lord would keep her safe. She'd just lived too long in cities and had only spent a year of high school here in Montana, on these high lonely plains.

Round lights flashed through the dark behind her, and she dropped the phone. Rain drummed hard against the windshield so she couldn't see anything more of the approaching vehicle. Twin headlights floated closer on the unlit two-lane road, and she felt a little too alone and vulnerable.

Maybe whoever it was would just keep going, she prayed, but of course, the lights slowed and, through the rain sluicing down her side window, she could see the vehicle ease to a stop on the

road beside her. Her heart dropped as his passenger window slid downward, revealing a man's face through the dark sheets of rain.

She eased her window down a crack.

"Got trouble?" he asked. "I'd be happy to give you a lift into town."

"No, thanks. Really, I'm fine."

"Sure about that?" His door opened.

Years of living on her own in big cities had fine-tuned her sense of self-preservation. Habit called out to her to roll up her window and lock her doors. But instinct kept her from it. For some reason she didn't feel in danger.

"Don't be afraid, I don't bite." He hopped out into the road, stopping right there in the only westbound lane. "If you don't mind, let me take a look at your engine first. Maybe I can get you going again."

Relief spilled through her. "Thanks."

Through the slant of the headlights, she could see the lower half of his jeans and the leather boots he wore, comfortable and scuffed. He approached with an easy stride, not a predatory one, but she couldn't see more of him in the darkness, and he disappeared behind the Jeep's raised hood.

Maybe it was something easily fixed. Maybe this man with a voice as warm as melted chocolate was a guardian angel in disguise.

Then his boots slogged to a stop right beside her. "Hope Ashton, is that you? I can't believe you'd step foot in this part of

Montana again.”

And then she recognized something in his voice, something from a life that felt long past. When she was a millionaire’s daughter from the city lost in a high school full of modest Montana bred kids. She searched her memory. “Matthew Sheridan?”

“You remember me.” His voice caressed the words, as rich and resonant as a hymn. “Good, then maybe you’ll stop looking as if you expect me to rob you. You’ve got a busted fan belt. C’mon, I’ll give you a lift.”

“I’m not sure—”

“This time of night you’ll be lucky to see another car. Lower your pride a notch. Unless you think being seen with me will ruin your reputation.”

She winced, remembering with a pang of shame the prideful schoolgirl she’d once been. “My reputation has survived worse than accepting help from an old friend.”

“We were never old friends, Hope.”

“You’re not one to sugarcoat the past, is that it?”

“Something like that.” Lightning broke through the dark, flashing bright enough for her to see. He appeared taller, his shoulders had broadened, and his chest and arms looked iron strong.

“That was too close for comfort,” he said above the crash of thunder. “Let me grab your bags and we’ll get you to your grandmother’s.”

“I can manage on my own.” She hopped out, and wind and rain slammed into her. She wrestled with the back door, but a strong arm brushed hers.

“All three bags?” he asked as if he hadn’t heard her, his breath warm against the back of her neck.

She trembled and nodded. Words seemed to stick in her throat. It was the cold weather, that was all. That had to be the reason her heart sputtered in her chest.

“You’re shivering. I’ll come back for the bags. Let’s get you inside the truck where it’s good and warm.” One strong, warm hand curled around her elbow, seeing her safely through the slick mud at her feet.

His behavior and his kindness surprised her so much, she didn’t even argue. “You’re a gentleman, Matthew Sheridan. I won’t forget it.”

He chuckled, warm and deep. “I do what I can. Hop up.”

The warm interior of his pickup wrapped around her like a hug. She settled onto the seat, dripping rain all over his interior. The dome light overhead cast just enough of a glow to see the rolled up bag of cookies at her feet.

Matthew reached past her and flicked the fan on high. “There should be a blanket behind your seat. Just sit back and take it easy. I’ll be right in.”

He shut her door, and the cab light winked off. Rain pummeled the roof overhead, and she saw the faint shadows of tall trees waving angrily in the gusty wind. Lightning blazed,

thunder answered. She found the blanket behind the seat, just as Matthew said, and noticed three empty car seats in the back seat of the extended cab.

Funny, how life changed. It seemed everyone she knew was married with children and, while she wished them happiness, she certainly didn't believe that marriage could bring happiness. She felt colder and snuggled into the soft thermal cotton blanket that smelled of fabric softener and chocolate chip cookies.

The driver's door snapped open and the dome light illuminated Matthew's profile. Strong, straight, handsome. He'd grown into a fine-looking man. He stowed her luggage, then joined her in the cab and slammed the door against the bitter storm.

"I'll give Zach at the garage a call first thing in the morning." Matthew didn't look at her as he slid the gearshift into second.

Her teeth clacked in answer, and she snuggled deeper into the blanket. The blast of the truck's heat fanned hot air against her, but she couldn't stop shaking.

"I heard about your grandmother's fall. I bet seeing you will cheer her up some."

"I hope so." Her fingers curled around her purse strap. "I plan to stay as long as she needs me."

"Is that so?" He quirked one brow. "I heard you've never been back to visit her."

"How do you know?" His question set her on edge, as if she didn't love her grandmother. As if all the times she'd flown Nanna out to California for every holiday didn't count. Or the

vacation they went on every year.

“You didn’t show up for the ten-year reunion. Everybody talked about it.”

“They did?” Except for a few close friends she’d made, she hadn’t even thought of the small town where she’d spent one year of her teenage life. But it had been a pivotal year for her, emotionally and spiritually. “I got an invitation, but I was—”

“In Venice,” he finished with a lopsided grin. “I heard that, too.”

“I was working.”

“On a new book. I know.” He slowed down as a pronghorn antelope leaped across the road.

“Look at that.” Hope’s chest caught. The fragile animal flew through the air with grace and speed. The light sheened on the antelope’s white flanks and tan markings. In a flash, it was gone, leaving only the dark road behind.

“I’ve seen thousands of them, but it takes my breath away every time.” Matthew’s grin was genuine, and for a moment it felt as if they’d touched.

As if they were no longer practically strangers and all the differences in their lives and in their experiences had vanished. She saw his loneliness and shadows.

Then she tore her gaze from his. She was being foolish, really. She and Matthew Sheridan had nothing in common—the three car seats in the back were proof of that.

Silence settled between them as he drove, and she welcomed

it. The loneliness she'd witnessed in Matthew's eyes troubled her. Maybe because she didn't want to be reminded of the loneliness in her life, a loneliness that had no solution. She didn't want love, she didn't want marriage. She didn't even want to feel her heart flicker once in the presence of a handsome man.

She was surviving just fine on her own. God was in her corner, and that was enough. Even on the loneliest of nights.

"Thanks for the ride, Matthew." Her fingers fumbled for the door handle in the near dark. "I know you had to go out of your way."

"Not too far. And it's always my pleasure to help out one of Manhattan, Montana's most esteemed citizens. Or ex-citizens." His gaze didn't meet hers as he hopped out of the truck.

Maybe he'd felt the same way as she did, that when their gazes had met, she'd seen something far too personal. Her feet hit the muddy ground. "Matthew?"

He didn't look up as he tugged out her carry-on, heavy with her computer and camera equipment, and two suitcases. "Go on ahead, get out of this rain. I'll bring your things."

"That's not right." She eased around to take her baggage, but Matthew's grip remained firm on the leather handles. "You've done enough. I'm more than capable of carrying my own bags."

"I'll let you know when I've had enough." As if insulted, he shouldered past her. "I was raised to look after stranded women in distress."

“I’ve been taking care of myself for a long time.”

“I’m sure you have.” Matthew set the bags down on the front porch next to the neatly painted swing and pulled back the squeaky screen door.

She’d forgotten how macho and strong men were in Montana. Plus, she figured she was right. She’d seen loneliness in his eyes, a loneliness they might have in common, and that bothered her.

His wide knuckles rapped on the wood frame. “I’ll get a hold of Zach at first light.”

“Matthew, you’ve done more than enough. You haven’t seen me since high school and—”

“It’s just the way I’m made, Hope. Or should I say Miss Ashton?” He tipped his Stetson and backed down the steps and into the darkness, distant but kind. “Give my best to your grandmother.”

She opened her mouth, but the words fumbled on her tongue. She didn’t know what to say to make things right between them. He’d gone out of his way to help her, as one good neighbor helps another, and instead of recognizing that, she’d put up the same old defenses.

Some lessons in life were hard to let go of, no matter how much she prayed.

She heard Matthew’s truck pull away. Red taillights glowed in the black sheets of rain plummeting from sky to earth. She would have to find a way to make things right, to thank him for helping her when he didn’t have to.

The door squeaked open, and a woman in a teal tunic and slacks smiled at her. “You must be Nora’s granddaughter. Goodness, she’s been talking of nothing else all day. Come in, dear. Heavens, but you’re soaked clear through to the skin.”

“My Jeep broke down and stranded me.”

“No!” The nurse looked stricken. “And on a night like this. Haven’t seen a storm as bad as this in some time. Was that Matthew Sheridan’s truck I saw driving away?”

“He took pity on me and gave me a ride.”

“Matthew’s a good man. Shame about his wife, though. Let’s get you inside and out of those wet clothes, shall we? My name’s Roberta—” She made a move to grab the carry-on bag.

Hope managed to get there first, hauling all three pieces into the living room. The nurse had enough work to do without waiting on Hope, too.

“Dear, you’re soaked clear through to the skin,” Roberta fussed. “Let me draw a bath for you—”

“Thank you, but no.” Only one thing—one person—mattered. “How’s Nanna?”

“She’s been having trouble sleeping.”

“Because she was waiting up for me? I called her after supper and told her not to—”

“Why, she can’t wait to see you. You and your brother are the only real family she has left.” Roberta bustled into the kitchen, flipping on lights as she went. “As I see it, she’s got the right to worry about you traveling all the way from Italy on your own.

And besides, it's given her something else to think about besides the pain.”

Hope's stomach fluttered. She hated the thought of her sweet Nanna suffering. “Is she awake?”

“I'm sure she is. Go on up. Do you want to take this to her?”

Hope took the prepared tea tray, thanking the nurse who'd gone to the trouble, and headed upstairs. She knew each step and knew which stair creaked. Memories flooded back, filling her heart, warming her from the inside out.

Some memories weren't filled with hurt. Like the year she'd spent with Nanna when her parents were divorcing.

As she climbed into the second story, the smell of dried roses, lavender and honeysuckle tickled her nose, just as it had so many years ago.

“Hope? Is that you?” Nanna's voice trilled like a morning lark, joyful and filled with melody. “Heavens, I've worried about you, child. Do you know what time it is?”

“I told you not to expect me until morning.” Hope breezed into the room, unchanged from memory with the lace curtains shimmering like new ivory at the windows, the antiques polished to a shine and the wedding ring quilt draped across the carved, four-poster bed. Just like always.

But the woman beneath the covers was fragile and old, changed from the sprightly grandmother Hope remembered.

Deep affection welled in her heart, and she set the silver tray on the cedar chest at the foot of the bed. “Nanna, it's good to

see you.”

“Come give me a hug.”

Hope bent at the waist, lightly folding her arms around the frail woman. Nanna felt delicate and not tough and robust like she'd been at Christmas, less than four months ago. “You smell like honeysuckle.”

“One of my favorites. You should have seen last summer's garden! Goodness, the sachets and things Helen and I made. We were busy bees. Why, we had the entire basement filled from floor to rafter with drying flowers.” Nanna's eyes warmed with the happy memory, and she patted the bed beside her. “Dear heart, it's good to see you, but you're thinner.”

“Been busy.” Hope sat on the edge of the mattress.

“Too busy to eat? You work too much. What is it with young girls these days? You should eat, enjoy life, indulge a little.”

“Is that what you do, Nanna?”

“Why, it's one of the secrets to a happy life.” Trouble twinkled in dark eyes. “I saw your last book. It's absolutely beautiful. Not everyone has the God given talent to take pictures the way you do.”

“I'm glad you like it.” Hope watched her grandmother's weathered hands lift the hardcover book from the nightstand. “I worked hard on it.”

“Love always shows.” Nanna's fingers traced her name on the cover, in gold. “It's good work that you do, using your pictures to remind us all the beauty God gives us in each and every day.

But work isn't everything in life, remember that."

"You've told me that about a billion times." Trying to avoid a well-worn subject, Hope pressed a kiss to her grandmother's cheek. "You get your rest. We have all tomorrow to talk."

"And what a fine day it will be because you've come home." Nanna returned the kiss. Her fingers held tight and would not let go. "I've missed my Hope."

"Not half as much as I've missed you." A love so sharp it hurt edged into her heart. Hope didn't move away, not until after Grandmother sipped her chamomile tea, whispered her prayers and closed her eyes. Not until sleep claimed Nanna and she was lost in dreams of happier times.

Hope sat in the dark for a long while and watched Nanna sleep. The lightning returned. Rain beat against the window and drummed on the roof, but they were safe from the storm and never alone.

Chapter Two

Hope Ashton. Matthew couldn't get her out of his mind. Not when he'd gone to sleep and not now that the first pink light of morning was teasing the darkness from the sky.

He hadn't recognized her at first glance. She'd softened, grown taller, changed from girl to woman. But that graceful elegance was still there in the fall of her dark hair, in the rich timbre of her alto voice and in every lithe, careful movement she made.

The phone rang, and he turned from the kitchen sink, nearly tripping over a little boy who wasn't quite as tall as his knee. "Whoa, there, Josh. Look where you're going."

The little boy tilted his head all the way back. "Goin' to Gramma's?"

"Almost." He wove around an identical little boy. "Ian, stop eyeing the cookie jar."

"I still hungry, Daddy."

"Hungry? You ate four whole pancakes." He ruffled the boy's dark hair and intentionally turned him away from the counter as the phone continued to ring.

He dodged another identical little boy and snatched up the receiver.

"Matthew? I got your message." It was Zach from the garage. "Got the belt you asked for right here. What happened? That

truck of yours leave you stranded?”

“You wish.”

“Hey, I’m thinking of my profits,” the only mechanic in town teased.

“Nothing like that. I came across Hope Ashton last night, broke down in the middle of that storm. You remember her, don’t you?”

There was a moment of silence, then Zach gasped. “Tall, slender, pretty. Nora’s granddaughter. Sure, I remember. Is she back in town? Why don’t I run the belt out to the Greenley place —”

“Her Jeep’s broken down on the highway south of town.”

“Then I’ll warm up the tow truck and bring it in.”

“You can’t miss it. Bright red, brand-new model about four miles out.” Matthew felt his stomach tighten, as if he didn’t like the idea of Zach giving Hope a hand and he couldn’t explain why. Maybe it was his conscience.

Sure, the woman troubled him, stirred up all sorts of emotions. He knew he was out of her league—which wasn’t why he wanted to help. It didn’t sit right backing away now. He liked to see things to the end.

Matthew heard silence and peeked around the doorway into the kitchen. “Ian, stay away from the counter. Go put on your shoes like your brothers.”

The little urchin hesitated, tossed him an innocent grin, then dashed away to join his brothers at the table. Matthew headed

down the center hallway and to the front door, careful to keep an eye and an ear on his sons.

“Hope Ashton, huh?” Zach laughed at that. “It’ll be something to see her again. I bet she’s still a knockout.”

“Yep.” She was pretty, all right. Model-good looks but there was a girl-next-door freshness to her. A freshness he didn’t remember seeing in the unhappy rich girl he’d gone to school with.

Matthew ended the call, checked on the three boys busily pulling on shoes in the corner of the kitchen and went in search of his work boots. He sat down on the bottom step to tug them on.

Morning was his favorite time as the sun rose, so bold and bright. The world was waking up, the birds’ songs brand-new and the breeze as soft as a whisper. Peace filled him for a moment, and then he heard a loud crash coming from directly behind him—the kitchen.

That was his two seconds of peace for the day. He took off at a dead run. Six strides took him into the kitchen where he saw his three sons standing in a half circle.

“Josh did it, Daddy!” Kale pointed. “He climbed up on the chair and dropped the cookies.”

“They smashed all over the floor!” Ian looked pleased.

Josh’s head was bowed, his hands clasped together as he whispered a prayer.

Matthew saw the shattered cookies and stoneware littered all over the clean floor and the pitcher of grape juice at Ian’s feet.

The refrigerator door stood open and a chair from the table was butted up against the cabinets. He remembered to count to ten.

“We got real hungry.” Ian rubbed at a juice stain on his crisp white T-shirt.

“Real hungry,” Kale added.

Josh took one look at the floor and bowed his head again. “The cookie jar’s still broken, God.”

Since he was short on time, Matthew decided to ignore for now the purple stains splattered on his kitchen floor, nudged the refrigerator door shut and grabbed the broom from the corner. “You boys step back. Careful of those sharp pieces.”

“Daddy, it’s all Josh’s fault.” Ian tugged on Matthew’s jeans, transferring the grape juice from those little fingers onto the clean denim above Matthew’s knee.

“Somehow I doubt Josh did this all by himself.” He laid his hand against the flat of Ian’s back and eased him away from the broken stoneware shards. “Any owies I should know about?”

“There ain’t no blood nowhere,” Ian announced.

But there was grape juice spattered all over the little boy who’d obviously been the one to try to heft the full pitcher from the refrigerator shelf and failed.

One thing was clear. He couldn’t go on like this. He needed a new housekeeper or he’d never get off to work on time. “Into the truck. C’mon. Step around the mess, Ian.”

“Sorry, Daddy.” The oldest triplet looked angelic as he stopped his sneaker in midair, about to crunch right through the

cookies and shattered pottery.

He caught Ian by the shoulder, Kale by the arm and was grateful for Josh who clambered after them, muttering an amen to end his prayer. The mess would wait. The boys would have to change at Mom's.

Lord knew, this was all a balancing act. Every morning wasn't as bad as this, but then he was used to having a housekeeper. With three three-year-olds, it made a big difference having another adult to run interference.

Matthew locked the door and herded the boys toward the black pickup in the gravel drive. He opened the door, and the scent of Hope Ashton's perfume—light and pretty—lingered, a faint reminder that she'd sat beside him on the ride to town. Longing swept through him. Not for Hope, but for a woman gone from his life forever.

It had been over two long years since he'd smelled the pleasing gentleness of a woman's perfume in his truck. Two years had passed since he'd buried Kathy, and he still wasn't over his grief.

And how could he? There would never be another woman who would make his heart brighter, his life better.

Kathy had been his once-in-a-lifetime, a gift of love that a man was lucky to know at all. Something that miraculous didn't happen twice.

It just didn't.

Chest tight, he buckled Josh into the remaining car seat and hopped into the cab.

“I’m so glad I have the committee meeting today,” Nanna announced as the new day’s sun tossed a cheerful pattern across the quilt. “I’ll take any excuse I can to get out of this house.”

“I thought you were supposed to be on bed rest. How are we going to get you to town if your doctor’s orders are to keep you right here?” Hope slid open the closet door.

“We could always drive. It’s easier than hobbling. I’m still not used to those crutches.”

“Very funny.” Hope pulled out a blue summer dress. “This would look nice. Before I take you anywhere, I’m checking with your doctor.”

“You worry too much, and I want the yellow dress. The flirty one.”

“Flirty? You’re in your sixties. You shouldn’t be flirting.”

“That’s what you think.” Nanna’s chuckle was a merry one. “Howard Renton joined the planning committee last month. Both Sadie and Helen made fools of themselves fighting to sit next to him. But I think I won him with my charm.”

“Wear the yellow but don’t flirt. Too much.” Hope laid the cheerful sundress on the foot of the bed. “Isn’t that what you used to tell me?”

“Hope, you’re twenty-nine years old. You’re supposed to be flirting.”

“I’m supposed to, huh? Is there some unwritten law or something?”

“Go ahead and pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about. You’re going to let the best years of your life slip away alone without a man to love you.”

“I didn’t fly all the way from Rome and drive down from the closest airport through a terrible storm to hear that kind of advice.”

“Well, then what kind do you want to hear?”

“The kind that doesn’t have anything to do with getting me married off.” Hope unzipped the dress and lifted it from the hanger. “God gives to some the gift of marriage, and to others he gives the gift of singleness.”

“And the Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a companion who will help him.”” Nanna lifted her arms as Hope slipped the dress over her head. “It’s not good for a woman to be alone, either.”

“So, the person who marries does well, and the person who doesn’t marry does even better.” Hope smoothed the dress over her grandmother’s back. “I think I’ve proven my point.”

“You’ve proven nothing. Love is one of God’s greatest gifts. Don’t let your life pass you by without knowing it.” Nanna’s hand brushed hers with warmth. “Goodness, this dress makes me feel young. Fix my hair for me.”

“Do you want it up or down?”

Nanna squinted into the mirror against the far wall. “Down.”

Hope reached for the brush and started working. “Tell me more about this man you and your friends are fighting over.”

“He’s moved back to town after being away for what, nearly twenty years. He wanted to be close to what remains of his family. Sad, it is. You didn’t hear about the tragedy, did you? Lost his son, daughter-in-law and two of his grandchildren in a small plane crash a few years back. In fact, one of the grandchildren was Matthew Sheridan’s wife.”

The brush slipped from her fingers. “I didn’t know.”

“Lucky thing, one of the boys got sick right before the plane took off, so she left the children with Matthew. He was devastated. It shook all of us to the core, I tell you. We lost a lot of friends that day.”

Matthew lost his wife and the mother of his children. Her chest tightened. She remembered how he’d seen her safely home last night. And remembered the loneliness in his eyes. “It’s strange to be here after being gone for so many years. All the people I know are much older now. So much has happened to them.”

“And your classmates grown up and married.” Nanna’s eyes sparkled. “Everyone except you.”

“Surely not everyone’s married. There has to be a few people in this town as smart as I am.” She winked at Nanna’s reflection in the big, beveled mirror.

“You mean as misguided. I think your old friend Karen McKaslin isn’t married yet. Now, don’t get your hopes up. Her wedding is scheduled for sometime this fall.”

“A mistake.” Hope shook her head. “I’ll have to give her a call

and see if I can't wisen her up."

Nanna laughed. "Tease all you want. You never know when the lovebug will bite."

"Lovebug?" Hope reached for a headband on the edge of the nightstand. "If love is a bug, then all I need is a good can of pesticide."

"Really, Hope. You're impossible." Nanna's hand caught hers, warm and accepting, as always. "And no, I won't change your mind. I'll let God do that."

"What's He gonna do? Send a lovebug?"

"You never know. There are a few handsome men in this town looking for the right woman to share their lives with."

"Oh, there are men, all right, but I don't think marriage is what they're looking for."

"Then you've been living in all the wrong places." Nanna winked, then caught her reflection in the mirror. "Oh, Hope. Why, this is wonderful. I hardly recognize myself."

"You look beautiful, Nanna." Hope brushed her hand gently over a few stray wisps, guiding them into place. "What do you want for breakfast?"

"My day nurse Kirby is taking care of that."

"Well, she has enough to do taking care of you."

"Yes, but the real question is, can you cook?" Nanna looked terribly skeptical. "I know how you live, always traveling—"

"That's because I'm always working."

"If you had a husband and a family, you would have more to

do with your time than work.” Nanna pressed a kiss to Hope’s cheek, one of comfort and love. “Go ahead, make breakfast. I’m a brave woman with good digestion.”

“I’m not going to poison you.”

“And be careful of the sink handle. It’s been leaking something fierce. And that right front stove burner is wobbly. I mean to talk to someone in town about it today.”

“Have a little faith, Nanna. I’m all grown up. I think I can figure out a faucet handle and an ancient stove.”

“Pride goes before destruction, and haughtiness before a fall.”

“Relax.” Hope helped Nanna lean back into her pillows, then reached for the quilt to cover her. “I’m not going to burn down the kitchen.”

“You almost did once, you know.”

“I was seventeen years old.” Hope pressed a kiss to Nanna’s brow. How fast time passed. And it was passing faster every day. “You get some rest, and I’ll be right back with some scrambled eggs.”

“Now this I have to see,” Nanna mused.

Hope pulled the door closed and hurried downstairs, her heart heavy. Nanna was wrong, she didn’t need the pain of marriage. She’d watched her parents up close and personal, and she’d sworn never to live like that. Ever.

Even now, remembering, her stomach tensed and she laid her hand there. The ulcer still bothered her from time to time.

Usually whenever she thought about her family.

Yes, singleness was one gift from the Lord she intended to cherish for the rest of her life.

“Matthew, you have to take my place on the Founder’s Days planning committee. I can’t do everything.” Matthew’s mother herded three little boys into her living room. Building blocks clattered and sounds of glee filled the air. “I don’t mind keeping the triplets over the summer, you know that. But these three are a lot to keep up to. You’re going to have to do some things for me.”

“The committee meetings are during the day, and you know I can’t take off work. I’ve got a roof to put on the McKaslins’ hay barn—”

“You can work it out. You’re self-employed.” Mom pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Tell you what, I’ll sweeten the deal. I’ll keep the boys past supper every night if you’ll take over this one tiny, little obligation for me.”

“I’m a carpenter. I don’t know the first thing about committees.”

“Nonsense, a smart man like you. The meeting is this morning, from ten-thirty to eleven-thirty at Karen’s little coffee shop. Oh, those boys are a busy bunch, aren’t they?” Mom took off at a run. “Ian, don’t climb up the fireplace. No, not even if you’re a fireman.”

There was a twinkle in her eye. The planning committee, as far as he knew, consisted of the town’s oldest citizens.

If Mom wasn't playing matchmaker, she was still up to something. If only he knew what.

Manhattan, Montana crept into sight around the last bend. Hope hadn't seen this place since she was seventeen. Last night, when she'd driven through with Matthew, it had been dark and late, the streets deserted.

In the light of day, she saw that much was different from what she remembered. Businesses had changed hands, new stores had come in, but the character and the small-town feel remained.

It was the closest thing to home she'd known in her entire life. "It's good to be back, isn't it?" Why did Nanna sound triumphant? "I always knew you belonged here, Hope, and not in your parents' world."

"What does that mean, exactly?" Hope braked as an elderly man jaywalked leisurely across the wide, two-lane street.

"It means you're the kind of person who needs roots, like me. To plant them deep and watch your life grow." Nanna tapped her fingers against the dash. "Turn here. Right there in front of the blue shop."

Hope eased Nanna's old sedan into a parking spot. The hand-painted sign on the row of shops read Field of Beans. "I'm not a tree. I don't have roots."

"You know darn well what I mean, you're being stubborn." Nanna opened her door. "Kirby, dear, bring those crutches. I can handle the steps by myself."

Hope saw the nurse's exasperated look in the rearview. "Don't tell me she's always like this?"

"Usually she's worse." The young nurse hopped out of the car, hurrying to help.

Hope listened to her grandmother issue orders to Kirby as she situated the crutches beneath her arms. Nanna might be injured, but her spirit remained unscathed. Hope stepped out into the fresh spring morning to lend Kirby a hand.

Already the sun was hot, and dust mixed in the air. She smelled freshly ground coffee and baking muffins. "Nanna, is there anything you want from the store?"

"Oh, no, you don't." Nanna wobbled to a stop. "You're coming to the meeting with me. You can do your errands-running later."

"But you have Kirby—"

"Kirby has to go fill some prescriptions for me."

"I have to run over to Zach's garage and rescue my Jeep. Then I have to grocery shop." Hope took hold of her grandmother's fragile elbow. "Don't worry, I'll help Kirby get you inside—"

"Look, there's Matthew Sheridan crossing the street." Nanna took a stronger step. "It looks like he's heading for Karen's coffee place, too. Good. I've been needing to speak with him."

"What you need to do is concentrate or you're going to fall off those things. Maybe we should get the wheelchair from the trunk—"

"Don't you dare. There's only three stairs, and I'm starting to get the hang of these crutches." Nanna hobbled forward, then

stopped in the middle of the first board step. “Why, Matthew. The man I’ve been looking for.”

“Me?” He strolled to a stop on the sidewalk above, his face shaded by the brim of his Stetson. “Nora Greenley. I can’t believe you’re up and around.”

“It’s hard to keep an old warhorse down,” Nanna quipped as her fingers caught Hope’s sleeve. “Matthew, I have a terrible problem up at the house. Now, I could have called the McKaslin boy, but I hear you’re a better carpenter. I need some work done on my kitchen.”

“I’d be happy to come take a look.” He held out his hand, palm up. It was a strong hand with calluses thick on his sun-browned skin. “Do you need help up these stairs?”

“I can handle the stairs. You talk a minute with my granddaughter and find a time she can show you the kitchen.” Nanna was suddenly busy crutching up the steps and avoiding Matthew’s gaze. “Hope, be a dear and handle this for me.”

“You know I can’t say no to you, Nanna.” But Hope did feel suspicion burn in her heart. What was her grandmother up to?

“Kirby will see me in, dear. Just make sure you come and join me. If I need help, I’d hate to interrupt the meeting. You understand.”

“I understand.” Was that a twinkle in the older woman’s eye? Nanna knew better than to try to fix her up with poor Matthew Sheridan, didn’t she? “Try to behave until I get in there, Nanna.”

“You know me.” Her crutches creaked against the board

walkway.

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” Hope’s chest felt tight watching the frail lady ease her way over the threshold and into the café, as determined as an Olympic athlete.

Matthew leaned against the wooden rail. “Looks like Nora’s keeping you busy.”

“Busy? I’m running like a madwoman. It’s not even lunchtime and she’s exhausted me.” Hope couldn’t quite meet his gaze. She remembered what Nanna had said about his wife’s death. She remembered the loneliness in his eyes. “I guess she wants some work done on her stove and sink.”

“Well, I don’t pretend to be the best in town when it comes to appliances, but I can take a look at that sink.” Matthew splayed both hands on the weathered rail. “I’m roofing the McKaslins’ barn this week. I can drop by, say, Monday morning, if that’s no problem.”

“That will be soon enough, I’m sure. I didn’t notice any leak when I washed the dishes this morning. I have this funny feeling there’s no real hurry. I think Nanna wanted to try to get the two of us together.”

“I had that feeling, too.” He shrugged one shoulder uneasily, looking off down the street. “Did Zach get your Jeep fixed?”

“It’s repaired and waiting for me. Thanks again for helping me out. It would have been a long miserable walk.”

“No problem.” He tipped his hat, a polite gesture. “Well, I better get going. Don’t want to be late for my first committee

meeting.”

“You’re on the planning committee?”

“My mom talked me into it this morning. She extorted me, is more like it.” A wry grin touched his mouth as he took a step toward the open door. “She’s taking care of my sons, so I’m in a bind and she knows it. It’s a shame when you can’t trust your own mother.”

“Or grandmother.” Hope hated that she had to follow him toward the gaping door. A bad feeling settled hard in her stomach, the kind that foretold disaster.

“What does that mean?” he asked. Sunlight brushed him with a golden glow, highlighting the wary slant to his eyes. The wry grin faded from his mouth. “You don’t think my mom and your grandmother—”

“I sure hope not, but at this point do we give them the benefit of the doubt?”

“I don’t know, my mom’s been kind of sneaky lately.” Matthew shook his head. “And obviously off her rocker. She knows you’re only visiting. Maybe it’s coincidence.”

“Let’s hope so, or my grandmother is in big trouble, and I don’t care how fragile she is.”

“Somehow, I doubt she’s in much danger.” Matthew caught the edge of the open door and gestured for Hope to go first.

“You haven’t seen my temper.” Laughing, she breezed by him. The wind caught her long curls and brushed the silken tips against the inside of his wrist. His grip on the door faltered, but

she didn't seem to notice that the bell overhead jingled furiously. She smelled like spring, like new sunshine and fresh flowers.

"Isn't it marvelous that Hope has agreed to take my place on the committee?" Nora Greenley's voice rang like a merry bell above the clash of conversation in the homey little café. "Matthew, that means the two of you will be working side by side. Doesn't that sound terrific?"

"Nanna!" Shock paled Hope's face. "But—"

"You know I'm not well, dear, and the doctor wants me to get as much rest as possible."

"Yeah, but—" A fall of black hair cascaded across Hope's face, hiding her profile as she leaned her grandmother's crutches against the wall. Embarrassment stained her creamy complexion. She looked at him helplessly.

"It's all right, Hope. I'm getting used to the manipulative behavior of old women with nothing else to do but interfere in my business." He gave Nora a wink so she'd know he wasn't mad. Well, not too mad.

"Watch who you're calling old, young man." But Nora's eyes were laughing at him, as if she were enjoying this far too much. "Helen is calling the meeting to order. She's about to announce Hope is taking over my position. I can't tell you what a relief it is. Hope, dear, come sit down here between me and Matthew—"

It was too late to escape. Helen's voice rose above the sound of the coffee grinder at the counter. And only two unoccupied chairs remained close by. If he wanted to escape, he would have

to excuse himself through half of the crowded café.

Hope shot him an apologetic look as she took one of the two remaining chairs. Her hair, unbound and rich, tumbled across her shoulders, catching the sprinkle of sunlight through the curtained window. Her curls shone like polished ebony.

“Now, if Nora is settled,” Helen said as the room silenced. “I’ll let her tell about how her wonderful granddaughter, whom we haven’t seen in quite a few years, has agreed to take her position on our committee. Nora—”

“I didn’t agree to anything,” Hope leaned close to whisper. “Just so you know.”

“Oh, I know.” He did. He knew how his mother thought. Mom figured that enough time had passed since losing Kathy and that he ought to get on with his life. The boys needed more than a housekeeper—they needed a mother to love them. And he needed a wife.

But what she didn’t know, what she couldn’t accept, was that Kathy had been his whole heart.

Regret tightened in his chest until Nora’s words and the sounds of the café faded. His parents’ marriage had been based on respect, but not true love. Not like his and Kathy’s. Mom couldn’t understand.

Pain cut like a newly sharpened knife straight through the center of his chest. Mom didn’t realize she was hurting him, but she was. Her matchmaking attempts stirred up old memories and grief.

Applause ripped through the café, tearing into his thoughts. The meeting continued, and the sun flirting with the curtains grew warm on his back. Karen McKaslin arrived with coffee and tea for everyone.

Matthew leaned across the table, stretching for the packets of sugar. Hope scooted the little ceramic holder closer, so it was within his reach. She avoided his gaze and maybe it was because she was a woman, soft and pretty, but it made him feel keenly alone.

He remembered a verse from John, one he'd relied on heavily these last difficult years. "Here on this earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."

Matthew stirred sugar into his tea and clung to those treasured words.

Chapter Three

Hope snapped open the kitchen cupboards. “You embarrassed the poor man.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Go ahead, play innocent. But I’m not fooled and neither is Matthew.” She slammed the cans of food onto the shelves. “It wasn’t fair to volunteer me like that. You could have asked me. I would have been happy to do anything for you. Don’t you know that? But this—”

“Don’t you see? It’s for your own good, Hope.” Nanna didn’t sound quite as confident. “Time is slipping away from me, and I want to know my beloved granddaughter is happy and cared for.”

“I can take care of myself.” Hope slammed two more cans onto the wooden shelf. “Besides, I’m perfectly happy.”

“Sure, but you could be happier.” Nanna sighed. “Don’t be mad at me, Hope. With this injury I can’t serve on the committee, and your spending time with poor widowed Matthew Sheridan can’t hurt.”

“It’s your intentions that bother me. You know how I feel about marriage. And you know why.” Hope kept out a box of crackers and folded up the paper grocery sack. “I’m not going to marry anyone. Ever. I’m never going to go through what my parents did.”

“Just because your mom and dad couldn’t get along doesn’t

mean that you can't have a fulfilling marriage."

"That's exactly what it means." Hope grabbed the bright yellow box and set it on the table in front of her grandmother. Her chest ached. Old wounds beat within her heart, and she didn't want to be angry with Nanna. "Stop trying to change my life, okay? I like it just the way it is. And no, I don't want a husband. I don't miss having a family."

"But, Hope—"

"Please, just drop it, Nanna. I can't talk about this anymore. I'm the result of a bad marriage, remember?" The memories of her parents always fighting, always hurting each other tore through her. Memories she wanted to forget. The wind teased the chimes outside the open window, and Hope spun away, determined to keep control of her emotions.

The past was gone. There was no sense letting it hurt her now. She watched the light in Nanna's eyes fade and she hated that, but she couldn't back down. Marriage was not—and never would be—for her. No matter what. And if she felt lonely in the evenings cooking for one, well, that was a small price to pay for a life without hurt, blame and endless battles.

"What you haven't seen," Nanna continued above the musical jingle of the chimes, "is that some marriages can be a great blessing. Filled with joy and enduring love."

"Sure, I've seen the movies. I've read the books. Notice how they're all fiction?" Hope grabbed the tea-kettle from the stove and carried it to the sink. "I don't want to hear any more about

this, Nanna. Isn't there a passage somewhere in the Bible about minding your own business?"

"Well, Thessalonians. 'This should be your ambition: to live a quiet life, minding your own business—'" Nanna broke into a chuckle. "All right, fine, you've won. I'll stop trying to match you up with handsome, kind, marriageable men even if it is for your own good."

"Finally! You've come to your senses." Hope grabbed hold of the cold water faucet.

"I'll have you know there are many young women in this town who would appreciate my efforts."

"Then maybe you should try matchmaking for them." Hope gave the faucet a twist and felt the old metal handle give.

A blast of cold water slammed against her right cheekbone and across the front of her neck. She jumped back. Water sluiced down her face and dripped off her chin. Her shirt was wet through and plastered to her skin.

She could only stare at the geyser shooting water everywhere—straight up at the ceiling and sideways in every direction.

When Nanna had asked her to talk to Matthew, there really was a problem with the plumbing. She set the broken cold water handle on the counter and swiped more drops from her eyes.

"Kirby, quick, call Matthew." Nanna's voice rang high with distress above the sounds of the cascading waterfall. "Ever since Ethan Brisbane left town, we don't have a decent plumber. Hope, quick, can you make it stop?"

“I’m trying.” Her sneakers slid on the wet surface as she tugged open the cabinet doors. She scrunched down and peered under the sink.

The old pipes groaned. Droplets plinked against her forehead. She knew next to nothing about plumbing, but she did own a small condo. She’d had her share of homeowner disasters. “I don’t see any shutoff valves. Nanna, how old are these pipes?”

“Who knows? Seventy years or more?”

“Maybe it’s time to replace ’em.” There was no way to stop the water, not here at the sink. “There must be a shutoff in the basement. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Hurry, dear, my knickknacks—”

Hope spun toward the sink. The pretty porcelain figurines on the corner shelves above the sink were taking a direct hit.

She stepped into the force of cold water, wincing as it struck like a thousand icy pinpricks. “Kirby, could you help me out here?”

“Sure thing.” The young nurse abandoned the phone and hurried across the growing puddle on the floor to carry the rescued figurines to the table. “Mr. Sheridan wasn’t in. I got his pager.”

“We’re going to need someone right away.” Hope curled her fingers around the last wet porcelain child. “And it would be better—” she fixed a warning gaze on her grandmother “—if it wasn’t Matthew Sheridan.”

“Don’t worry, Hope.” Nanna spoke up. “I’m a defeated old

woman resigned to live without a single great grandchild.”

“Sure. Make me feel guilty.” Hope handed Kirby the last figurine and stood, dripping wet, in the middle of the kitchen. Water crept in an ever-widening puddle across the ancient flooring. As far as she could tell, puddles and crutches didn’t look like they would mix. “C’mon, Nanna, let’s get you to safer ground.”

“I’ll take her into the living room,” Kirby volunteered, the crutches already in hand. “And I’ll try to find someone—anyone—to come right away.”

“Thanks, Kirby.” Hope caught Nanna’s elbow as she wobbled, a little unsteady on her feet. “I’m going to see what I can do downstairs.”

“Now be careful of those narrow steps,” Nanna warned.

Hope resisted the urge to remind her grandmother that she was no longer a child. The warmth in her chest doubled knowing someone worried over her—that someone still cared.

The water was still spewing like Old Faithful, so Hope ran for the basement door.

No light greeted her when she hit the switch. She guessed Nanna hadn’t been down here in a while. She found a flashlight on a hook by the door and searched the lengths of wrapped pipes visible overhead. They ended by the hot water tank in the back corner, where huge cobwebs warned of even bigger spiders.

“No way am I going in there.” She shivered, her skin crawling just at the sight of those thick, dust-coated gossamer strands.

Then a dark object slinked across the cement floor toward her sneaker. She screamed in midair, already jumping back. The flashlight slipped from her grip. It hit the ground with a crash and rolled, the light eerily aimed at the ceiling. The shadowy spider skidded to a stop, waiting—like he was preparing to launch an all-out assault on her ankle.

“Chances are it’s more scared of you.” A rich masculine voice rumbled like low valley thunder through the dark. Then boots clipped on the concrete. “He’s looking up at you and thinking, boy, that giant sure looks dangerous. I hope she doesn’t attack me.”

“Matthew Sheridan.” She took another cautious step back, her pulse fast, her limbs shaky. “You scared me to death.”

“Didn’t hear me come down the stairs, huh? I guess you were too busy screaming at this poor defenseless spider.” He strode closer, his presence like a fire in the darkness, radiating heat without light. A heat she felt.

“How did you get here so fast?”

“Kirby left a desperate message so I came over. I was next door at the Joneses’.” He flashed her a grin in the eerie mix of shadows and knelt down, unafraid. “If you shoo him off, he’ll go hide and leave you alone.”

“Sure. I feel so much safer knowing he’s in the shadows watching and waiting for the right moment to take a bite.” Hope tripped back, away from the narrow hallway, not sure which was affecting her more—the spider or the man. “I was trying to find

the shutoff.”

“Let me take it from here. After all, I’m the professional.” He held up a big wrench and stepped into the light. Lemony rays brushed across his face, accenting the fine cut of his profile and the curve of his lopsided grin. “Tell Nora not to worry. I’m on the job.”

“Oh, that’s a comfort.” Why was she feeling like this? The last thing she wanted was to feel attracted to a man. Especially Matthew Sheridan.

She remembered how he’d looked in the coffee shop with sadness so huge in his eyes. How he’d leaned slightly away from her in his chair, placed right beside hers, so that their shoulders wouldn’t brush. As if he wanted to make it clear just how much distance he wanted.

Well, he was in luck. She wanted distance, too. And yet, she felt sorry for him. Sorry because beneath his easy grin lurked a great grief, one so obvious how could Nanna even think he’d want to remarry?

Not knowing what to say, Hope backed away, leaving the flashlight on the floor in case Matthew needed it, finding her way through the dark by touch and by memory.

Matthew listened to her light step against the stairs, tapping away into silence. Hope had looked at him like a deer blinded by headlights. Maybe it was the spider or the way he refused to look at her at the meeting today.

Either way, he knew he had to make things right. Since he couldn't back out of his obligation to the committee, it looked like he'd be seeing Hope a lot during the preparations for the Founder's Days dance. He didn't want any strain or bruised feelings confusing things. As soon as he turned off the water and fixed Nora's sink, he'd pull Hope aside and talk with her.

Unfortunately, the old valve was rusted wide open, and he had to use every bit of his strength to turn it. The old metal groaned, and he whispered a prayer for the ancient pipes to hold. They did, and the rush of water faded into silence.

Overhead he heard the soft tap of shoes—probably Hope's. He tried not to think about that as he brushed the cobwebs off his shirt and retrieved the fallen flashlight. He hadn't looked at a woman since he'd fallen in love with Kathy, and it bothered him. He didn't know what to make of it as he headed upstairs.

Hope was in the kitchen, guiding a mop across the floor. Sunlight spilled through the back door, highlighting the sheen of her dark hair and the agile grace in her slender arms.

She knelt, wrung water from the mop into a bucket, then straightened. "You came to the rescue. Again."

"That I did. I even survived the spider." He couldn't get over the sight of Hope Ashton handling a mop. He couldn't seem to tear his gaze away.

"You're a braver person than I am." She bent to work, swiping with practice. "Sharing dark cramped spaces with arachnids isn't high on my list."

He knew she was from a wealthy family—she probably had her own housekeeper and cook, a chauffeur and gardener—but here she was in simple blue jeans and a light yellow T-shirt cleaning her grandmother’s floor with a steady competence. As if she mopped floors all the time.

Not that Hope’s lifestyle was any of his business, he reminded himself and he forced his gaze away. But as he crossed the kitchen with water slick against his work boots, he could hear the stroke of Hope’s mop back and forth.

“I’m going to have to replace this entire setup.” He checked under the sink to make sure. “Either that, or chances are this kitchen will end up flooded again.”

“Then we’ll just have you fix it right.” Hope swiped her forearm across her brow. “Kirby took Nanna outside for some fresh air. I think she’s more upset than she’s letting on.”

“She’s lived here, what, fifty years? It’s hard to see something you love damaged.” He eased onto his back and adjusted his pipe wrench, determined to concentrate on his job and not on Hope mopping the floor. “I’m going to take out the sink and all these pipes. Put in proper shutoff valves. She’ll even get a new faucet out of the deal. Lucky for you, I have a faucet in the carpenter boxes in the back of my truck—I get these emergencies often enough. It’s a nice white European one.”

“Oh, boy. I can’t remember the last time a handsome man gave me a new faucet.”

She was kidding—he knew that. But why did his pulse perk

up? Did she really think he was handsome? He couldn't see it—he doubted anyone else did, either. That was the thing that made him wary about women like Hope—easy flattery, a drop of kindness, it was superficial and not always innocent. He ought to remember that the next time he couldn't stop looking at her.

Disgusted with himself, he gave his wrench a hard twist, and the old pipe came loose from the wall. “So, you'll be staying in town through Founder's Days?”

“If Nanna needs me that long.” Hope knelt to wring the mop. Water splashed into the bucket. “I'm sorry about the committee meeting. She's just trying to throw us together. I hope you know I had nothing to do with that.”

“I figured it out easy enough.” He slid out from beneath the sink and caught sight of Hope hefting the full bucket toward the back door, so at odds with what he expected from her. Maybe that's why his gaze kept finding her in the room. “I believe you. Remember, my mom blackmailed me.”

“Your own mother? That's hard to believe. I remember how sweet she was.” Hope disappeared in the shimmer of the midday sun.

“Sweet? Sure, she once was, I suppose. Then she became a grandmother and started meddling.”

Hope breezed back inside, swinging the empty bucket, and her smile looked genuine enough to make his heart flip. She lifted one delicate brow. “Meddling?”

“Yep. Mom decided she wanted more grandchildren so I

needed another wife to provide her with some.” He concentrated on coaxing the broken faucet out from the tiled wall. “It’s a desperate situation.”

“I understand that completely. Poor Nanna won’t be happy until she thinks I’m taken care of.” The mop smacked against the floor. “She isn’t satisfied when I say I can take care of myself. As if any man will do.”

Any man. A common, middle-class working man. Matthew knew it wasn’t a fair way to think, but even though Hope Ashton looked kind and casual and goodhearted and even though she was mopping a floor, she was a millionaire’s daughter. She was a renowned photographer. She wasn’t looking for just any man.

The pipe stuck, and he gave it a hard tug. It split into pieces and tumbled into the sink. “These pipes look as old as the house.”

“I’m sure they are.” Hope swept past him, leaving a lingering trail of sweet, light perfume. “Grandfather was notoriously frugal. Do you think you can get the water at least running today?”

“Sure can.” He shook his head at the rot where the pipes had been leaking for some time. Better to concentrate on his work. “This wall is going to have to be replaced. And this set of cupboards.”

“Nanna is going to be heartbroken. Grandfather made those cabinets for her. They’re custom—”

“I’m not a bad carpenter. I bet I can match them.” He couldn’t help teasing her, she looked so serious, so concerned. “Have a

little faith, Hope.”

“I’m trying.” She smiled, soft and sweet, and he noticed the way her dark curls caught the light, shimmering like rare silk.

Heaven help him.

A bell rang, spinning her toward the front door. Long locks flicked over her shoulder, glimmering with such beauty he couldn’t look away. She hustled from his sight, padding across the damp floor and into the dim recesses of the entry hall.

He recognized Helen’s voice and then heard only silence. Hope must have taken her out to see Nora in the flower garden. Matthew headed out the back door to grab what he needed from his truck. He’d put in new pipe, valves and a faucet.

An older lady with a broken leg needed running water. He figured the McKaslin family wouldn’t mind if he was a day late finishing their barn.

“How are you and Matthew getting along?” Nanna asked after she’d greeted, Helen, her lifetime friend. “Did you notice how wide his shoulders are? I just love a man with broad shoulders.”

“Then you flirt with him,” Hope teased as she tucked a cushion in the black metal chair for Helen. “Let me fetch some iced tea. I’ll be right back.”

“She’s hurrying back to him.” Nanna’s loud whisper carried on the sweet breezes.

“To look at his shoulders,” Helen teased.

Okay, so his shoulders were broad. Hope hopped up the back

steps and she couldn't help it—her gaze found and traced the strong line of Matthew's muscled arms, corded as he worked to set the new pipe in the wall.

“Would you like some iced tea?” She reached into the cupboards for three glasses, determined not to notice his well-honed physique.

“Sounds good.” He didn't look up from his work. As if he were afraid to make eye contact with her.

Why now? Then she noticed the windows were open, and Nanna's voice lifted on the breeze through the window. He couldn't have accidentally overheard what they were talking about, right?

The curtains fluttered with a gust of wind. “Goodness, Hope is so alone. Matthew's mom and I thought since they were both so lonely, we'd try to toss them together—”

The curtain snapped closed, cutting off the rest of Nanna's words.

A cold feeling gripped Hope's stomach. She felt her heart stop as she met Matthew's gaze.

“I guess that's as close to a confession as we're going to get.” He stretched a kink in his neck, flexing the muscles in his left shoulder and arm. “Our own families are working against us.”

“Nanna just promised to stop—” Hope's knees felt weak. “No, she didn't exactly say that. She sort of skirted the issue and changed the subject. You heard her. She doesn't sound one bit sorry.”

“It sure didn’t sound that way.”

Hope set the pitcher on the counter. She remembered how he’d looked in the coffee shop, lost and sad and brokenhearted. “I’m sorry, Matthew. This must be painful for you.”

“I’m used to it.” His words were as warm as spring rain. “This is what I’ve been up against ever since the boys wanted a mother for their third birthday. My mom has been on a nonstop campaign to find me a wife, and now she’s involving her friends in the search.”

“Like any woman will do, right?” It hurt to see the shadows in his eyes, so deep hazel and mingled with pain. She didn’t know what to say. How to comfort him.

He laid a packaged faucet, shiny knobs wrapped in plastic, on the counter. “It sounds to me like these women are pretty determined. Just how do you think we can stop them?”

“It’s going to be a long awkward summer unless we find a way.”

Matthew rubbed the heel of his hand against his brow. He looked tired. He looked as if a world of burden rested on those wide shoulders. Her heart ached for him.

She poured iced tea into the three tumblers, and then inspiration gripped her. “I know! Proverbs. ‘If you set a trap for others, you will get caught in it yourself.’”

“You mean...”

“Have you noticed how your mother and my grandmother have all this time on their hands? Notice how they both live

alone.”

“I noticed.” Light began to twinkle in Matthew’s eyes.

“Poor lonely widows. With no one to take care of them.” Hope tugged the curtain aside and caught sight of Nanna in the garden shaded by the tall maple. “Nanna mentioned a certain older gentleman she thought was very attractive. Maybe there’s someone your mother might like....”

“Hope, you’re a genius.” Matthew laughed, relief chasing away the shadows in his eyes and the furrows from his brow. “We turn the tables on them. And why not?”

“That’s right. Why not?” She topped off the last tumbler and handed it to Matthew. “Your mother and my grandmother had no qualms about torturing us.”

“That’s right. We find the two of them husbands, and they’ll be so happy they’ll forget all about us.” Matthew leaned against the counter and sipped his tea. “It’s not deceptive. After all, we’re bid to let love be our highest goal....”

“Like Nanna said, it’s not good to be alone.” Hope felt the sunlight on her face, warm and sustaining. She knew Nanna wasn’t alone, not truly, but she also remembered how years had slipped from Nanna’s face at the thought of Matthew’s handsome grandfather-in-law.

Nanna had spent too many years in this empty house watching for the mailman to slip letters into her box or waiting for the phone to ring. That was about to change. Hope could feel it down deep in her soul.

Maybe that's why the Lord had brought Matthew to her in the middle of that dangerous storm. And why Matthew stood here now.

If God kept watch over the smallest sparrow, then surely He cared about the loneliness in an old woman's heart.

Chapter Four

The new morning's sun had already burned the dew off the ground as Hope made her way through the neighbor's fields. Dark green, knee-high alfalfa swayed in the warm breezes and brushed her knees as she spotted the Joneses' barn and the man kneeling on its steep peak, tacking down new gray shingles with a nail gun.

She only had to look at him for her heart to flip in her chest. For one brief moment she noticed the wind tangling his collar-length hair and let her gaze wander over the lean hard height of him. In a white T-shirt and wash-worn jeans, he was a good-looking man. As if he felt her gaze, he glanced up from his work and shaded his eyes with one gloved hand. Then he waved in welcome.

A prairie dog gave a chirp of alarm and scampered out of sight as Hope hurried through the field, alfalfa shoots brushing against her bare skin. Matthew disappeared from the roof only to reappear circling from behind the weathered barn, stripping off his work gloves.

"Hey, I began to think you stood me up."

"I know, and I'm sorry. Nanna was in a lot of pain this morning and we couldn't get her to eat. I finally tempted her with fresh cinnamon rolls, but it took more time than I figured." She held up a paper sack. "I brought a peace offering, though. Figured you couldn't be too mad with me if I brought sweets."

“A wise woman.”

“No, a grateful one. You’ve helped me twice now, and I’m indebted. The cinnamon rolls are only a start.”

“You don’t owe me a thing.” Matthew flicked his gaze away toward the west side of the barn where shade stretched over soft grasses in an empty corral. “I’ve got a cooler with juice over here. Let’s get down to business.”

“Sure.” She followed him past the wooden posts, worn gray from time and the elements, and when she saw the blanket spread out on the small patch of wild grasses, she realized that Matthew had gone to some trouble. She regretted being late.

“Tell me how the new kitchen plumbing is working out,” he said over his shoulder as he knelt down in front of a battered blue cooler.

“Nanna’s happy with your work, but she’s fretting over the ruined cabinet.”

“It shouldn’t be long until I have the replacement for her. I planned on tooling it in my workshop at home this weekend. Tell her I won’t forget to come by and make the cabinet as good as new.”

“Oh, I think she can’t wait to get us in the same house together.” Drawing closer, Hope knelt on one edge of the fleece blanket. “After you left last night, she kept going on and on about all your wonderful attributes.”

“She had to resort to lying, huh?” His eyes twinkled with merriment.

And she felt that twinkle in her heart. “I can see a few good things about you, Matthew, not that either of us is interested in the way Nanna thinks. I tried to tell her that you were more interested in fixing her ancient pipes than in making small talk with me, but she wanted to know every single word we exchanged when we were alone in her kitchen.”

“She couldn’t hear us well enough from the garden, huh?”

“That’s what I thought, too.” Hope unfolded the neat crease at the top of her sack, and the fresh scent of frosting and cinnamon made her stomach rumble.

Matthew handed her an unopened juice box and knelt down a fair distance from her. “My mom was singing your praises last night when I went to pick up my boys. She had that same look in her eyes that Nora had.”

“You’re right, they are shameless meddlers and they need to be taught a lesson.” She held out the bag to him.

He reached inside and withdrew a gooey pastry. “Now I’m doubly grateful you came by. These cinnamon rolls are the best things I’ve seen in a long time. Nora’s baking is famous county-wide.”

“Nora’s recipe, but I baked them.”

“You?” Did he have to look so surprised?

“Hey, I have my uses. I packed enough for you to take home to your boys.” She took one sticky roll and plopped the bag on the blanket between them. “Now, wipe that shocked look off your face and tell me. Do you have any idea who your mom might be

interested in?”

“Not one. I’ll have to pry into her life a little, like she’s been doing to mine lately.” He sank his teeth into the roll and moaned. “I took a long hard look at Mom last night, and I figure she’s got to be lonely. I’ve got my boys, but when the day is done, she’s alone.”

“Nanna’s the same way. It’s got to be sad. All the work they did and the sacrifices they made to raise their families, and now, when they should be enjoying their lives, they have no one to share with.”

“Do you know how we can fix that?”

“Not really. I was hoping you’d have a brilliant idea and get me off the hook.”

“Give me another cinnamon roll and we’ll see what I can come up with.”

He’s deeply lonely, too. Again, Hope felt it with the same certainty as the gentle breezes on her face. She wondered if he sat up at night, watching the late shows or reading to the end of a book just to keep from going to bed alone, as she did. She wondered if he, too, had a hard time sleeping with the dark and the silence of the night, when prayer could only ease the empty space....

“Nanna let it slip that she has a crush on Harold.”

“Kathy’s grand dad?” Matthew nodded slowly as he helped himself to another roll. “I noticed Helen fought to sit next to him at the Founder’s Days committee meeting, but I didn’t know Nora

was interested in him, too.”

“He wouldn’t be lonely, would he?”

“He’s been a widower as long as I have.” Matthew stared down at the pastry and didn’t take a bite, the sadness in his eyes stark and unmistakable.

Maybe Nanna was right, Hope considered. Maybe, every now and then, true love was possible. Every now and then.

“I’m taking the boys to see him at his ranch this weekend. Between chasing after my sons, I’ll try to figure out if Harold is interested in Nora.”

“And if he is, we could casually set them up so they wouldn’t know it was us. Something not as obvious as what they did to us on the Founder’s Days committee.”

“Sounds like a good plan.” Matthew took a bite of the roll, but the sadness remained in his eyes. The breeze tangled his hair, tossing a dark hank over his brow, and she fought the urge to brush it away, fought the urge to reach out and try to comfort him.

“How’s the roof coming along?” she asked, not knowing what else to say to change the direction of their conversation. She stood, drawn toward the ladder stretching twenty feet in the air, and studied the roof’s steeply pitched slope. “Do you mind if I climb up?”

“Yeah, I mind.” He leaped to his feet, all business, square jaw set and hands fisted. “You could fall, and then what would I say to your grandmother?”

“I won’t fall.” She spun around, taking in the expanse of the

river valley bright with the colors of spring, and ached for her camera. “Okay, I’m not interested in your roofing job, but on the walk over here my mind clicked back to work and I could get a great view from up there.”

“You can get a great view of the valley from the road.”

“Yeah, but I’m already here.” She grabbed hold of the ladder and fit her sneaker onto the weathered rung.

“Hope, I’m not kidding. You’re going to break your neck.” But he didn’t sound too upset with her.

When she looked over her shoulder, she saw that he was holding the ladder steady for her and shaking his head as if to say women didn’t belong on ladders. Well, she wouldn’t be on for long. “I appreciate this, Matthew.”

“If you weren’t helping me out with my mom, I’d let go of this ladder.”

“Sure you would. You’re too nice of a guy.”

“That’s only according to rumor. You can’t trust everything you hear.”

“Nanna says a man who can raise three small boys at the same time has to have the patience of Job and the temperament of an angel.”

“Either that or he’s on psychiatric medication.”

Hope stumbled onto the roof, laughing, but Matthew hadn’t fooled her. Sure, he was joking, but there was no way he could disguise the patience and good humor lighting him up from within, not quite chasing away his sadness. It touched her

somewhere deep inside her well-defended heart. How was it that this man could affect her so much and so quickly?

“Be careful up there.” The ladder rubbed against the weathered eaves with each step Matthew took as he climbed higher. “I don’t want to have to explain to Nora how I let her only granddaughter tumble off a barn roof. I’d never get work from her again.”

“Repeat business is all that matters, is it?”

“Sure.” He hopped onto the roof with an athletic prowess that drew Hope’s gaze, and a slow smile tugged at the left corner of his mouth. “Now before you start running around up here, some of the shingles aren’t tacked down yet.”

“I noticed that. Really.” Wisps had escaped from her ponytail, and she swept them back with one hand. “Between you and Nanna, I feel like an awkward kid again. Stop worrying about me, okay? I’m not going to take a nosedive off the barn. I’ve been on a roof before.”

“Not as often as I have, I bet.” He curved his hand around her elbow, holding her secure. “Just in case.”

“I’m not afraid of heights.”

“I am.”

“You? Manhattan’s best carpenter?”

“My roof jobs would dry up if word like that got around. You’ll keep my secret, right?” His grip on her arm remained, sure and steady, keeping her safe.

“I don’t know,” she teased in turn, heading toward the roof’s

peak. “Seems to me keeping a secret like that could be worth some money.”

He chuckled, rich and deep, and it somehow moved through her even though they hardly touched. Like a vibration of warmth and sunlight, she felt it, and when her sneaker hit a loose shingle, his grip on her arm held her steady even before she could stumble.

His touch remained, branding her with his skin’s heat, and she almost stumbled again. Why was her heart beating as if she’d run a mile? With every step she took, she was aware of the way he moved beside her—the easy, athletic movements as he escorted her safely to the peak of the sloped roof.

No, she wasn’t attracted to him. He was simply being a gentleman, as he’d been when he’d carried her luggage and driven her home on the night of the storm. A gentleman, nothing more and nothing less, and even if that was attractive to her, she didn’t need to panic. He was no threat to her heart. No threat at all.

She faced the wind, and the sweet country breezes lifted the hair from her brow and whirred in her ears. Sunlight slanted in ragged, luminous fingers from the wide blue sky to the rich green earth.

“I should have brought my camera. Look at the cloud shadow on those hills.”

“The Tobacco Roots.” He nodded toward the wrinkled hills in the distance, rugged and rocky, in contrast to the regal Rockies to the West. “Kathy and I used to hike there before the boys were born. We tried it once afterward, carting the three of them in

backpacks, but they were hot and miserable and, unfortunately, teething. We decided not to make that mistake again.”

“Scared away the wildlife, did they?”

“I still think half the deer never did return to their natural habitat. The park ranger threatened to ticket us.” He shrugged one capable shoulder but his grin didn’t reach all the way to his eyes.

“I remember Kathy. She was two years behind us in school, wasn’t she?”

“Yes.” A muscle worked in his jaw as he towered over her, his back to the sun, his face shadowed.

Hope sat on the hot shingles, emotions tangled into a knot in her stomach. She didn’t want to say anything more that would make sadness shade his eyes. “How old are your boys?”

“Three, almost four. Their birthday is in July.”

“Triplets. That must be a handful.”

“When Kathy was alive, it was almost manageable. When we finally got them on the same sleeping schedule, that is.” The sadness crept into his eyes anyway as he sat down beside her, leaving a deliberate space between them. “Right now I’m between housekeepers. It’s hard to find someone with the right temperament.”

“I bet it isn’t easy keeping up with triplets.”

“It’s not impossible. They are something, I’ll tell you that, always going in different directions at once, but I wouldn’t trade ’em for the world.”

The wind tossed dark shocks of hair over his brow as he looked everywhere but at her. “I haven’t seen the world like you have, heck, I haven’t even been out of Montana, but I have everything I want right now. I have my boys and that’s all I need.”

“Then you’re a lucky man.”

“I’m not going to argue with you about that.”

His voice dipped and he turned away from her to study the valley spread out before them. As the silence lengthened, Hope tried to pretend she wasn’t touched by what she’d seen in Matthew’s eyes and heard unspoken in his words, but she failed. She was touched. Anyone could see a father’s steadfast love in him as certain as the warm sun overhead.

Not that what lived in Matthew’s heart was any of her business.

Maybe this jumpy, skittery feeling wasn’t an attraction to Matthew at all. Maybe she was itching to start working again. That’s it. “I’d better get back before Nanna misses me.”

Matthew stood, not meeting her gaze, and offered his hand.

She straightened on her own, not certain if she could touch him one more time. She wasn’t attracted to him...and she didn’t want her physical reaction to him proving her wrong.

“Looks like we’re in trouble.” Without looking at her, he nodded across the field toward the dirt road, where a dust plume rose behind a sedate burgundy sedan. “It’s my mom. No, there’s no time to run. There she is. We’re busted.”

The look of dismay on Hope’s face told Matthew she didn’t like the prospect of being caught alone with him, and he couldn’t

blame her. Mom would jump to conclusions and only take seeing them together as encouragement. He held the ladder for Hope so she could climb down safely.

She knelt and carefully placed her designer sneakers on the top rung. "Sure, send me down first into enemy territory."

"Better you than me. Mom will show you mercy."

"Not if she's anything like Nanna."

Her attempt at humor touched him because she couldn't like this situation. It was absurd that anyone would think that a small-town carpenter belonged anywhere near a millionaire's daughter.

"Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" The words rang on the air the instant the passenger door of Mom's car swung open. As Hope finished descending, Matthew watched his sons race full out toward the fence until Mom shouted at them to wait and not touch the barbed wire.

Hope lighted on the ground and tilted her head back to look at him. "I didn't know they were identical."

"Keeps things interesting."

"I bet it does." She covered her eyes with her free hand and squinted through the glaring sun to watch the triplets tumble into the field.

He started down the ladder, descending quickly. Already Mom was helping the boys through the fence and there was no mistaking the look of delight in that grin of hers, which he could see plainly from across the field. This wasn't what he needed. Mom would think she was on the right track and start really

pushing.

“Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!” The triplets plowed through the sweet-smelling alfalfa and scrambled to him, arms flung open.

Matthew barely had time to brace himself before the boys threw their arms around his knees and held on tight, bouncing and shouting. “Did you three give your grandma so much trouble she decided to give you back?”

“It was tempting,” Mom teased over the racket of the boys talking at once. He heard the words “fire,” “fireman” and “big truck.” “Agnes had a small kitchen fire and wanted you to give her an estimate on the damage.”

“You could have called, Mom.” Matthew lifted Josh onto his hip.

“Yes, but you know I hate talking to that beeper thing of yours. Hope, what a pleasure to see you again.” Mom practically beamed as she approached the slim woman who stood off by herself, as if not sure what to think of them all. “I heard from Nora you were in town.”

“She finally figured out a way to get me back here.” Hope took Mom’s hand, her manner warm, as if she wasn’t upset in the slightest. “It’s good to see you again, Patsy.”

The boys demanded Matthew’s attention, telling him everything about the sirens and the big red truck, but his gaze kept straying to the woman talking with his mother, whose girl-next-door freshness was at odds with everything he remembered about Hope Ashton from high school.

“Is that lady gonna take us?” Josh asked, both fists tight in Matthew’s T-shirt.

The other boys turned to frown at Hope, and before Matthew could answer, she did.

“No, but I did bring you boys something.” Hope swirled away from his mother and snatched the paper bag from the blanket.

Of course, his mother took one look at the blanket, not an item he usually took to work with him, and lifted one curious—or was that accusing?—eyebrow.

Ian took one step forward, interested in Hope’s paper bag. “Cookies?”

“Candy?” Kale looked tempted.

Josh buried his face in Matthew’s shoulder and held on tight.

Matthew watched as Hope shook her head, dark wisps tangling in the wind, and knelt down, opening the sack. “If you boys don’t like cinnamon rolls, I could eat them all by myself—”

“Cinnamon rolls?” Kale shot forward, not caring if this woman was a stranger. “Like the kind Gramma makes? With frosting?”

“With frosting.”

Ian scrambled closer. “Does it got raisins? Don’t like raisins.”

“No raisins, but they do have icing. Go ahead and try one.” Hope shook the bag, as if she were trying to coax them closer.

Huge mistake. Matthew set out to rescue her as both boys plunged their hands into the sack, fighting for the biggest roll. But Hope only laughed, a warm gentle sound that made him stop and

really look at her, at this outsider who had never quite belonged in their small Montana town.

She didn't look like an outsider now. Her faded denims hugged her slender legs with an easy casualness, and her T-shirt was probably a big-label brand, but the cherry-red color brought out the bronzed hue of her skin and the gleam of laughter in her eyes. She didn't look like a millionaire's daughter and an established photographer.

She looked like a beautiful woman who liked children. His children.

"No, only take one." She merely shrugged when Kale got away with two plump rolls, and Matthew was about to make Kale put the pastry back when Hope shook her head, her cheeks pink with laughter, her eyes bright and merry. "Good thing I brought enough for second helpings."

Josh buried his face harder into Matthew's shoulder and held on tighter.

"He's sensitive." Matthew leaned his cheek against the top of the boy's head. "We've gone through a lot of baby-sitters and it's been hard on him."

"I know exactly what that feels like. I had a lot of different nannies when I was little. All that change can be hard." She pressed the bag into Matthew's free hand. "He might be interested once I'm gone."

Why did he feel disappointed that she was leaving? "So, you're leaving me alone with my mom?"

Hope glanced over her shoulder to watch his mother sit Ian and Kale down on the blanket, admonishing them to eat with their mouths closed. "I bet a grown man like you can handle anything and besides, I don't want to be in the way."

"You're welcome to stay." And it surprised him because he meant it.

"This will be the perfect opportunity to talk with your mother and try to figure out who we should fix her up with." She backed away, lifting a hand to wave at Mom and the boys.

"I hope to see you again soon," Mom called. "Say thank-you, Ian, Kale."

Two thank-yous chimed in unison.

Matthew watched helplessly as she breezed away from him, the big blue sky at her back, the green field at her feet. He wanted to stop her, to keep her here with him. It didn't make a bit of sense, but that's how he felt. He couldn't help it.

He watched as she turned around to glance at his boys eating unfurled sections of their cinnamon rolls, sticky and happy, and the look in her eyes, the softness on her face made his knees weak. He had to lean against the corner of the old barn for support.

Was that longing he saw on Hope Ashton's face? Before he could be sure, it was gone. She shouted across the widening distance. "I'll tell Nanna you haven't forgotten about repairing her cabinets."

"Sure." He felt tongue-tied, not sure what to say as she spun

around and headed off through the fields, leaving him with a strange, yearning feeling.

A feeling he decided he wouldn't look at too closely.

"Those boys are the cutest things I ever did see," Nanna crooned as Matthew's triplets tripped down the church aisle, their father towering over them. "And Matthew is cute in an entirely different way. Why, if I were you, Hope, I'd cut a path for that man, I tell you. He's as dependable as the day is long, and you already know he'll make a wonderful father. Look how he handles those boys."

"I'm immune to the lovebug, Nanna. Don't get your hopes up because I'm not planning on marrying anyone."

"Still, Matthew is a very handsome man."

"He's still grieving his wife, Nanna. Have you and Patsy given one thought about how much your matchmaking is hurting him?"

"Well, if that's true, then I'm sorry about that, but honestly, grief does fade, maybe not completely, but there comes a time when you're ready to start accepting what life has to give." Nanna's hand covered Hope's and squeezed gently, lovingly. "In time a heart is ready to love again."

"You've been a widow for over ten years."

"That I have." Her sigh was sad, and the old lady looked hard at the stained glass windows bursting with color beneath the sun's touch. "But I'm more concerned about you. You should be thinking about starting a family of your own. Patsy told me you

went to see Matthew for a little picnic the other day.”

“No, I went to remind him about your cabinets.”

“With cinnamon rolls?”

Hope glanced around, desperate for a change of subject. She spotted an elderly man, his back straight and his shoulders strong as if he'd done battle with age and won, his gray hair distinguished as he strode powerfully down the aisle toward Matthew and the triplets. “Look, there's Harold. I can see why you have a crush on him.”

“It's probably foolish, but I—” Nanna stopped, the brightness in her eyes fading. “I'm just having a little fun, and it makes me feel young again.”

Hope wondered at the change in her grandmother, and when she saw Helen hurrying down the aisle to speak with Harold, she knew why. Helen might not have any idea how Nanna felt about the handsome older gentleman, and Hope knew that Nanna wasn't about to say anything differently now.

Organ music broke through the din of the congregation settling onto the old wooden pews, and disappointment wrapped around Hope's heart as Helen took Harold by the arm and led him to Matthew's pew.

“It's not like I'm crazy over the man or anything,” Nanna said staunchly, but her voice sounded too tight and strained to be telling the truth. “But a handsome man is always a joy to behold.”

Six rows ahead of them, Matthew stood to greet his grandfather-in-law. Patsy was there and ordered the boys to

squeeze closer together to make room, and there was enough space on the bench for Helen to settle down beside Harold.

As if he felt her gaze, Matthew turned and found her in the crowd. He wore a dark suit and a white shirt that emphasized his sun-browned, wholesome good looks, the kind a man had when he worked outside for a living.

Her heart gave a strange little flip-flop.

“I’m sorry,” he seemed to say as he shrugged.

She shrugged back. Matchmaking wasn’t as easy as it looked.

Sad for Nanna, Hope wrapped her arm around the old woman’s shoulders and held her tight. They were in God’s house. Surely here of all places He could gaze into the old woman’s heart and see the loneliness—and now the hurt.

Please help her feel young again, Hope prayed. With the days she has left, let her know love one more time.

Chapter Five

Matthew knew what his mother was up to the minute that he saw Hope through the Sunshine Café's front window.

"Look, there's Nora and her granddaughter." Mom flashed him a not-so-innocent smile. "I told Nora to get a table big enough for all of us. I thought brunch sounded like just the thing. I told Harold to meet us there, but it looks like Helen might be coming, too."

"Mom, tell me you didn't invite Hope and Nora to join us." Matthew kept tight hold on Ian and Kale as he stopped in his tracks in the middle of the sidewalk crowded with after-church traffic. "Tell me you wouldn't meddle in my life like that."

"It's just brunch. Nora's been so housebound I thought—"

"You didn't think. You just decided what you wanted to do and lied about it to me."

"Lied?" Her jaw sagged and her free hand lighted on the back of his. "I did no such thing. I just didn't tell you—"

"The truth?"

"No, that Hope would be joining us." Mom looked so proud of herself, as if she truly believed she was doing what was best for him. "Well, look, Nora's waving at us through the window. It's too late to back out now, but if you want to—"

Matthew's jaw snapped tight. He hated it when his mother did this. She meant well, and he figured she didn't want him to be

as lonely as she was, but that didn't mean she could break open his heart like this and make him remember everything he was missing.

"Daddy!" Ian complained loudly, tugging hard against Matthew's grip. "I wanna hamburger."

"Hamburger, Daddy," Kale demanded. "I'm hungry."

They went inside, but he didn't like it. The boys were already counting on devouring one of their favorite meals and he wouldn't disappoint them. Not that he could stomach his mother thinking that her plan was working.

"Look at those darling boys," Nora crooned, welcoming them all with a bright hello.

Hope sat at her grandmother's side, somehow elegant and country-fresh at the same time in a lavender cotton dress, the kind that swirled around her woman's form, making her look as tempting as spring. She met his gaze and shrugged, letting him know she'd been as tricked into this as he was.

"It's the lady!" Ian raced straight to Hope and climbed onto the empty chair beside her with a clatter.

Hope held the chair steady as the boy settled down next to her. "I like your shirt."

"Trucks." Ian looked down at his shirt and slapped his little hand across a red truck imprinted there. "This is a fire truck—" he moved his fingers "—and a ladder truck and a tanker truck."

Matthew hefted Kale onto a chair at the end of the table, leaving his mother to deal with the booster seats the waitress was

lugging toward them, and went to rescue Hope.

“He’s into trucks,” Matthew explained as he bent to haul Ian out of the chair next to Hope, where he clearly didn’t belong.

“So am I, as a matter of fact.” She laid her warm fingers on his forearm to stop him from lifting the boy away, and her touch and words surprised him. “Ian, guess what? I saw a dump truck yesterday.”

“I seed a fire truck and...and it had water and everything.” Ian looked proud of himself.

Mom, at the end of the table, shot a happy look at Nora and beamed as if she’d discovered a big pot of gold.

“Okay, that’s enough.” Matthew grabbed Ian around the middle. Hope might be a good sport about his mother’s meddling and she was being kind to his son, but she clearly wasn’t into children. It wasn’t as if, at her age, she was married with kids of her own. “Little fireman, let’s get you over here with Gramma so you can’t bother Hope.”

“He can stay, Matthew.” Her words were velvet steel. “If you want to move him, fine, but he’s not bothering me.”

“He’ll be like this through the whole meal.”

“I like Ian. He’s a fellow truck lover.” The truth shone in her eyes—she seemed to really want Ian beside her. “Look, if you don’t trust me with him, sit right here with us and make sure I don’t start a food fight.”

“Are you kidding? Look at those two old meddling women.” He looked up to find both Mom and Nora watching him.

“Watch who you’re calling old, young man,” Nora admonished but looked undaunted as she winked at him. “Look at how your little boy takes to Hope.”

Help. That’s what he needed. Big-time help. Before he could protest, Hope spoke up.

“Nanna, you know I like children, so stop torturing Matthew or I’ll burn your supper tonight.” Hope flashed her grandmother a warning look, but her words held no real threat.

The door behind him snapped open and Helen walked through, escorting Harold. As the older women turned to greet the newcomers, Matthew knelt beside Hope and lowered his voice. “If we don’t protest this with a united front, they’ll think their matchmaking tricks are working.”

“So? Let them.” There were shadows in Hope’s eyes, too, and he watched her press a hand to her stomach, as if she were in pain. “Sooner or later they’ll figure out the truth and they’ll be happily married by then.”

She looked confident and somehow unhappy, too, and that troubled him. He wasn’t the only one hurt by this. As Helen and Harold made their way to the table, settling down on the far side of Nora, Matthew couldn’t help leaning close to whisper in Hope’s ear. “What about Helen?”

“Good question.” She swept a lock of hair from her face, an unconscious gesture that drew his gaze, and he couldn’t look away from her beauty. Her skin looked silken-soft, and she smelled like sun-kissed wildflowers.

Why couldn't he stop noticing?

Hope caught Matthew alone in front of the egg trays at the buffet server. Grabbing a plate, she slid into line behind him. "Those women are incorrigible, using little children to further their matchmaking plans. Look at them."

Matthew peered over his shoulder toward their table situated near the front of the café, where Patsy straightened up from pouring ketchup on Josh's plate. His mom flashed him a triumphant smile that might mean, "See, I was right." Seated next to Helen, Nanna laughed, caught in the act of spying.

"I see." He reached for a serving spoon, trying to control a building anger. "They look pleased with themselves."

"Too darn pleased."

"You're encouraging them." Matthew spooned a heap of scrambled eggs onto his plate. "And I don't like it. It's not like I want Mom to think there's a chance I would want—"

He paused. No, those words hadn't sounded right. That wasn't what he meant.

"Oh." Hope heard his words and her fingers knocked against a serving spoon with a clatter. "That's fine, Matthew. I'll straighten things out once we get back to the table."

He'd spoken without thinking, out of anger and hurt and frustration. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean I wouldn't want to be seen with you."

"It's okay. You have every right to your opinion." She scooped

up a poached egg and plopped it on her plate, concentrating very hard so she didn't have to look at him. "I wasn't the nicest person in high school, I'll grant you that. But I was young and with the way my family behaved, I didn't know any better. That must be what you see when you look at me."

"That's not what I see." His gaze shot behind her to where customers were grabbing plates from the stack, and moved forward to the heated trays of crisp bacon and spicy sausages. "I meant, why would a beautiful woman who has everything want to hang out with me."

"Really, it's okay." Hope grabbed blindly for the tongs and dropped a bunch of sausages on her plate, then circled around Matthew, leaving him alone.

It wasn't okay, and she didn't know why, but a horrible tightness was squeezing into her chest. When she reached the table piled high with fruit and breads, she set her plate down and took a deep breath.

This was irrational. Completely insane. She should get a grip before someone noticed how upset she was. Taking a deep breath, she ladled melon slices onto her plate and tried not to take flight when Matthew eased beside her, reaching for a few sweet breads.

"Cinnamon rolls, for the boys." His shoulder brushed her arm as he arranged the sweet-smelling pastries onto his crowded plate. "Hope, I'm sorry. I just meant that it's not like either one of us wants half the town thinking we're together. Rumors spread

fast in a small town.”

“I see your point.” Trying to hide her hurt, she released the spoon too quickly, and metal clattered against the glass bowl. “For your information, I’m not all that bad to be around, at least, I’ve had other people think so. I might not be the best person in the world but I’m not the worst, thank you very much.”

Without looking at him, even as he was opening his mouth to say whatever it was that would just make her angrier, she grabbed her plate and stormed toward the table, no longer caring who noticed.

“Have a nice chat with Matthew?”

Hope set the plate on the table in front of Nanna and glared at her grandmother. She caught Patsy with a withering look and willed her voice to be quiet but firm. “No more matchmaking. I’ve had enough of it, and so has Matthew. Believe me, there’s no chance in a blue moon that we’ll ever have anything in common, so not another word. Not one more word.”

“She’s right.” Matthew towered behind her, square jaw clenched, broad shoulders set and a look of fury in his eyes. But his anger was controlled as he looked from his mother to Nanna, and then it seemed to fade away. “You heard Hope. We’re from different worlds and whatever you two have in mind is never going to work.”

“Don’t they say that opposites attract?” Patsy looked ready to launch into a full-out, charming defense but seemed to change her mind when she saw the look on her son’s face. “I only wanted

to help, that's all. Look at these little tykes. They need a mother's care."

"Yes, that's right, and we love you both. We want you to be happy." Nanna didn't look one bit sorry. "Now, enough with this nonsense. Matthew, sit down and tend to your boys. Look what they've done with the ketchup."

Matthew caught Kale before he wiped ketchup on his brother, distracted from the issue at hand, but Hope wasn't fooled. She knew that Nanna had survived a life filled with losses and loneliness with an indomitable heart, and nothing would derail her, especially not something she felt was this important.

Frustrated, she kissed her grandmother's cheek and headed for the buffet table to fill a plate for herself. Her stomach burned and even if she wasn't hungry, she had to eat.

It wouldn't be easy, sitting next to Matthew's son and feeling Matthew's solid presence all through the meal...and maybe feeling his dislike of her.

There was no way he would ever make Mom understand. Matthew fought frustration as he opened the refrigerator and hauled out a yellow pitcher. He slammed the door and rummaged in the cupboard for a plastic glass.

Sure, Mom was sorry but she didn't understand. She thought he was lonely and that he was holding onto Kathy's memory so that he could keep his heart safe from the risk of loving again. Well, she couldn't be more wrong.

After pouring, he left the pitcher on the counter, snatched the glass and headed through the house. His footsteps echoed in the too-quiet rooms, and the dark shadows made him all too aware that he was alone. A wife would have turned on the lamps and maybe put on some soothing music. That's what Kathy always did. His heart warmed, remembering.

He switched on the lamps and shuffled through the CDs, but couldn't find anything that felt right. Silence was okay; he didn't need to cover up the sound of the empty hours between the triplets' bedtime and his own.

Matthew sat down in the recliner, put his feet up, drank some juice and grabbed the paperback book lying facedown on the end table. But when he flipped to where he'd left off reading last, the printed words stared back at him and he couldn't concentrate.

He kept seeing Hope storming away from him in the café, hiding her hurt feelings behind cool anger, and he slammed the book shut. Frustration and conscience tugged at him. He wanted to head outside and keep going until the darkness and the cool night air breezed away this horrible knot of emotion and confusion tightening around his heart.

As he launched out of the chair, his feet hit the ground with a thud and he flew across the room. The silence felt thunderous and the emptiness inside felt as endless as the night. The doorknob was in his hand and the next thing he knew he was pounding down the front steps and into the cool darkness.

The crisp winds lashed across him, tangling his hair and

driving through his shirt and jeans. He shivered, but at least he was feeling something besides heartache. Besides loneliness.

The wind rustled through the maple leaves near the house, and the rattling whisper of the aspens along the property line chased away the silence still ringing in his ears. He breathed in the scents of night earth, grass and ripening alfalfa from the nearby fields at the edge of town as a distant coyote called out and was answered. An owl swooped close on broad, silent wings and cut across the path of light spilling through the open door. He missed Kathy so much.

Father, help me to put an end to this.

There was no answer from the night, no sense of calm, no solution whispering on the wind.

“Daddy?”

Matthew heard a sniff and spun around. Josh huddled on the doorstep, rubbing at his eyes with both fists, his spaceship printed pajamas trembling around his small form. “What are you doing out of bed, hotshot?”

“I’m thirsty.”

“Then come have some water with me.” Matthew scooped his youngest son into his arms and held him close. He headed back into the house, shut the door with his foot and carried Josh into the kitchen.

The boy didn’t want to let go, so Matthew balanced him on one hip while he searched for a second glass and found a clean one in the top rack of the dishwasher. He filled the glass while

Josh clung to him.

The small boy was too sleepy to talk. He drank, smacked his lips and closed his eyes. Matthew's heart tightened with love for his child. For Kathy's child.

With Josh's head bobbing against Matthew's shoulder, he carried his son down the hall to the dark bedroom where a Pooh Bear night-light cast a faint glow across the two other boys sound asleep in their beds, teddy bears clutched in small hands.

"Sweet dreams," Matthew whispered as he laid Josh down on the spaceship sheets and covered him with the matching comforter.

Josh murmured, reaching out. Matthew spotted the bear lying forgotten against the wall and pressed it against his son's chest. The boy yawned, eyes closed, and sleep claimed him. He didn't stir when Matthew kissed his brow.

Kathy would have loved this, tucking in the boys, basking in the peace and quiet. She would have treasured the sense of rightness, of a day well spent and the blessing of three healthy sons asleep in their beds. With every beat of his heart, he missed her.

She was no more than a blurred face in his mind, the distant memory of a kind voice, and maybe that's what troubled him most of all. The real reason he was on edge with his mother and had hurt Hope's feelings. Because his beloved Kathy was fading from his memory, a little bit at a time, leaving a void in his heart. He could no longer recall the exact tone of her voice or the exact

shade of her blond hair. And her smile, her touch, her presence...

She'd been the love of his life, and she was fading away from him slowly, piece by piece, memory by memory.

Clenching his fists, Matthew stood, crossed the room and pulled the door closed behind him. The empty feeling of the house seemed to vibrate around him, and he knew what he had to do. He'd behaved badly today, and it tugged at his conscience like a fifty-pound weight.

After looking up the number in the white pages, Matthew punched the lighted buttons on the pad, glowing a faint yellow, and glanced at the kitchen clock. Not ten yet. Maybe she'd still be awake.

"Hello?" Hope's voice answered after the second ring, gentle as an evening breeze.

"It's Matthew. You have every right to hang up on me, but I wanted to talk with you. I need to apologize."

"It isn't important." A reserve crept into her words, now that she knew he was the caller.

"What could be more important than your feelings?" He waited while the seconds ticked by.

"Fine, apology accepted."

"Wait, give me a chance to actually apologize. And there's something I wanted to talk about with you—"

"Good night, Matthew." There was a click and the line went dead.

It was worse than he'd thought. Hope was truly angry with

him. You sure handled that just fine. Did he call her back and tell her what Harold had told him today?

The static on the line seemed to answer him, and he dropped the receiver into the cradle. The night, the shadows and the loneliness remained, and now he could add being a horse's rear to the list.

Troubled, he paced through the house, locking the doors, checking the windows, turning out the lights, feeling empty inside. A verse came to him, quiet as the night. So if you are suffering according to God's will, keep on doing what is right, and trust yourself to the God who made you, for He will never fail you.

The frustration and pain raging inside him eased, and he no longer felt alone in the dark night. Father, I'm struggling. Please show me the way.

Nanna looked old, older than Hope had ever seen her. Bright, fresh morning light teased at the window and tossed lemony rays across the foot of the old four-poster bed. Heart heavy, Hope lifted the breakfast tray laden with untouched food as Nanna curled on her side, pale with pain and still from the effects of the medication.

"She overdid it yesterday." Kirby tried to reassure Hope in the kitchen, where she sat at the table bent over her paperwork. "Nora isn't young anymore, and an injury like this is hard on a woman her age. Try not to worry so much. The new dose of

painkiller seems to be working, so let's hope she sleeps through the morning.”

Hope prayed that Kirby was right as she filled the coffee carafe at the sink, the spray of water into the empty container ringing in her ears. She shut off the faucet and looked down at the smooth, shiny handles Matthew had installed, and the worry eased away, which made no sense because she was still angry at the way he'd treated her in the restaurant. His behavior toward her had been so different from when he'd helped her to the top of the McKaslin's barn roof, when he'd held her safe and kept her from stumbling.

He didn't want his sons near her, and he didn't want to be seen in the same café as her. Well, that was perfectly fine. She wasn't looking for a man, especially not a settling-down widower with three kids in tow. Really, that's not what she was looking for. And it didn't matter how cute those little boys were. Not one bit.

She didn't need a family. She didn't need love. She didn't need to start seeing a fairy tale where none could ever exist. At least, fairy tales didn't happen to her and she was wise enough and old enough to know it.

After spooning ground gourmet coffee into the filter and turning the coffeemaker on, she grabbed an old knife and headed outside. The sweet gentle warmth of morning breezed against her as she hopped down the steps. She then knelt alongside the flower bed that ran the length of the house.

Untended since Nanna's injury, weeds were taking a firm hold

in the rich soil. Tulips vied with dandelions and thistles, and Hope vowed to do some weeding, maybe later today when Nanna was doing better. The thought strengthened her, but even as she cut flowers, her mind kept drifting back to Matthew Sheridan and her heart clenched.

Yesterday, as he worked to keep his little boys from playing with their food, he'd handled them with tenderness and patience. Something she wouldn't have thought a man, even one as good as Matthew, could have possessed. And this was the man who hadn't wanted her befriending his boys, and the man who didn't want half the town thinking he was with her.

Good, fine, get over it, she told herself. But part of her felt hurt and angry. Hurt because she wished he didn't look at her and see her mother's daughter. Angry because it was easier than admitting the truth.

She gathered the cut flowers, arranged them in a vase and carried them upstairs. Nanna slept on her side, one hand curled on her pillow, her gray hair swept back from her eyes making her look as vulnerable as a child.

Yesterday had been tough on Nanna, although she would never admit it. Hope had seen the look on her grandmother's face when Helen had walked into the café with her hand on Harold's arm. There had been a brief flicker of sadness and regret, and then she'd invited Helen to sit down next to her. Nanna had let go of her hopes, just like that, for the sake of her lifelong friend.

There had to be a way to make her happy. But what? Feeling

lost, Hope scooted the vase onto the edge of the nightstand and nudged it into place, bumping into a gold-framed photograph.

Hope's heart melted when she saw her grandfather's picture, a man she'd met only twice as a child, and Nanna's love. They'd met in grade school, Nanna told her, and they played together in the creek that bordered their family's properties.

He'd been her true love, one that didn't fade even after his death. Nanna had been newly widowed when Hope had visited the year she'd turned seventeen—it felt so long ago now, but the memories filled her with emotion. She remembered how two females, one old and one young and both hurting, forged a bond of love that summer.

She looked at the kind man in the photograph, taken at a summer picnic, maybe the town's annual Founder's Days celebration. It was easy to recognize the love in Granddad's eyes as he danced with a younger Nanna beneath an endless azure sky.

For the first time, Hope let herself consider that maybe Nanna meant what she said about love. That sometimes, it was honest and true. It didn't hurt or belittle but made the whole world right.

Sometimes.

With Kirby's words of warning, Matthew negotiated the narrow staircase as quietly as he could in his work boots. A few boards squeaked as he reached the top, and he felt odd prowling down the hall, drawn by the splash of light through an open doorway.

No sounds of conversation came from the room at the end of the corridor. No soothing music or low drone of a television broke the stillness. There was only Hope perched on a chair at her grandmother's bedside, head bowed as she read from the Bible held open on her lap, the light from the window pouring over her shoulder to illuminate the pages.

In the span of a breath, he saw the depths of her heart as she turned the page, searching for passages. Every opinion he'd formed of Hope Ashton faded like fog in sun.

"Matthew," she whispered, startled, and closed her Bible with quiet reverence. "What are you doing here?"

He gestured toward the bed, where Nora barely disturbed the quilt. "I have the cabinets."

"Now isn't the best time." Hope laid her Bible on the crowded nightstand and padded across the wood floor as quietly as she could manage. "Where's Kirby?"

"Downstairs on the phone speaking with the doctor," he explained once they were in the hallway. "She said her call might take a while and that you might be up here all morning, so if I wanted you, I'd better fetch you myself."

"She's right." Hope led the way down the hallway. "I wouldn't be able to bribe you into coming back another day, could I?"

"If it's a good enough bribe," he teased, wishing he could mend how he'd hurt her.

She almost smiled, but it was enough to chase the lines of exhaustion from her soft face. When they reached the bottom

of the stairs, the bright morning light accentuated the bruises of exhaustion beneath her eyes and surprised him.

He followed her through the front door and onto the wide old-fashioned porch where flowering vines clutched at the railing. The morning's breeze tossed back the dark curls escaping from Hope's ponytail and ruffled the hem of her T-shirt.

It was only then he realized what she was wearing—an old T-shirt with the imprint faded away and a stretched-out neck, and a pair of old gray sweatpants with a hole in the knee. She ambled to the old porch swing on stocking feet and sighed as she eased onto the board seat.

“Rough night?” he asked.

She nodded, this woman who could have hired a legion of nurses to take care of her grandmother. But she had come herself without nurses or help from the rest of her family. By the looks of it, she'd spent most of the night at Nora's side.

“I know what that's like. I didn't get a whole lot of sleep during the triplets' first two years.” He headed toward the steps. “I better leave so you can get some rest. We'll worry about the cabinets some other time.”

“I hope this doesn't mess up your work schedule.”

“Don't you worry about my work. Since I finished the McKaslins' barn, I've got a few roofing jobs to do, but I'm always waiting on deliveries. I'll just give a call when I've got time and head on over. When Nora is feeling better, that is.”

“I'm determined to feel optimistic—she's going to be fine.”

Hope offered him a weary smile. “You don’t have to run off, you know. At least not before I get a chance to apologize.”

“I’m the one who owes you an apology. I practiced it on the drive over here.” He leaned against the rail, arms folded over his chest. “I gave you the wrong impression at the café.”

“No, I understand. You’ve told me how you feel about your mom’s matchmaking schemes, and I shouldn’t have expected you to just shrug them off. You’re right, we shouldn’t encourage them.”

“Now wait a minute. I was going to say that you were right. That those two stubborn opinionated wonderful women can matchmake all they want, but it won’t do a bit of good. They can’t influence us. And if you can have enough grace and class not to be obviously insulted that my mom would try to marry you off to a working man like me, then I can do the same.”

“Yep, spending time with you has been torture. And those boys.” Hope managed a weary smile, but emotion glinted like a new dawn in her eyes and told him what her words didn’t. “Those sons of yours are the cutest kids I’ve ever seen in my life.”

“You won Ian over. He loves a woman with truck knowledge.”

“I’m a working-class woman, so I’ve seen a lot of trucks in my day.” She glanced at him, chin up and gauntlet thrown.

“You’re not a working-class woman, Hope. Not with your family’s income bracket.”

“I was never a part of that family.” Her chin inched a notch higher. “I make my own way in this world.”

“So, that explains the outfit.”

“What?” Then she looked down at the battered pair of gray sweats with a gaping hole in the right knee and the white, so-old-it-was-graying T-shirt. “A true gentleman wouldn’t have said a word, but you had to, didn’t ya?”

“I’m tarnished around the edges.”

“No kidding.” Half-laughing, she swiped the stray curls that had escaped from her ponytail with one hand. “Who needs makeup, presentable clothes and combed hair, right?”

“It’s like seeing you in a whole new light.” The old impressions of the remote, pampered girl he’d known in high school and the expectations he’d had of a rich woman fell away, shattered forever. “It’s not bad from where I’m standing.”

“Sure, try to make me feel better. Yikes, I need a shower and, wow, I can’t believe I look like this.” Embarrassed, laughing at herself, she hopped to her stocking feet, leaving the swing rocking. “I have to go and...and...do something, anything.”

“You look the best I’ve ever seen you.” Maybe he shouldn’t have spoken his heart, but it was too late, and Hope stopped her rapid departure.

She turned, and he saw again the woman seated at her grandmother’s bedside, head bowed over the Bible in her lap. The exhaustion bruising Hope’s eyes and the comfortable clothes she wore to care for an old woman through the night made her all the more beautiful to him.

“Tell anyone about this, and I’ll deny it,” she said.

“So, you are worried about your reputation, after all.”

“You bet, buddy. Guess what your mother will assume if you tell her that you got a good glance at my bare knee?”

“It’s not a bad knee,” he confessed, but before she could answer Kirby stepped into sight and whispered something to Hope.

Alarm spread across Hope’s face, chasing away the smile until only worry remained. “I have to go, Matthew.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

Hope’s gaze latched onto his, filling with tears. “She’s in a lot of pain, and the doctor isn’t certain that the fracture is healing. Prayer would be a help.”

“You’ve got it.” Chest tight, Matthew watched her spin with a flick of her ponytail, and she was gone. Leaving him feeling both lonelier and more alive than he’d been in what felt like a lifetime.

At sixteen minutes before noon, Hope heard a car rumble down the long gravel drive. Patsy Sheridan climbed out into the brisk spring sunshine and, leaving the triplets belted into their car seats, carried a steaming casserole to the front door.

She’d handed the meal over to Kirby before Hope could make it downstairs, but the gratefulness washing over her didn’t diminish after Patsy’s car drove out of sight.

Later, flowers arrived and cakes and Helen brought supper by, a potluck favorite that was always the first to go at the church’s picnics, according to Kirby.

As the dusk came, bringing shadows and evening light, Hope knew that in all her travels, all the places she'd been and photographed, home was here in Montana, in this small town where neighbors took care of one another.

She knew who to thank. Matthew Sheridan had spread the word of Nanna's relapse. And she owed him the world.

Chapter Six

“Is that Matthew’s truck?” Nanna leaned toward the edge of the bed, fighting to see out the window.

“Hey, careful.” Hope gently caught Nanna’s elbow. “All we need for you is to fall and break another bone.”

“I may have broken my leg, but I’m not fragile.” Nanna nodded with satisfaction as Matthew’s dark red pickup gleamed in the sun in the driveway below. “At least, not anymore. This bone will heal, or else. I’ve lost nearly a week in this room, and it’s time to get a move on.”

“Just remember what your doctor said, Nanna.” Hope reached for the hairbrush and knelt on the floor, gently swiping the smooth-bristled brush through Nanna’s soft cloud of gray hair. “Want me to braid this for you?”

“I’d love it, dear heart. I’m in a festive mood, as long as young Matthew Sheridan can get my cabinets right.”

Hope bit her lip so she wouldn’t smile. Fretting over the cabinetry work might give Nanna something to think about other than her injury. “I don’t know if I’d trust Matthew. He’s one of the only carpenters in town. Without much competition, how good can he be?”

Nanna’s eyes sparkled. “So, you like him, do you?”

“Keep dreaming.”

“A girl’s got to try.” Nanna fell silent, allowing Hope to part

and braid her hair, then finish the thick French braid with a cheerful pink bow.

As Hope pulled a comfortable pair of clean pajamas from the bottom bureau drawer, the sound of a second vehicle coming up the driveway drew their attention.

Nanna tipped sideways again. “Goodness, that looks like—”

“Harold.” Hope couldn’t believe her eyes as she watched the distinguished-looking older man climb from a restored 1950s forest-green pickup. A carpenter’s belt hung at his waist as he headed for the back door, his deep voice carrying as he greeted Matthew.

Was this what Matthew had tried to tell her on the phone the night she’d been so abrupt with him? Hope leaned against the window frame and felt the sun warm her face. In the yard below, Matthew and Harold appeared, talking jovially as they unloaded the heavy wood pieces from the back of Matthew’s truck.

The sun gilded Matthew’s powerful frame and heaven knew, she shouldn’t be noticing. A tingle zinged down her spine, and a yearning she’d never felt before opened wide in her heart.

“There’s no way I’m going downstairs in these.” Nanna’s two-piece cotton pajamas landed with a thunk on the end of the bed.

Hope turned from the window. “Nanna, have you ever thought about falling in love again?”

“Goodness, child, a woman my age doesn’t waste what’s left of her days wishing for romance. You have the greatest happiness life has to offer ahead of you. Marriage and children. Now don’t

lie to me, you have to want children.”

Hope felt the warmth inside her wither and fade at the word marriage. Her stomach burned at the memory of exactly what that word meant to her, the old ulcer always remembering. Endless battles, bitter unhappiness and her parents’ habitual neglect of her.

She tried to put the memory aside of the unhappy child hiding in the dark hallway, listening to the hurtful words her parents hurled at each other as if they were grenades. Fearful that this argument would be the one to drive Dad away.

And it reminded her of her own attempt at marriage, ended before it began. And her stomach felt as if it had caught fire. No, she wouldn’t think about the time she was foolish enough to think that love could be real for her.

Determined to distract herself, Hope paced the sunny room. “Where’s the shorts set I bought for you when we took that cruise last summer?”

“Try the drawer chest, second to the bottom.”

Sure enough, the soft blue-and-pink print knit shorts and top were folded amid Nanna’s summer wear, surrounded by sachets of sweet honeysuckle. As she helped her grandmother into the clothes, she wished Matthew had told her he’d invited Harold over.

Kirby tapped down the hall and into the room and together they carried Nanna downstairs. “No, the garden,” she insisted when they tried to situate her in the living room. “I need to feel

the warmth of the sun on these old bones.”

“Let me help.” Matthew strode into the room like a myth—all power, steel and hero. He lifted Nanna into his strong arms, cradling her against his chest. “Nora, it’s been a long time since I’ve held such a beautiful woman in my arms.”

“That’s a line you ought to use on my granddaughter, not on an old woman like me.”

“I’m partial to older women.”

Now I’m going to have to like him. Really, really like him, Hope thought as she held open the wooden framed screen door for Matthew. I’ve run completely out of excuses.

There was no turning back her feelings, especially when he set Nanna onto the shaded, wrought-iron bench with the same care he showed his sons. Tender, gentle, kind, he grabbed one of the matching chairs and drew it close. Watching him made that tingle zing down Hope’s spine again.

No doubt about it, she was in trouble now. As she accepted the pillows Kirby had thought to fetch, she tried not to look at him, but he drew her attention like dawn to the sun.

“Are you going to give me that last pillow?” His mouth curved into a one-sided grin as she handed it over. “I’ll have you ladies know that this service is entirely free. It won’t show up on the bill.”

“You’re a real bargain.” Hope tried to sound light but failed as he laid the pillow on the seat of a chair and lifted Nanna’s leg into place.

Their gazes met and Hope heard the morning breezes loud in her ears. Awareness shot down her spine again.

His slow grin broadened. "I've been told that before. I never overcharge." He stood, towering over her, casting her in shadow. "But I do accept tips. Cash or baked goods."

He was kidding, but Hope couldn't smile. Kirby arrived with Nanna's Bible, reading glasses and the cordless phone.

They were shooed away by the old woman who thought she was matchmaking by sending them off to be together. "Take your time, Matthew. I don't need the cabinets today."

Hope shook her head, taking the lead down the garden path. "Sure, she's been fretting over the cabinets all week."

"That's all right, we'll fix her." Matthew's feet tapped on the flagstones behind her. "I brought Harold."

"I noticed. I thought he was interested in Helen."

"Helen is interested in him." Matthew caught her arm, stopping her before she could reach the back porch. "He avoided the subject when I asked him how he felt. All he would say is that he hardly knew Helen, that's all. I figure, until it's decided for sure, we might as well put him and Nora together and see what happens."

"Great idea, but you could have warned me."

"Harold didn't make up his mind until the last minute." Matthew's hand flew to his jeans pocket and withdrew a black pager, vibrating in his open palm. "It's Mom. Can I use your phone?"

“For a fee.”

His grin was slow and stunning, and he darted past her, taking the porch steps in one stride, leaving her breathless.

She wasn't interested in Matthew Sheridan and he wasn't looking for marriage, but she couldn't help but wonder for the first time in her life what it would feel like to spend time with a man like him. To know the shelter of his arms and the tenderness of his kiss.

Gentle warmth spilled through her at the thought. What was wrong with her? Why on earth was she feeling this way? Hadn't she failed miserably at her one attempt to open her heart and hadn't she learned her lesson? That it was better to live alone and safe than give a man control of her heart?

Matthew reappeared, frowning, his hair disheveled as if he'd been raking one hand through it. “The job's off for this morning. Harold can't do the heavy work alone because of his bad back, and I've got to go. I can rearrange things for tomorrow afternoon. How about it?”

“What happened? Is something wrong with your boys?”

“No, not with the triplets.” Matthew's frown deepened. “My mom's sick. She didn't look so good this morning, but she insisted she was fine enough to baby-sit.”

“Of course, you need to check on her.” Hope followed him down the path. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Yeah, find me a real good baby-sitter. One who isn't afraid of three little boys.”

“That shouldn’t be hard.” Nanna spoke up from her serene bench in the shade. “Is something wrong, Matthew?”

“Mom’s allergies are acting up and she isn’t up to handling the boys.” Matthew’s brow frowned with concern.

Hope’s heart twisted. He was a good man, one who cared for his family genuinely and selflessly. She tried to imagine her own father setting aside work for any reason, especially his family. “I hired extra nurses. If your mom needs any care—”

“No.” Matthew dug in his pocket for his keys, loping down the path and onto the gravel. “It’s nothing like that. Appreciate it, though. Her new medication is making her drowsy, and she’s just not up to chasing after the boys.”

Hope stepped after him, wanting to soothe away the worry on his face and the lines of hardship bracketing his eyes. “If you need someone to look after your sons for the day, I could do it. You could bring them here. Nora now has two nurses to take care of her and hardly needs me. I wouldn’t mind keeping an eye on them.”

“Nora needs peace and quiet.”

“Let me go ask her. I—”

“Don’t mind a bit,” Nanna’s voice called clear as a bell through the foliage that separated the driveway from the garden. “Doesn’t Proverbs say that a cheerful heart is good medicine? Watching those boys of yours play will be all the cheer I need.”

“No. Absolutely not.” Matthew yanked open his truck door. “Hope, it’s a nice offer, but you don’t want to look after my sons.”

“Why not? Ian and I struck up a friendship in the café, and I’m sure I can charm the other two.”

“No. You’re a...” He looked at her from head to toe and blushed. “You’re a beautiful woman, and I can’t see you getting down and dirty with three energetic little boys. You don’t know what you’d be getting yourself into.”

“I saw them in action at Sunday brunch. They move fast, but I’m faster. Besides, Nanna needs some joy in her life, and something tells me your sons will keep her laughing.”

“You don’t want to take care of these kids, trust me.”

But he was weakening, she could see it, and so she went in for the kill. “Nanna really wants her cabinets finished.”

“Nora’s been ailing. She wouldn’t be able to get any rest.”

“She’s listening to every word we’re saying, so she’d speak up if that were true. Besides, I owe you a favor for all the wonderful things you’ve done for my grandmother and me. So consider this payback, got it? After this we’re even.”

“It’s a bad idea, Hope.” Matthew raked one hand through his hair, leaving more dark strands standing up on end to ruffle in the breeze.

Hope fought the urge to reach out and smooth down those strands. Her hand tingled at the thought of touching him that way.

“You’re not used to one kid, let alone three.”

“We have certified registered nurses on the premises. What could go wrong?”

Laugh lines crinkled around his eyes. “You’ll be sorry you said

that, just wait and see.”

“Then it’s decided.”

“Well...it would help me out. If you’re sure.”

“Absolutely.”

Doubt lingered in his eyes, but his grin came easily. “Fine. We’ll just see how the morning goes first, then we’ll see if you’ve changed your mind.”

Long after he’d driven off, Hope still felt the tingle in her spine and warmth in her heart.

Kneeling in dirt in what would soon be Nanna’s vegetable garden, Hope looked up as Matthew strolled onto the back porch looking as though he’d been working hard. His T-shirt and jeans were smudged with sawdust, and the carpenter’s belt cinched at his hips was missing a few tools.

He squinted in her direction, his amusement as bright as spring. “You look exhausted. Are you sorry yet?”

“Give me ten more minutes, then I might be.” Laughing, Hope ducked as a handful of dirt came flying her way. “Hey, Kale, I saw that. Lower that hand right now. Right now.”

As the boy reluctantly complied, tossing a look of warning to his older brother, whom he was aiming for, Matthew’s chuckle rang out, effecting her from her head to her toes. “Boys, I told you no fighting.”

“It’s Josh’s fault.” Kale spoke up, always ready to pass the blame. “He’s throwing.”

“Nope, I’m talking to you, buddy.” Matthew loped down the steps and moved a potted tomato plant out of the way. Then he crouched down, his gaze meeting Hope’s across the span of freshly turned dirt. “I didn’t know dump trucks and graders were useful in a garden.”

“Of vital importance. Look how busy it’s keeping them. For now.” Hope laughed as Josh made a truck engine sound, content on leveling out the far end of Nanna’s unplanted garden. “How’s the work coming?”

“The cabinet’s in. I talked Harold into fetching Nora. Figured she’d want to see what I’d done before he starts the finishing work.”

“I thought you two were going to do that work together.”

“We were, until I lost Mom as a baby-sitter. I just called her and she’s feeling better, but not well enough to take the boys.”

“They can stay the rest of the afternoon, don’t worry. You’re not putting me out, and Nanna’s getting a kick out of watching them. Ian took a worm he found over for her to praise, and she’s still glowing. Over a worm.”

“She’s pining for great grandchildren.”

“Count on it. She figures I’m her only hope.” Longing speared her sharp as a new blade. Really, she didn’t need a family. She didn’t need a man in her life trying to dominate her and belittle her. Isn’t that what most marriages were?

Ian dashed through the fragile rows of newly planted vegetables, carrying a bright yellow tractor. “Daddy, come see

right now.”

“Over here, Daddy.” Kale hollered as he scooted a bright yellow dump truck into a rock with a clang. “Come see the big hole we dug.”

“It’s a huge one, Matthew, so be careful not to fall into it.” Hope winked as she grabbed a six-pack of tomato plants.

Matthew watched her hands gently break apart the dirt and ease the first sprout into the rich earth. Her touch was gentle as she patted the dirt around the roots, and for one brief second he wondered what it would feel like to take her hand in his. Not in a quick touch to steady her on the barn roof or help her from the ladder, but to hold her hand, her palm to his, their fingers entwined.

He felt ashamed for even thinking of it. He was a man, he was human, and the Good Lord knew he was lonely, but this was the first time since Kathy’s death he thought about another woman. Guilt cinched hard around his heart, leaving him confused.

Then Hope reached past him, brushing his knee with the edge of her glove as she grabbed one of the last tomato plants.

“You look at home here in the garden.” Matthew couldn’t seem to take his eyes from her. “There’s dirt smudges on your face.”

“Probably.” She swiped her forearm across her brow and left another. “I’m a mess. Why is it that whenever you come over, I look like I’ve rolled out of a drainage ditch?”

“Lucky for you, it’s a look I like. Especially the leaf in your

hair.”

“Oh, dear.” She tore off one glove, revealing slender fingers stained with dirt.

“Here, let me.” It was a simple thing, reaching forward and lifting the green half of a tomato leaf from her hair, but it felt as natural as if he’d been this close to Hope all his life. Already the floral scents of her skin and shampoo felt like a memory, and he knew, if he lowered his hand just a few inches to brush the side of her face, her skin would feel like warm silk against his callused fingers.

Guilt pounded through him with renewed force, and he let the leaf blow away in the wind.

“Daddy!” Ian stomped his foot, his voice hard with indignation. “Listen.”

Oh, boy, how long had the kid been trying to get his attention? And how could he not hear his own son? “I’m coming, buddy.”

He climbed to his feet, and Ian’s small gritty fingers curled around his and held on with viselike force. He watched as Ian shot a jealous look at Hope. A lot of women who’d sacrificed their morning to watch over someone else’s children might have taken offense, but Hope merely shrugged, her mouth soft with amusement.

It was there on her face, radiant and sincere, and he couldn’t get it out of his head as he knelt in front of a small pit to praise the boys’ busywork. She liked his boys, and he couldn’t fault her for that.

“Matthew, look.” Her whispered words as gentle as a spring breeze tingled over him and, at the look of hope in her eyes, his heart skipped a beat.

Harold was carrying Nora in his arms from the garden to the back porch. It was one of the sweetest things he’d ever seen.

“Daddy.” Josh let go of his grader, and the truck tumbled to the ground with a clang. “I’m real hungry.”

“Me, too!” the other boys chimed.

“You’ve got to be kidding. It’s ten-thirty in the morning. Nope, no food. I’m starving you three from here on out.”

The triplets started demanding hamburgers, and Matthew watched Hope climb to her feet, brushing the dirt off her clothes.

“It will be after eleven by the time we get to town.” She lifted her chin in challenge. “We can get take-out hamburgers and they’ll be fueled up for the rest of the afternoon.”

“No way. I’m not imposing on you like that. You have Nora to look after.”

“She’s a soft spot in my heart, and I let her stay up too long this morning. She’s going to be napping all afternoon, believe me, so I’ll have plenty of free time.” Hope rubbed a smudge of dirt from her cheek with her hands, leaving another bigger smudge. “Besides, I have it on good authority that Nanna loves cheeseburgers. Even older women need their protein.”

“Hamburgers, hamburgers,” the triplets chanted.

“All right, boys, you win. Let’s get you in the truck. And you. Stop encouraging them.” He shot a gaze at Hope, who was

carefully treading through the rows of vulnerable new plants.

“Hey, I wanted hamburgers, too.” The wind tousled the dark strands that framed her face.

His chest cinched tight, and he wished he could stop noticing how the sunlight sheened on her velvet hair and caressed the silken curve of her cheek.

But most of all, it was her hands that caught his attention, slim but capable-looking, sensitive but strong. Hands that had helped care for her ailing grandmother, hands that could coax beauty from a camera and hands that he wanted to take in his own.

But that was because he missed Kathy. That was the only explanation. The longing in his heart for a woman’s touch was really the longing for Kathy’s touch, forever lost to him. It wasn’t an attraction to Hope.

“I’ll help get the boys buckled in,” she offered, following the triplets to the truck.

His heart cinched. A part of him knew that it wasn’t Kathy he wanted to touch right now, and as Hope trotted away, offering to race the boys, he wondered what his feelings meant.

He’d asked the Lord to show him the way. Surely these feelings for Hope weren’t God’s answer to his prayers.

“I tried to seat them together,” Matthew whispered as he climbed onto the picnic bench beside her, his breath warm against the outer shell of her ear. “Harold was stubborn.”

“And look at Nanna, she’s talking to Josh and completely

ignoring Harold.” Hope snatched an onion ring from one of the waxed paper boxes in the middle of the old weatherworn table. “We’re dismal failures as matchmakers.”

“Good thing we’re not done yet.”

“I’m glad you’re not easily defeated, because neither am I.” Not now that she realized how much her grandmother needed someone in her life, someone to love. And that’s what she would concentrate on. “I know Nanna’s interested in him, but you wouldn’t know it to look at them.”

“Kale, throw that fry and you won’t get more,” Matthew interrupted as one dark-haired little boy held a ketchup-tipped curly French fry in midair, contemplating the merits of lobbing it at Ian and losing his fry privilege completely.

Ian solved the dilemma by flinging a fry at Kale instead and splattering ketchup across the table.

“That’s it, you boys have sat long enough.” Matthew leaped up to prevent any more throwing. “Get up and run off that energy. And stay where I can see you.”

Two identical little boys hopped off the bench, legs pumping, sneakers pounding, tearing through the grass field behind the house. A small plane cut through the wispy white clouds in the blue sky above, and the boys spread their arms like wings, making plane engine noises.

“My, I’d forgotten what fun they are at that age. And so much energy!” Nanna beamed with delight as she watched them. “My son was just like that, always on the go, always thinking. About

ran me ragged, he did. How you manage with three of them, I'll never know. It would take a special woman to be a stepmother to three three-year-olds."

"Nanna, I think it's time for you to go upstairs." Hope snatched another onion ring from the basket and shared a conspiratorial smile with Matthew. He looked ready to set Nanna straight, ready to come to Hope's aid if she needed him.

Not that she needed him.

Matthew stood alongside her, scooped Josh from the bench and set him on the ground. The little boy raced off to join his brothers, arms spread, soaring through the fresh young grass waving in the wind. "Harold, if you keep an eye on my sons, I'll carry Nora upstairs."

"Sure thing." The older man nodded, pride at his great grandsons alight on his handsome face, before nodding politely to Nanna. "You take care, Nora."

"Oh, my granddaughter will see to that." There was no want, no coveting in Nanna's clear eyes as she smiled.

Hope ached for her grandmother. Harold seemed as if he liked Nanna, and Hope fought disappointment as she took Nanna's hand.

"She looks too tired." Matthew appeared at Hope's side, his strong warm presence unmistakable. "Nora, come lean on me."

So it was with gratitude that she followed Matthew up the stairs as he cradled Nanna in his arms. The bedroom windows were open to the sun, and the lace curtains fluttered in cadence

with the wind. The distant sounds of small boys' laughter and the hum of engines sounded merry and seemed to fill the lonely old house with a welcome joy.

Hope tugged down the top sheet and stepped back so Matthew could lower Nanna onto the mattress with tender care. Hope's chest swelled with more than gratefulness and she turned away as a warmth that had nothing to do with appreciation spilled into her veins.

"Bless you, Matthew." Easing back into her pillows, Nanna pressed her lips together to hide a moan of pain. Kirby rushed in with noontime medication and a glass of water to wash down the collection of pills.

Matthew took the older woman's aged hand in his and squeezed gently. "You take it easy now and rest. I can't thank you enough for allowing my boys to stay."

Nanna's eyes glistened. "They made this place feel happy, like it used to when my children were young. I can't tell you what it did for this old heart of mine."

Matthew eased back to give Kirby room to work, and Hope followed him into the narrow hallway, which was warm from the heat of the day. Feelings she couldn't name fought for recognition in her heart as she struggled with the locked window at the end of the hall. It wouldn't budge.

"Let me." Matthew's arm brushed hers as he took over, efficiently manhandling the stubborn old lock and lifting the equally obstinate wooden window.

The heat from his brief touch lingered on the outside of her arm and didn't go away, even when she stepped farther back, even when she rubbed at the spot on her arm. Was it her loneliness making her feel this way? She didn't like it, not one bit.

"Harold's going to go ahead with the finishing work. He's excellent at it." As if he felt it, too, Matthew backed away, creating distance between them, and his gaze locked on hers, warm and intimate.

Way too intimate. Panic leaped to life inside her. "I'm glad you're leaving the boys for the rest of the afternoon."

"It looks like you're managing." He caught hold of the banister and hesitated. "I'd like to stop by and check on my mom."

"Why don't you give her a call from here, and if she's still under the weather, I'll send home some food for her, so she doesn't have to cook tonight. The refrigerator is packed, thanks to your thoughtful words to the pastor."

"That's what friends are for." He tossed her a slow grin, one that lit up the hazel twinkles in his eyes.

"Is that what we are? Friends?"

"Why not, it's better than being enemies, or adversaries or afraid of the matchmaking women in our lives."

The confusion coiled in her chest eased. Yes, they were friends. And there was nothing she would like more. Friends were safe. Friends didn't demand a vulnerable part of your heart.

"Speaking of our matchmaking relatives, I'm going to need your help." She swept past him, careful not to brush against him,

and skipped down the stairs. "I'm going to make a list of all the eligible men in your mom's age group. I don't know what to do about Harold. I know Nanna is still interested in him, but Helen is her best friend. That's the way Nanna is, and I love her for it. So we'll have to find her someone as nice."

"That's going to be hard." Matthew's step echoed in the kitchen behind her. "Look."

Hope eased the screen door open to get a better view of Harold running in the calf-high grass, arms spread, making airplane noises with his three great grandsons.

"I think we should leave it up to the Lord." Matthew's grin broadened, and he was handsome enough to make Hope's senses spin.

Somehow she managed to speak. "What about Helen?"

"And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love Him." Matthew splayed both hands on the porch rail and squinted through the sun to watch Harold dive-bomb Ian, then pretend to have engine trouble and drop to the ground. The boys giggled. "We'll let Him work it out. Whatever's meant to happen will. I have a suggestion, though."

"I'm almost afraid to ask."

"I think Nora might be happy if Harold refinished every last one of her cabinets. Think how shiny and new they'd look."

"I like the way you think." Let Harold and Nanna spend time alone in this house, and if they were meant to be together, then the Lord would work it out in His own way. "Consider

refinished cabinets my treat to Nanna. How about new linoleum and countertops?”

“I’m miraculously booked up, but I bet Harold might do it.”

“Then we have a deal.” She sidled up next to him at the porch rail, leaving enough space so their elbows wouldn’t brush, and it felt good having a friend in Matthew.

She felt different, better than she could ever remember feeling.

Chapter Seven

The sun slanted low in the sky and thunderheads were gathering on the horizon in tall pillars of angry clouds by the time Matthew headed his pickup down Nora Greenley's drive. The tires crunched in the gravel, and the warm breeze from the open window blew against his face. It wasn't hot enough for air-conditioning yet, and with the approaching storm, the dusty air felt muggy.

He rounded the last corner and Nora's old white farmhouse rolled into view, a sprinkler casting arcs of water across the front lawn. The shade trees shivered in the gentle breezes as he pulled to a stop in the graveled area in front of the detached garage. He cut the engine, and the familiar sound of his sons' laughter came distant but welcome.

So, Hope had survived the threesome after all. Warmth gathered in his chest, an emotion he couldn't name as he hopped from the truck and strode down the garden path. The rich scents of pollen, blooming plants and new roses felt as mellow as the late afternoon light.

He rounded the corner of the house and stopped in his tracks at the sight of his boys racing around on the back lawn, squealing whenever Hope hit one of them with a blast from the garden hose. Drenched, Ian darted one way, Kale the other, and Josh got hit full-force in the stomach.

“It’s cold!” he shrieked, face pink with delight.

“Catch me, Hope!” Ian waved both hands, then took off running the instant she turned the nozzle toward him. With a shout, Ian hopped away from the cold water jet, laughing as Hope took off after him, hose snaking in the grass behind her. Water sprayed over him, drenching him from head to toe.

“Gotcha!” Hope called victoriously, then quick as a whip shot water at Kale, who wasn’t expecting it.

“Run, Kale, run!” Ian urged, and the three took off toward the garden gate, trying to outdistance the arcing geyser that was quickly catching up to them.

Then Josh spotted him. “Daddy! Daddy!”

“Daddy!” They headed toward him talking at once, their bare chests glistening in the warm sun and their brown locks sluicing water as they ran.

“Hope sprinkled us with the hose and not the grass,” Ian shouted over his brothers. “It’s real cold. We want pizza.”

“Pizza, pizza!” the other two demanded.

“You boys have food on the brain.” Matthew knelt down as they launched toward him and didn’t mind their wet hugs one bit. “Ready to head home?”

“Is Hope comin’, too?” Kale wanted to know.

“Hope has to stay here with her grandmother.” Matthew stood, and the tiny hairs on his arms and the back of his neck prickled when Hope padded close.

“I sure had a lot of fun with you three today.” She’d rescued

their shirts from the porch railing, and she held them out now. “Let me run inside and grab some towels. I’m afraid I got your boys a little wet.”

“They’re sweet, but they won’t melt. Already tried it.” He winked, and he liked the smile that shaped her face. His fingers brushed hers as he took the shirts, and for the life of him he couldn’t stop looking at her.

She simply glowed, out of breath from chasing his boys, dripping wet, her hair tumbling in thick shanks, and he wanted to pull her close to him. To take her in his arms and hold her, simply hold her, as if her brightness could chase away the shadows inside him and make right every wrong in his world.

But he hesitated, knowing he had no right. There was too much to stop him.

The moment was lost, and she stepped away, heading toward the porch. “I’ll be right back.”

“Don’t bother with the towels. They’ll dry off in the truck. It’s hot enough. Okay, boys, time to head out and give Hope some peace and quiet.”

“Why?” Ian demanded. “Wanna get sprinkled by the hose.”

Matthew recognized the signs. A long, exciting day and no nap. “Looks like I’d better get them home and fast. Thanks again for watching them.”

“I hope it helped you out. Heaven knows you’ve done more than enough for me.”

He couldn’t look at her any longer, torn between the past and

something that felt frightening to think about. “I was able to finish another job this afternoon. It made a huge difference.”

“Good.” A world of goodness shone in her eyes as their gazes met and held.

It felt like a deep chasm breaking his heart into pieces and he stepped back, searching but not finding words to begin to explain.

“Bye, boys,” Hope called, lifting a hand, looking as attractive and beautiful as morning, and he wished....

A part of him wished.

The boys called out in answer, grumbling first, then telling him about every aspect of their afternoon with Hope. How she'd let them dig holes for the baby corn plants, how they'd watered the garden and got into a water fight, and the chocolate cookies she'd given them.

She'd taken their pictures, and they climbed trees and ran through the sprinkler until they were cold. Their happiness filled the cab of the truck but it didn't touch him as he first belted each boy in tight, then climbed in behind the steering wheel.

He could see Hope through the shivering leaves of the willows as she set the sprinkler in the backyard. Then the boughs moved, blown by a harsher wind, signaling the first edge of a storm and hiding her from his sight. But not from his mind.

Wishing, aware of a great emptiness in the deepest part of him, he headed down the road, straight toward the dark shadow of gathering angry clouds, already dreading the night ahead.

“I happened to see you and Matthew talking alone together,” Nanna commented, patting the sheets smooth over her legs to make a place for the supper tray. “You two sure look like you’re getting along well.”

“Why wouldn’t we? We’re on the Founder’s Days planning committee together, thanks to you and Patsy, so we have to find a way to cooperate. And what were you doing out of bed?” Hope set the tray into place and checked the wooden legs to make sure they were locked and sturdy. “Don’t tell me you got up without anyone noticing.”

“I could hear you two talking because my window is wide open.” Nanna’s bright eyes spoke of something more as she unfolded the paper napkin and spread it over her lap. “Sounds like those boys of his have really taken to you.”

“They’re nice boys, and I know where you’re headed, so don’t go there and say grace instead.”

Nanna chuckled. “Fools think they need no advice, but the wise ones listen to others.’ I’ve told you before and I’ll tell you again, you need roots, Hope. You’re like me, and I watched you with Matthew’s boys today. You had joy in your eyes for the first time since you’ve come back, and it makes my heart glad.”

“I like children. I never said I didn’t. You have to stop this pressure, Nanna. I know what you expect from me and what you want from me.” Her stomach burned, and she could feel the day’s lightness slipping away.

A great emptiness opened up inside her, an emptiness that hurt. How did a person know that love would last?

Love didn't come with guarantees.

Tucking away her fears, Hope decided to take charge of the conversation. "Now say grace because I'm starving."

Over the pleasant supper, Hope steered far away from Matthew and made a point to ask about the people in town she'd known as a teenager and how they were doing now. Nanna's exhaustion caught up with her. Her nighttime medication put her to sleep before she had time for her prayers and chamomile tea, so Hope took the pot with her to the living room.

Wind whipped through the open windows, lashing the lace curtains without mercy. With the scent of imminent thunder and rain strong in the air, Hope wrestled with the stubborn, warped wood window frames and wondered how on earth Nanna had managed to strong-arm these windows for so long.

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