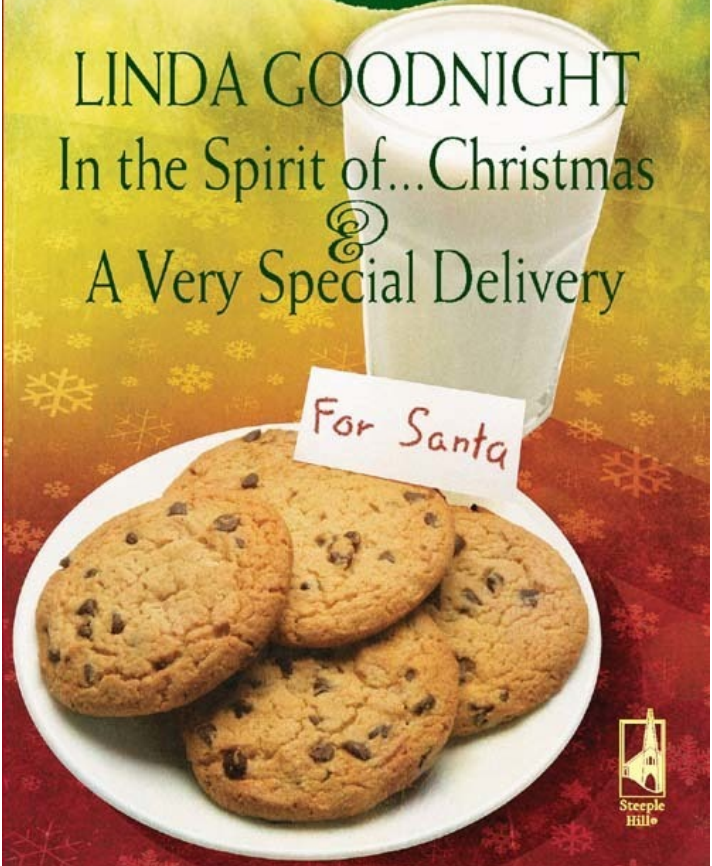
2 NOVELS
1 GREAT PRICE

Love Inspired
CLASSICS

LINDA GOODNIGHT

In the Spirit of...Christmas
&
A Very Special Delivery



Steeple Hill

Linda Goodnight
In the Spirit of...Christmas and A Very Special Delivery: In the Spirit of...Christmas / A Very Special Delivery

Аннотация

Heartwarming stories of holiday romance by RITA Award-winning author Linda GoodnightIn the Spirit of…ChristmasFor his daughter's sake, widowed father Jesse Slater returns to Oklahoma to reclaim the family ranch. But their home is now a Christmas tree farm…run by a woman whose faith will change their lives forever. A Very Special Delivery Molly McCreight has met the man of her dreams! But with her painful secret, how can she hope to spend the holidays–let alone the rest of her life –with single father Ethan Hunter and his precious baby girl?

Содержание

Praise for RITA® Award winning author Linda Goodnight and her novels	5
In the Spirit of…Christmas & A Very Special Delivery	6
LINDA GOODNIGHT	7
Contents	8
Chapter One	10
Chapter Two	29
Chapter Three	42
Chapter Four	57
Chapter Five	78
Chapter Six	96
Chapter Seven	107
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	116

Praise for RITA® Award winning author Linda Goodnight and her novels

"Linda Goodnight's sweet story, In the Spirit of…Christmas joyfully portrays the true spirit of the holiday season."

—RT Book Reviews

"This unique story has an uplifting and healing conclusion."

—RT Book Reviews on A Very Special Delivery

"Linda Goodnight does her protagonists justice with her sensitive writing in A Season for Grace."

—RT Book Reviews

"From its sad, touching beginning to an equally moving conclusion, A Touch of Grace will keep you riveted."

—RT Book Reviews

In the Spirit of…Christmas
& A Very Special Delivery
Linda Goodnight



LINDA GOODNIGHT

Winner of the RITA® Award for excellence in inspirational fiction, Linda Goodnight has also won the Booksellers' Best, ACFW Book of the Year, and a Reviewers' Choice Award from RT Book Reviews. Linda has appeared on the Christian bestseller list and her romance novels have been translated into more than a dozen languages. Active in orphan ministry, this former nurse and teacher enjoys writing fiction that carries a message of hope and light in a sometimes dark world. She and her husband, Gene, live in Oklahoma. Readers can write to her at linda@lindagoodnight.com, or c/o Steeple Hill Books, 233 Broadway, Suite 1001, New York, NY 10279.

Contents

IN THE SPIRIT OF…CHRISTMAS
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Epilogue

A VERY SPECIAL DELIVERY
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four

Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Epilogue

In the Spirit of…Christmas

You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace, the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.

—Isaiah 55:12

Dedicated with love to my aunts and uncle: Bonnie, Pat, Carmalita and Robert. I'll never forget how you stood, a wall of family, supporting me at my first book signing and at every signing since. You're the best!

Chapter One

Leaning over the steering wheel of his blue-and-gray Silverado, Jesse Slater squinted toward the distant farmhouse and waited. Just before daybreak the lights had come on inside, pats of butter against the dark frame of green shutters. Still he waited, wanting to be certain the woman was up and dressed before he made his move. She had an eventful day ahead of her, though she didn't know it.

Aware suddenly of the encroaching autumn chill, he pulled on his jacket and tucked the covers around the child sleeping on the seat beside him, something he'd done a dozen times throughout the night. Sleeping in a pickup truck in the woods might be peaceful, but it lacked a certain homey comfort. None of that mattered this morning, for no matter how soul-weary he might be, he was finally back home. Home—a funny word after all these years of rambling. Even though he'd lived here only six years after his mother had inherited the farm, they were formative years in the life of a boy. These remote mountains of southeastern Oklahoma had been the only real home he'd ever known.

Peace. The other reason he'd come here. He remembered the peace of lazy childhood days wading in the creek or fishing the ponds, of rambling the forests to watch deer and squirrel and on a really lucky day to spot a bald eagle soaring wild and regal

overhead.

He wanted to absorb this peace, hold it and share it with Jade. Neither of them had experienced anything resembling tranquility for a long time.

The old frame house, picturesque in its setting in the pine-drenched foothills of Oklahoma's Kiamichi Mountains, was as it had always been—surrounded by green pastures and a dappling of scattered outbuildings. Somewhere a rooster heralded the sun and the sound sent a quiver of memory into Jesse's consciousness.

But his memory, good as it was, hadn't done justice to the spectacular display of beauty. Reds, golds and oranges flamed from the hills rising around the little farm like a fortress, and the earthy scent of pines and fresh air hovered beneath a blue sky.

"Daddy?"

Jesse turned his attention to the child whose sleepy green eyes and tangled black hair said she'd had a rough night too.

It was a sorry excuse of a father whose child slept in a pickup truck. And he was even sorrier that she didn't find it unusual. His stomach knotted in that familiar mix of pain and joy that was Jade, his six-year-old daughter.

"Hey, Butterbean. You're awake."

Reaching two thin arms in his direction, she stretched like a kitten and yawned widely. "I'm hungry."

Jesse welcomed the warm little body against his, hugging close his only reason to keep trying.

"Okay, darlin'. Breakfast coming right up." With one eye on

the farmhouse, Jesse climbed out of the truck and went around to the back. From a red-and-white ice chest he took a small carton of milk and carefully poured the contents into a miniature box of cereal.

Returning to the cab, he handed the little box to Jade, consoling his conscience with the thought that cereal was good for her. He didn't know much about that kind of thing, but the box listed a slew of vitamins, and any idiot, no matter how inept, knew a kid needs milk.

When she'd eaten all she wanted, he downed the remaining milk, then dug out a comb and wet wipes for their morning ablutions. Living out of his truck had become second nature for him during fifteen years on the rodeo circuit, but in the two years since Erin had died, he'd discovered that roaming from town to town was no life for a little girl. She'd been in and out of so many schools only her natural aptitude for learning kept her abreast of other children her age. At least, he assumed she was up to speed academically. Nobody had told him different, and he knew for a fact she was smart as a tack.

But she needed stability. She deserved a home. And he meant for her to have one. He lifted his eyes to the farmhouse. This one.

A door slammed, resounding like a gunshot in the vast open country. A blond woman came out on the long wooden porch. Of medium height, she wore jeans and boots and a red plaid flannel jacket that flapped open in the morning air as she strode toward one of the outbuildings with lithe, relaxed steps. No hurry.

Unaware she was being watched from the woods a hundred yards away.

So that was her. That was Lindsey Mitchell, the modern-day pioneer woman who chose to live alone and raise Christmas trees on Winding Stair Mountain.

Well, not completely alone. His gaze drifted to a monstrous German shepherd trotting along beside her. The animal gave him pause. He glanced over at Jade who was dutifully brushing her teeth beside the truck. She hadn't seen the shepherd, but when she did there would be trouble. Jade was terrified of dogs. And for good reason.

Running a comb through his unruly hair, he breathed a weary sigh. Dog or not, he had to have this job. Not just any job, but this one.

When his daughter had finished and climbed back into the cab, he cranked the engine. The noise seemed obscenely loud against the quiet noises of a country morning.

"Time to say hello." He winked at the child, extracting an easy grin, and his heart took a dip. This little girl was his sunshine. And no matter how rough their days together had been, she was a trooper, never complaining as she took in the world through solemn, too-old eyes. His baby girl had learned to accept whatever curves life threw her because it had thrown so many.

Putting the truck into gear he drove up the long driveway. Red and gold leaves swirled beneath his tires, making him wonder how long it had been since anyone had driven down this lane.

The woman heard the motor and turned, shading her eyes with one hand. The people in the nearby town of Winding Stair had warned him that she generally greeted strangers with a shotgun at her side. Not to worry, though, they'd said. Lindsey was a sweetheart, a Christian woman who wouldn't hurt a flea unless she had to. But she wasn't fool enough to live alone without knowing how to fire a rifle.

He saw no sign of a weapon, though it mattered little. A rifle wouldn't protect her against the kind of danger he presented. Still, he'd rather Jade not be frightened by a gun. The dog would be bad enough.

He glanced to where the child lay curled in the seat once again, long dark eyelashes sweeping her smooth cheeks. Guilt tugged at him. He'd been a lousy husband and now he was a lousy father.

As he drew closer to the house, the woman tilted her head, watching. Her hair, gleaming gold in the sun, lifted on a breeze and blew back from her shoulders so that she reminded him of one of those shampoo commercials—though he doubted any Hollywood type ever looked this earthy or so at home in the country setting. The dog stood sentry at her side, ears erect, expression watchful.

Bucking over some chug holes that needed filling, Jesse pulled the pickup to a stop next to the woman and rolled down the window.

"Morning," he offered.

Resting one hand atop the shepherd's head, Lindsey Mitchell

didn't approach the truck, but remained several feet away. Beneath the country-style clothes she looked slim and delicate, though he'd bet a rodeo entry fee she was stronger than her appearance suggested.

Her expression, while friendly, remained wary. "Are you lost?"

He blinked. Lost? Yes, he was lost. He'd been lost for as long as he could remember. Since the Christmas his mother had died and his step-daddy had decided he didn't need a fourteen-year-old kid around anymore.

"No, ma'am. Not if you're Lindsey Mitchell."

A pair of amber-colored eyes in a gentle face registered surprise. "I am. And who are you?"

"Jesse Slater." He could see the name held no meaning for her, and for that he was grateful. Time enough to spring that little surprise on her. "Calvin Perrymore sent me out here. Said you were looking for someone to help out on your tree farm."

He'd hardly been able to believe his luck when he'd inquired about work at the local diner last night and an old farmer had mentioned Lindsey Mitchell. He hadn't been lucky in a long time, but nothing would suit his plan better than to work on the very farm he'd come looking for. Never mind that Lindsey Mitchell raised Christmas trees and he abhorred any mention of the holiday. Work was work. Especially here on the land he intended to possess.

"You know anything about Christmas-tree farming?"

"I know about trees. And I know farming. Shouldn't be too hard to put the two together."

Amusement lit her eyes and lifted the corners of her mouth. "Don't forget the Christmas part."

As if he could ever forget the day that had changed the direction of his life—not once, but twice.

Fortunately, he was spared a response when Jade raised up in the seat and leaned against his chest. She smelled of sleep and milk and cereal. "Where are we, Daddy?"

The sight of the child brought Lindsey Mitchell closer to the truck.

"You're at the Christmas-tree farm." She offered a smile that changed her whole face.

Though she probably wasn't much younger than his own thirty-two, in the early-morning light her skin glowed as fresh as a teenager's. Lindsey Mitchell was not a beautiful woman in the Hollywood sense, but she had a clean, wholesome, uncomplicated quality that drew him.

Something turned over inside his chest. Indigestion, he hoped. No woman's face had stirred him since Erin's death. Nothing stirred him much, to tell the truth, except the beautiful little girl whose body heat warmed his side just as her presence warmed the awful chill in his soul.

"A Christmas-tree farm. For real?" Jade's eyes widened in interest, but she looked to him for approval. "Is it okay if we're here, Daddy?"

The familiar twinge of guilt pinched him. Jade knew how her daddy felt about Christmas. “Sure, Butterbean. It’s okay.”

In fact, he was anxious to be here, to find out about the farm and about how Lindsey Mitchell had come to possess it.

“Can I get out and look?”

Before he had the opportunity to remember just why Jade shouldn’t get out of the truck, Lindsey Mitchell answered for him. “Of course you can. That’s what this place is all about.”

Jade scooted across the seat to the passenger-side door so fast Jesse had no time to think. She opened the door, jumped down and bounded around the pickup. Her scream ripped the morning peace like a five-alarm fire.

With a sharp sense of responsibility and a healthy dose of anxiety, Jesse shot out of the truck and ran to her, yanking her shaking body up into his arms. “Hush, Jade. It’s okay. The dog won’t hurt you.”

“Oh, my goodness.” Lindsey Mitchell was all sympathy and compassion. “I am so very sorry. I didn’t know Sushi would frighten her like that.”

“It’s my fault. I’d forgotten about the dog. Jade is terrified of them.”

“Sushi would never hurt anyone.”

“We were told the same thing by the owner of the rottweiler that mauled her when she was four.” Jade’s sobs grew louder at the reminder.

“How horrible. Was she badly hurt?”

"Yes," he said tersely, wanting to drop the subject while he calmed Jade. The child clung to his neck, sobbing and trembling enough to break his heart.

"Why don't you bring her inside. I'll leave Sushi out here for now."

Grateful, Jesse followed the woman across the long front porch and into the farmhouse. Once inside the living room, she motioned with one hand.

"Sit down. Please. Do you think a drink of water or maybe a cool cloth on her forehead would help?"

"Yes to both." He sank onto a large brown couch that had seen better days, but someone's artistic hand had crocheted a blue-and-yellow afghan as a cover to brighten the faded upholstery. Jade plastered her face against his chest, her tears spotting his chambray shirt a dark blue.

Lindsey returned almost immediately, placed the water glass on a wooden coffee table and, going down on one knee in front of the couch, took the liberty of smoothing the damp cloth over Jade's tear-soaked face. The woman was impossibly near. The clean scent of her hair and skin blended with the sweaty heat of his daughter's tears. He swallowed hard, forcing back the unwelcome rush of yearning for the world to be normal again. Life was not normal, would never be normal, and he could not be distracted by Lindsey Mitchell's kind nature and sweet face.

"Shh," Lindsey whispered to Jade, her warm, smoky voice raising gooseflesh on his arms. "It's okay, sugar. The dog is gone.

You're okay."

The sweet motherly actions set off another torrent of reactions inside Jesse. Resentment. Delight. Anger. Gratitude. And finally relief because his child began to settle down as her sobs dwindled to quivering hiccups.

"There now." Adding to Jesse's relief, Lindsey handed him the cloth and stood, moving back a pace or two. She motioned toward the water glass. "Would you like a drink?"

Jade, her cheek still pressed hard against Jesse's chest, shook her head in refusal.

"She'll be all right now," Jesse said, pushing a few stray strands of damp hair away from the child's face. "Won't you, Butterbean?"

Like the trooper she was, Jade sat up, sniffed a couple of times for good measure, and nodded. "I need a tissue."

"Tissue coming right up." Red plaid jacket flapping open, Lindsey whipped across the room to an end table and returned with the tissue. "How about some juice instead of that water?"

Jade's green eyes looked to Jesse for permission.

He nodded. "If it wouldn't be too much trouble."

"No trouble at all." Lindsey started toward a country-kitchen area opening off one end of the living room. At the doorway, she turned. "How about you? Coffee?"

The woman behaved as if he were a guest instead of a total stranger looking for work. The notion made him uncomfortable as all get out, especially considering why he was here. He didn't

want her to be nice. He couldn't afford to like her.

Fortunately, he'd never developed a taste for coffee, not even the fancy kind that Erin enjoyed. "No thanks."

"I have some Cokes if you'd rather."

He sighed in defeat. He'd give a ten-dollar bill this morning for a sharp jolt of cold carbonated caffeine.

"A Coke sounds good." He shifted Jade onto the couch. Her hair was a mess and he realized he'd been in such a hurry to get here this morning, he hadn't even noticed. Normally, a headband was the best he could do, but today he'd even forgotten that. So much for first impressions. Using his fingers, he smoothed the dark locks as much as possible. Jade aimed a wobbly grin at him and shrugged. She'd grown accustomed to his awkward attempts to make her look like a little girl.

He glanced toward the kitchen, saw that Lindsey's back was turned. With one hand holding his daughter's, he took the few moments when Lindsey wasn't in sight to let his gaze drift around the house. It had changed—either that or his perception was different. Eighteen years was a long time.

The wood floors, polished to a rich, honeyed glow, looked the same. And the house still bore the warm, inviting feel of a country farmhouse. But now, the rooms seemed lighter, brighter. Where he remembered a certain dreariness brought on by his mother's illness, someone—Lindsey Mitchell, he supposed—had drenched the rooms in light and color—warm colors of polished oak and yellow-flowered curtains.

The house looked simple, uncluttered and sparkling clean—a lot like Lindsey Mitchell herself.

"Here we go." Lindsey's smoky voice yanked him around. He hoped she hadn't noticed his intense interest. No point in raising her suspicions. He had no intention of letting her know the real reason he was here until he had the proof in his hands.

"Yum, Juicy Juice." Jade came alive at the sight of a cartoon-decorated box of apple juice. "Thank you."

Lindsey favored her with another of those smiles that set Jesse's stomach churning. "I have some gummy fruits in there too if you'd like some—the kind with smiley faces."

Jade paused in the process of stabbing the straw into the top of her juice carton. "Do you have a little girl?"

Jesse was wondering the same thing, though the townspeople claimed she lived alone up here. Why would a single woman keep kid foods on hand?

If he hadn't been watching her closely to hear the answer to Jade's questions, he'd have missed the cloud that passed briefly over Lindsey's face. But he had seen it and wondered.

"No." She handed him a drippy can of Coke wrapped in a paper towel. "No little girls of my own, but I teach a Sunday-school class, and the kids like to come out here pretty often."

Great. A Sunday-school teacher. Just what he didn't need—a Bible-thumping church lady who raised Christmas trees.

"What do they come to your house for?" Jade asked with interest. "Do you gots toys?"

"Better than toys." Lindsey eased down into a big brown easy chair, set her coffee cup on an end table and leaned toward Jade. Her shoulder-length hair swept forward across her full mouth. She hooked it behind one ear. "We play games, have picnics or hayrides, go hiking. Lots of fun activities. And," she smiled, pausing for effect, "I have Christmas trees year-round."

Christmas trees. Jesse suppressed a shiver of dread. Could he really work among the constant reminders of all he'd lost?

Jade smoothly sidestepped a discussion of the trees, though he saw the wariness leap into her eyes. "I used to go to Sunday school."

"Maybe you can go with me some time. We have great fun and learn about Jesus."

Jesse noticed some things he'd missed before. A Bible lay open on an end table near the television, and a plain silver cross hung on one wall flanked by a decorative candle on each side. Stifling an inner sigh, he swallowed a hefty swig of cola and felt the fire burn all the way down his throat. He could work for a card-carrying Christian. He had to. Jade deserved this one last chance.

"We don't go anymore since Mama died."

Jesse grew uncomfortably warm as Lindsey turned her eyes on him. Was she judging him? Finding him unfit as a father because he didn't want his child growing up with false hopes about a God who'd let you down when you needed him most?

He tried to shrug it off. No way he wanted to offend this

woman and blow the chance of working here. As much as he hated making excuses, he had to. "We've moved a lot lately."

"Are you planning to be in Winding Stair long?"

"Permanently," he said. And he hoped that was true. He hadn't stayed in one spot since leaving this mountain as a scared and angry teenager. Even during his marriage, he'd roamed like a wild maverick following the rodeo or traveling with an electric-line crew, while Erin remained in Enid to raise Jade. "But first I need a job."

"Okay. Let's talk about that. I know everyone within twenty miles of Winding Stair, but I don't know you. Tell me about yourself."

He sat back, trying to hide his expression behind another long, burning pull of the soda. He hadn't expected her to ask that. He thought she might ask for references or about his experience, but not about him specifically. And given the situation, the less she knew the better.

"Not much to tell. I'm a widower with a little girl to support. I'm dependable. I'll work hard and do a good job." He stopped short of saying she wouldn't regret hiring him. Eventually, she would.

Lindsey studied him with a serene expression and a slight curve of a full lower lip. He wondered if she was always so calm.

"Where are you from?"

"Enid mostly," he answered, naming the small town west of Oklahoma City that had been more Erin's home than his.

"I went to a rodeo there once when I was in college."

"Yeah?" He'd made plenty of rodeos there himself.

With a nod, she folded her arms. "What did you do in Enid? I know they don't raise trees in those parts."

He allowed a smile at that one. The opening to the Great Plains, the land around Enid was as flat as a piece of toast.

"Worked lineman crews most of the time and some occasional rodeo. But I've done a little of everything."

"Lineman? As in electricity?"

"Yes, ma'am. I've helped string half the power lines between Texas and Arkansas."

His answer seemed to please her, though he had no idea what electricity had to do with raising Christmas trees.

"How soon could you begin working?"

"Today."

She blinked and sat back, taking her coffee with her. "Don't you even want to know what the job will entail?"

"I need work, Miss Mitchell. I can do about anything and I'm not picky."

"People are generally surprised to discover that growing Christmas trees takes a lot of hard work and know-how. I have the know-how, but I want to expand. To do that I need help. Good, dependable help."

"You'll have that with me. I don't mind long hours, hard work or getting dirty."

"The pay isn't great." She named a sum barely above

minimum wage. He wanted to react but didn't. He'd made do on less. Neither the job nor the money was the important issue here.

"The hours are long. And I can be a slave driver."

Jesse couldn't hold back a grin. Somehow he couldn't imagine Lindsey as much of a slave driver. "Are you offering me the job or trying to scare me off?"

She laughed and the sound sent a shiver of warmth into the cold recesses of Jesse's heart. "Maybe both. I don't want to hire someone today and have him gone next week."

"I'm not going anywhere. Jade's already been in two schools this year, and it's only October."

Her eyes rested on Jade as she thought that one over. One foot tapping to a silent tune while she munched gummy faces, his daughter paid little attention to the adults.

"I have about twenty acres of trees now but plan to expand by at least another ten by next year. Would you like to have a look at the tree lot?"

"Not now." Not at all, ever, but he knew that was out of the question. Once he took possession the Christmas trees would disappear. "Just tell me what I'll be doing."

For the next five minutes, she discussed pruning and replanting, spraying and cutting, bagging and shipping. All of which he could do. No problem. He'd just pretend they were ordinary trees.

"I'll need character references before I make a final decision."

Jesse reached in his jacket pocket and pulled out a folded

paper. He'd been prepared for that question. "Any of these people will tell you that I'm not a serial killer."

"Well, that's a relief. I'd hate to have to shoot you."

He must have looked as startled as he felt because she laughed. "That was a joke. A bad one, I'll admit, but I can shoot and I do have a gun."

Was she warning him to tread lightly? "Interesting hobby for a woman."

"The rifle was my granddad's. He had quite a collection."

"Is he the one who taught you to shoot?"

"Mostly. But don't worry about safety." She glanced at his adorable little girl with the missing front tooth. "I have a double-locked gun safe to protect the kids who come out here. Owning a firearm is a huge responsibility that I don't take lightly."

Rising from the overstuffed armchair, she took the sheet of references from his outstretched fingers. The clean scent of soap mixed with the subtle remnants of coffee drifted around her. The combination reminded him way too much of Erin.

"I'll give some of these folks a call and let you know something this afternoon. Will that be all right?"

"Sure."

"I'll need your telephone number. Where can I reach you?"

Jesse rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "Hmm. That could be a problem. No phone yet."

"Where are you living? Maybe I know someone close by and could have them bring you a message."

"That's another problem. No house yet either."

She paused, a tiny frown appearing between a pair of naturally arched eyebrows. Funny that he'd notice a thing like a woman's eyebrows. "You don't have a place to live?"

Jade, who'd been as quiet as a mouse, happily sipping her juice and munching green and purple smiley faces, suddenly decided to enter the conversation. "We live in Daddy's truck."

Great. Now he'd probably be reported to child welfare.

But if Lindsey considered him a poor parent, she didn't let on in front of Jade. "That must be an adventure. Like camping out."

"Daddy says we're getting a house of our own pretty soon."

Jesse was glad he hadn't told the child that he'd been talking about this house.

Lindsey's eyes flickered from Jade to him. "Have you found anything yet?"

Oh, yes. He'd found exactly the right place.

"Not yet. First a job, then Jade and I have a date with the school principal. While she's in school I'll find a place to stay."

"Rental property is scarce around here, but you might check at the Caboose. It's an old railroad car turned into a diner on the north end of town across from the Dollar Store. Ask for Debbie. If there is any place for rent in the area, she'll know about it."

"Thanks." He stood, took Jade's empty juice carton and looked around for a trash can.

"I'll take that." Lindsey stretched out a palm, accepting the carton. No long fancy nails on those hands, but the short-clipped

nails were as clean as a Sunday morning.

"Come on, Jade. Time to roll." Jade hopped off the couch, tugging at the too-short tail of her T-shirt. The kid was growing faster than he could buy clothes.

Stuffing the last of the gummy fruits into her mouth, she handed the empty wrapper to Lindsey with a shy thank-you smile, then slipped her warm little fingers into his.

"How about if I give you a call later this afternoon," Jesse asked. "After you've had a chance to check those references?"

"That will work." She followed him to the door.

Jade tugged at him, reaching upward. "Carry me, Daddy."

He followed the direction of her suddenly nervous gaze. From the front porch the affronted German shepherd peered in through the storm door, tail thumping hopefully against the wooden planks.

Jesse swept his daughter into his arms and out the door, leaving behind a dog that terrified his daughter, a house he coveted and a woman who disturbed him a little too much with her kindness.

He had a very strong feeling that he'd just compounded his already considerable problems.

Chapter Two

Uncertainty crowding her thoughts, Lindsey pushed the storm door open with one hand to let the dog inside though her attention remained on the man. He sauntered with a loose-limbed gait across the sunlit yard, his little girl tossed easily over one strong shoulder like a blanket.

Jesse Slater. The name sounded familiar somehow, but she was certain they'd never met. Even for someone as cautious of the opposite sex as she was, the man's dark good looks would be hard to forget. Mysterious silver-blue eyes with sadness hovering at the crinkled corners, dark cropped hair above a face that somehow looked even more attractive because he hadn't yet shaved this morning, and a trim athletic physique dressed in faded jeans and denim jacket over a Western shirt. Oh, yes, he was a handsome one all right. But looks did not impress Lindsey. Not anymore.

Still, she couldn't get the questions out of her head. Why would a man with no job and a child to raise come to the small rural town of Winding Stair? It would be different if he had relatives here, but he'd mentioned none. Something about him didn't quite ring true, but she was loath to turn him away. After all, if the Christmas Tree Farm was to survive, she needed help —immediately. And Jesse Slater needed a job. And she'd bet this broad-shouldered man was a hard worker.

The child, Jade, hair hanging down her father's back like black

fringe, looked up and saw that Sushi was now inside, then wiggled against her father to be let down. She slid down the side of his body then skipped toward the late-model pickup.

At the driver's-side door, Jesse boosted the little girl into the cab and slid inside behind her. Then for the first time he looked up and saw Lindsey standing inside the storm door, watching his departure. He lifted a hand in farewell, though no smile accompanied the gesture. Lindsey, who smiled—and laughed—a lot, wondered if the darkly solemn Jesse had experienced much joy in his life.

The pickup roared to life, then backed out and disappeared down the long dirt drive, swirling leaves and dust into the morning air.

Lindsey, who preferred to think the best of others, tried to shrug off the nagging disquiet. After months of seeking help, she should be thankful, not suspicious, to have a strong, healthy man apply for the job. But the fact that she'd almost given up hope that anyone would be willing to work for the small salary she could afford to pay was part of what raised her suspicions.

She wrestled with her conscience. After all, the poor man had lost his wife and was raising a small daughter alone. Couldn't that account for his air of mysterious sadness? Couldn't he be seeking the solitude of the mountains and the quiet serenity of a small town to help him heal? Even though she knew from experience that only time and the Lord could ease the burden of losing someone you love, the beautiful surroundings were a comfort.

She knew that from experience too.

Stepping back from the doorway, she stroked one hand across Sushi's thick fur. "What do you think, girl?"

But she knew the answer to that. Sushi was a very fine judge of character and she hadn't even barked at the stranger. Nor had she protested when the man had come inside the house while she was relegated to the front porch.

Looking down at the sheet of paper still clutched in one hand, Lindsey studied the names and numbers, then started for the telephone.

"If his references check out, I have to hire him. We need help too badly to send him away just because he's too good-looking."

Later that afternoon, Lindsey was kneeling in the tree lot, elbow-deep in Virginia pine trimmings, when Sushi suddenly leaped to her feet and yipped once in the direction of the house.

A car door slammed.

Pushing back her wind-blown hair with a forearm, Lindsey stood, shears in hand and strained her eyes toward the house. A blue Silverado once more sat in her driveway and Jesse Slater strode toward her front door.

Quickly, she laid aside the shears and scrambled out of the rows of pine trees.

Hadn't the man said he'd call for her decision? What was he doing out here again? Her misgivings rushed to the fore.

"Hello," she called, once she'd managed to breech the small

rise bordering the tree lot. The house was only about fifty yards from the trees, and Sushi trotted on ahead.

Jesse spun on his boot heel, caught sight of her and lifted a hand in greeting.

"No wonder you didn't answer your phone," he said when she'd come within speaking distance.

With chagrin, Lindsey realized that it had happened again. While working in the trees, she frequently lost track of time, forgot to eat, forgot about everything except talking to the Lord and caring for the trees. Maybe that's why she loved the tree farm so much and why she'd been so reluctant to take on a hired hand. While among the trees, she carried on a running conversation with God, feeling closer to Him there than she did anywhere—even in church.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize it was so late." Holding her dirty hands out to her sides, she said, "Why don't you come on in while I wash up? Then we can talk."

Jesse, who'd managed to shave somewhere since she'd seen him last, hesitated. "I hate to ask this, but would you mind putting the dog up again? My daughter is with me."

Lindsey pivoted toward the truck, aware for the first time that a small, worried face pressed against the driver's-side window. "I don't mind, but that is something else we need to discuss. If you're going to work for me, we have to find a way for Jade and Sushi to get along."

A ghost of a grin lit the man's face. "Does that mean none of

my references revealed my sinister past?"

"Something like that." In fact, his references had been glowing. One woman had gone beyond character references though, and had told Lindsey about Jesse's wife, about the tragic accident that had made him a widower, and about his raw and terrible grief. Her sympathy had driven her to pray for the man and his little girl—and to decide to hire him.

"If you'll carry Jade inside again, I'll hold Sushi and leave her outside while we talk."

Jesse did as she asked, galloping across the lawn with the child on his back, her dark hair streaming out behind like a pony's tail. Dog forgotten in the fun, Jade's giggle filled the quiet countryside.

"Would you like some tea? Or a Coke?" Lindsey asked once the child and man were seated inside on the old brown sofa. "I've been in the trees so long I'm parched as well as dirty."

"A Coke sounds great, although we don't intend to continue imposing on your hospitality this way."

"Why not?"

He blinked at her, confused, then gave a short laugh. "I don't know. Doesn't seem polite, I suppose."

She started into the kitchen, then stopped and turned around. "If you're going to work for me, we can't stand on ceremony. You'll get hungry and thirsty, so you have to be able to come up here or into the office down at the tree patch and help yourself."

"So I have the job." With Jade glued to his pants leg, he

followed Lindsey into the kitchen, moving with a kind of easy, athletic grace.

Lindsey stopped at the sink to scrub her hands. The smell of lemon dishwashing liquid mingled with the pungent pine scent emanating from her skin and clothes. It was a good thing she loved the smell of Christmas because it permeated every area of her life. Even when she dressed up for church and wore perfume, the scent lingered.

"If you want it. The hours are long. The work is not grueling, but it is physical labor. You can choose your days off, but between now and Christmas, things start hopping."

An odd look of apprehension passed over Jesse's face. He leaned against the counter running alongside the sink. "What do you mean, hopping?"

"Jesse, this is a Christmas tree farm. Though I'm mostly a choose-and-cut operation, I also harvest and transport a certain number of trees to area city lots, grocery stores, etc., about mid-November." She dried her hands on the yellow dishtowel hanging over the oven rail.

"Do you do that yourself or have someone truck them?" He followed her to the refrigerator where she handed him two colas. He popped the lids and gave one to Jade, then took a long pull on the other, his silver eyes watching her over the rim.

"Right now I'm delivering them myself, but long-range I want a large enough clientele to ship them all over the country." Her shoulders sagged. "But that takes advertising and advertising

takes money—which I do not have at present." Taking a cola for herself, she waved a hand. "But I'm getting off topic here. Let's go sit down and discuss your job. Jade," she said, glancing down toward the child, "I have some crayons and a coloring book around here somewhere if you'd like to color while your dad and I talk."

The child's eyes lit up, so Lindsey gathered the materials she kept stashed in a kitchen drawer and spread them on the table.

The child eyed the table doubtfully and clung tighter to her father's leg. She pointed toward the living room, not ten feet away. "Can I go in there with you and Daddy?"

The poor little lamb was a nervous wreck without her daddy.

"Of course, you can." Lindsey swept up the crayons and book and proceeded into the living room, settling Jade at the coffee table.

All the while, she was aware of the handsome stranger's eyes on her. His references were excellent. She could trust him. She did trust him. She even felt a certain comfort in his presence, but something about him still bothered her.

Was it because he was too good-looking? She had been susceptible to good looks once before and gotten her heart broken.

No. That had happened a long time ago and, with the Lord's help, she had put that pain behind her.

Hadn't she?

The sharp tang of Coke burned Jesse's throat as he watched the play of interesting emotions across Lindsey's face. She was not a woman who hid her feelings particularly well. If he was to pull this off, he would have to win her confidence. And right now, from the looks of her, she was worried about hiring him.

"I'm a hard worker, Miss Mitchell. I'll do a good job."

"Lindsey, please. There can't be that much difference in our ages."

"Okay. And I'm Jesse. And this lovely creature is Jade." He poked a gentle finger at Jade's tummy.

His little girl beamed at him as though he'd given her a golden crown and, as usual, his heart turned over when she smiled. That one missing front tooth never failed to charm him. "Daddy's silly sometimes."

"I guess I'll have to learn to put up with that if he's going to work out here. What about you? What are we going to do about you and my dog?"

"I don't like dogs. They're mean." When Jade drew back against the couch, green eyes wide, Jesse sighed.

What in the world was he going to do about this stand-off between dog lover and dog hater? He'd give anything to see Jade get over her terrible fear of dogs, but the trauma ran so deep, he wondered if she ever would. In fact, since Erin's death, her fear had worsened, and other fears had taken root as well. She didn't want him out of her sight, she was terrified of the dark, and her nightmares grew in intensity.

He took a sip of cola, thinking. “Could we just play it by ear for a while and see how things go? Jade will be in school most of the time anyway.”

“I work long, sometimes irregular hours, especially this time of year.”

“I don’t mind that.” The more hours he worked the more money he’d make. And the more time he’d have to question Lindsey and check out the farm.

“Then I have a suggestion. The school bus runs right by my driveway. Why not have Jade catch the bus here in the morning and come back here after school?”

Jesse breathed an inward sigh of relief. He’d hoped she’d say that. Otherwise he would have to take off work twice a day to chauffeur his child to and from school.

“That would be a big help.”

“Yes, but coming here will also put her in contact with Sushi morning and night.”

“Hmm. I see your point.” Pinching his bottom lip between finger and thumb, he considered, but came away empty. “Any ideas?”

“Yes, but fears like that don’t disappear overnight. We’ll need some time for Jade to acclimate and to realize that Sushi is one of the good guys.” She smiled one of those sunshine smiles that made him feel as though anything was possible—even Jade accepting the dog.

“In the meantime, while Jade is here, Sushi can remain

outdoors or in one of the bedrooms with the door closed. When we're working in the field, sometimes she hangs out in the office anyway. She won't like being left out, but it will only be until Jade feels more comfortable with her around."

There she went again, tossing kindness around like party confetti. He had to stop setting himself up this way. Liking Lindsey Mitchell could not be part of the deal. "I'm sorry about this. Sorry to be so much trouble."

"Don't worry about it. Jade's fear isn't your fault, and she certainly can't help it." She shot a wink toward Jade who looked up, green eyes wide and solemn. "Not yet, anyway."

The child was poised over a drawing of the Sermon on the Mount, red crayon at the ready. Jesse swallowed hard.

"Daddy, I want to see the Christmas trees."

The knot tightened in Jesse's chest. Pictures of Jesus. Christmas trees. What was next? "How about tomorrow?"

Jade didn't fuss, but disappointment clouded her angelic face. She resumed coloring, trading the red crayon for a purple one.

"Come on, Jesse." Lindsey rose from the armchair. "You may as well see where you'll be spending most of your time. While we're down there, I'll show you the little office where I keep the equipment and explain my plans for this Christmas season."

He'd have to do it sooner or later. Feeling as if he were being led to the gallows, Jesse swigged down the remainder of his Coke and stood.

"Where are the Christmas trees?" Gripping Jesse's hand, Jade took in rows and rows of evergreens, swiveling her head from side to side plainly searching for something more traditionally Christmas.

She might be disappointed, but Jesse inhaled in relief, feeling the pungent pine-scented coolness in his nostrils. They were just trees. Plain ordinary pine trees, no more Christmassy than the thousands of evergreens lining the woods and roads everywhere in this part of Oklahoma. The only differences were the neat rows and carefully tended conical shapes of a specific variety. Nothing to get all worked up over.

"Where are the decorations? And the presents?" Jade was as bewildered as she was disappointed.

Kneeling in the rich dirt, Lindsey clasped one of Jade's small hands in hers. "Listen, sweetie, don't fret. Right now, the lot doesn't look like anything but green pine trees, but just you wait another month. See that little building over there?"

After turning to look, Jade nodded. "Are the Christmas trees in there?"

Lindsey laughed, that warm, smoky sound that made Jesse's stomach clench. "Not yet. But the decorations are in there. Lights, and Santas, and angels. Even a nativity set and a sleigh."

"Yeah?" Jade asked in wonder.

"Yeah. And with your daddy to help me this year, we'll set out all of the decorations, string lights up and down these rows, hook up a sound system to pipe in Christmas carols. Maybe you and

I can even decorate one special tree up near the entrance where cars pull in. Then every night and day we'll have a Christmas party. People will come to choose a tree and we'll give them wagon rides from the parking area through the tree lot."

The woman fairly glowed with excitement and the effect was rubbing off on Jade. Pulling away from her dad for the first time, she clapped her hands and spun in a circle.

"Let's do it now."

"Whoa, Butterbean, not so fast." He laid a quieting hand on her shoulder. "Lindsey already told you that part comes later." The later the better as far as he was concerned.

"But soon, though, sweetie." Lindsey couldn't seem to bear seeing Jade disappointed. She motioned toward an open field where a large brown horse grazed on the last of the green grass. "See that horse down there? He loves to pull a wagon, does it all the time for hayrides—but at Christmas he gives visitors rides from the parking area through the tree lot."

"What's his name?"

"Puddin'. Don't you think he looks like chocolate pudding?"

Jade giggled. "No. He's big."

"Big, but very gentle. He likes kids, especially little girls with green eyes."

"I have green eyes."

Lindsey bent low, peering into Jade's face. "Well, how about that? You sure do. You'll be his favorite."

Jesse watched in amazement as Lindsey completely captivated

his usually quiet daughter. If he wasn't very careful, he'd fall under her spell of genuine decency too. Given his mission, he'd better step easy. Common sense said he should discourage Jade from this fast-forming friendship, but she'd had so little fun lately, he didn't have the heart to say a word.

"Can I go see the Christmas in your building?"

"Sure you can." Popping up, Lindsey dusted her knees and looked at Jesse. His reluctance must have shown because she said, "If we can convince your daddy there are no monsters in there."

Mentally shaking himself, Jesse forced a smile he didn't feel. Santas and angels and horse-drawn wagons. Great. Just great. He wanted no part of any of it. But he wanted this job. And he wanted this farm. To get them both he'd have to struggle through a couple of months of having Christmas shoved down his throat at every turn. It was more than he'd bargained for, but he'd have to do it.

Somehow.

Chapter Three

Delighted to see Jade so excited and to find a fellow Christmas lover, Lindsey clasped her small hand and started toward the storage building. Jesse's voice stopped her.

"You two go ahead. I'll get busy here in the trees."

Lindsey turned back. A crisp October breeze had picked up earlier in the afternoon, but the autumn sun made the wind as warm as a puppy's breath. "Work can wait until tomorrow."

"You have plenty of trimmings here to get rid of. I'll start loading them in the wheelbarrow."

If reluctance needed a pictorial representation, Jesse Slater had the job. Hands fisted at his side, the muscles along his jawbone flexed repeatedly. Lindsey's medical training flashed through her head. Fight or flight—the adrenaline rush that comes when a man is threatened. But why did Jesse Slater feel threatened? And by what? She was the woman alone, hiring a virtual stranger to spend every day in her company. And she didn't feel the least bit threatened.

"Don't you want to see all my Christmas goodies?"

His expression was somewhere between a grimace and a forced smile. "Some other time."

He turned abruptly away and began gathering trimmed pine branches, tossing them into the wheelbarrow. Lindsey stood for a moment, observing the strong flex of muscle beneath the denim

jacket. His movements were jerky, as though he controlled some deep emotion hammering to get loose.

Regardless of his good looks and his easy manner, something was sorely missing in his life. Whether he realized it or not, Jesse was a lost and lonely soul in need of God's love.

Ever since coming to live on her grandparents' farm at the age of fifteen, Lindsey had brought home strays, both animal and human. She'd been a stray herself, healed by the love and faith she'd found here in the mountains. But there was something other than loneliness in Jesse. Something puzzling. Maybe even dangerous.

Then why didn't she send him packing?

"Could we go now?" A tug from Jade pulled her attention away from the man and back to the child.

"Sure, sweetie. Want to race?"

The storage and office buildings, which looked more like old-time outhouses than business buildings, were less than fifty feet from the field. Lindsey gave the child a galloping head start, her short, pink-capri-clad legs churning the grass and leaves. When enough distance separated them, Lindsey thundered after her, staying just far enough behind to enjoy the squeals and giggles.

When Lindsey and Jade returned sometime later, Jesse had shed his jacket and rolled back his shirtsleeves. The work felt good, cleansing somehow, and he wanted to stay right here until nightfall.

"That was fun, Daddy." Jade pranced toward him with a strand of shiny silver garland thrown around her neck like a boa. "Lindsey let me bring this to decorate a tree."

"Little early for that isn't it?" He tried not to react, tried to pretend the sight of anything Christmassy didn't send a spear right through his heart. But visions of gaily-wrapped gifts spilled out around a crushed blue car still haunted him.

Lindsey shrugged. "It's never too early for Christmas. Looks like you've been busy."

He'd filled and emptied the wheelbarrow several times, clearing all the rows she'd trimmed today.

"Impressed?"

She rested her hands on her hipbones and smiled. "As a matter of fact, I am."

"Good." Yanking off his gloves, he resisted returning the smile. "What's next?"

"Nothing for now. It will be dark soon."

She was right. Already the sun bled onto the trees atop the mountain. Darkness would fall like a rock, hard and fast. He'd run away once into the woods behind the farm and darkness had caught him unaware. He'd spent that night curled beneath a tree, praying for help that never came.

"Guess Jade and I should be heading home then."

Knocking the dust off his gloves, he stuffed them into a back pocket, letting the cloth fingers dangle against his jeans.

"Did you find a house to rent today?"

"Your friend Debbie hooked me up. Sent me to the mobile-home park on the edge of town."

She picked up his jacket, swatted the pine needles away and handed him the faded denim. "Is it a nice place?"

He repressed a bitter laugh and tossed the jacket over one shoulder. Anything was nice after living in your truck. When Jade had seen the tiny space, she'd been ecstatic.

"The trailer will do until something better comes along." He couldn't tell her that the something better was the farm she called home.

By mutual consent they fell in step and left the tree lot, Jade scampering along between them, deliberately crunching as many leaves as possible.

Before they reached his truck, Lindsey said, "I have extra linens, dishes and such if you could use them."

Don't be so nice. Don't make me like you.

He opened the door and boosted Jade into the cab. "We're all right for now."

"But you will let me know if you discover something you need, won't you?"

Grabbing the door frame, he swung himself into the driver's seat.

"Sure." Not in a hundred years. What he needed was somewhere in the courthouse in Winding Stair and she didn't need to know a thing about it—yet. He'd planned to start his investigation today, but finding a place to live had eaten up all

his time. Soon though. Very soon he would have the farm he'd coveted for the past eighteen years.

Lindsey wiped the sticky smear of Jade's maple syrup off the table, trying her best not to laugh at the father-and-daughter exchange going on in her kitchen. In the week since she'd hired Jesse Slater, he and Jade had become a comfortable part of her morning routine. As many times as she'd offered, Jesse refused to take his meals with her, but he hadn't objected when she'd taken to preparing breakfast for his little girl.

Now, as she cleaned away the last of Jade's pancakes, Jesse sat on the edge of a chair with his daughter perched between his knees. Every morning he made an endearingly clumsy attempt to fix the child's beautiful raven hair. And every day Lindsey itched to do it for him. But she said nothing. Jade was, after all, Jesse's child. Just like all the other children she loved and nurtured, Jade was not hers. Never hers.

Normally, he smoothed her hair with the brush, shoved a headband in place, and that was that. This morning, however, Jesse had reached his limit when Jade announced she wanted to wear a ponytail like her new best friend, Lacy. Lindsey suppressed a smile. From the expression on his face, Jesse considered the task right next to having his fingernails ripped out with fencing pliers.

A pink scrunchie gritted between his teeth, he battled the long hair into one hand, holding it in a stranglehold. He'd once let slip

that he'd ridden saddle broncs on the rodeo circuit and, Lindsey thought with a hidden smile, that he must have done so with this same intense determination.

Finally, with an audible exhale, he dropped back against the chair. "There. All done."

"Jess…" Lindsey started, then hushed. As much as she longed to see the little girl gussied up like the princess she could be, she wouldn't interfere.

Jade touched a hand tentatively to her head. The lopsided ponytail resided just behind her left ear. A long strand of unbound hair tumbled over the opposite shoulder and the top of her head had enough bumps and waves to qualify as an amusement-park ride.

"Daddy, I don't think Lacy wears her ponytail like this."

Lindsey couldn't hold back the laughter bubbling up inside her. Dropping the dishtowel over the back of a chair, she covered her face and giggled.

Jesse heaved an exasperated moan and rolled his silver eyes. "What? You don't appreciate my talent?"

Lindsey could barely get her breath. "It isn't that—It's just, just—" She took one look at the child's hair and started up again.

Jesse had never joked with her before, didn't smile much either, but this time a reluctant half smile tugged at one corner of his mouth and kicked up, setting off laugh crinkles around his eyes. "If I were a hairdresser in LA, this would be all the rage."

"If you were a hairdresser in LA, I'd stay in Oklahoma."

"All right, boss lady, if you think you can do better—" He bowed toward Jade, extending his arm with a flourish. "She's all yours."

"I thought you'd never ask. I have been itching to get my hands on that gorgeous hair." She grabbed the hairbrush and guided the grinning child back into the chair, then stood behind her. As she'd suspected, the dark hair drifted through her fingers like thick silk. In minutes she had the ponytail slicked neatly into place.

"Impressive," Jesse admitted, standing with his head tilted and both hands fisted on his hips.

"I love playing hairdresser."

"No kidding?" His gaze filtered over her usual flannel and denim. "You don't seem the type."

"I think I should be insulted." She smoothed her hand down Jade's silky ponytail. "Just because I dress simply and get my hands dirty for a living doesn't mean I'm not a girl, Jesse."

He held up both hands in surrender. "Hey, no offense meant. You are definitely a girl. Just not frilly like some."

Like your wife? she wondered. Was she frilly? Is that the type you prefer?

As soon as the thoughts bounded through her head, Lindsey caught them, shocked to even think such things. Once she'd dreamed of marrying a wonderful man and having a houseful of children, but after her fiancé's betrayal, trusting a man with her heart wasn't easy. Add to that the remote, sparsely populated area

where she'd chosen to live, and she'd practically given up hope of ever marrying. Besides, she had a farm to run. She didn't want to be interested in Jesse romantically. He was her hired hand and nothing more.

She turned her attention to Jade, handing the child a mirror. "There, sweetie. See what you think."

Jade touched her hair again. Then a smile bright enough to light a room stretched across her pretty face. "I'm perfect!"

Both adults laughed.

Jade flopped her head from side to side, sending the ponytail into a dance. "How did you make me so pretty?"

"My Sunday-school girls come out for dress-up parties sometimes. We do hair and makeup and wear fancy play clothes. It's fun."

"Can I come sometime?"

"Sure. If it's okay with your dad. In fact, tonight is kid's night at church if you'd like to come and meet some of my Sunday-school students."

"Daddy?" Jade asked hopefully, her eyebrows knitted together in an expression of worry that made no sense given the harmless request.

Some odd emotion flickered over Jesse, but his response was light and easy. He pecked the end of her nose with one finger. "Not this time, Butterbean. You and I have to work on those addition facts."

The child's happiness faded, but she didn't argue. Head down,

ponytail forgotten, she trudged to the couch and slid a pink backpack onto her shoulders. Her posture was so resigned, so forlorn that Lindsey could hardly bear it.

"Hey, sweetie, don't worry. My Sunday-school class comes out here pretty often. Maybe you can come another time."

The child gave a ragged sigh. "Okay." She hugged her father's knees. "Bye, Daddy."

He went down in front of her, drawing her against his chest.

Lindsey's throat clogged with emotion. The man was a wonderful dad, the kind of father she'd always dreamed of having for her own children someday. But someday had never come.

"I'll get the dog," she said, going to the door in front of Jade as she had every morning this week. She brought Sushi inside, watching through the glass storm door as the little girl headed to the bus stop, a small splash of pink and white against the flaming autumn morning. In the distance, Lindsey heard the grinding gears of the school bus.

As a teenager she'd ridden that bus to high school and home again, and in the years since she'd watched it come and go year after year carrying other people's children. But this morning she watched a child make the journey down her driveway to the bus stop, and, for the first time, felt a bittersweet ache in her throat because that child was not her own.

By noon the damp October morning had given way to blue skies and the kind of clouds Jade called marshmallows. A bit of

breeze swirled down from the north, promising a frost soon, but Jesse wasn't the least bit cool. As he sat on the top step, leaning backward onto the front porch, he enjoyed what had become his usual lunch, a Coke and a ham sandwich, and pondered how one little woman had ever done all this work by herself.

Besides the routine weeding and spraying, he'd helped her clear several acres of land in preparation for planting another thousand or so trees next week. And from her description of November's chores, October was a vacation.

He had to admit, however reluctantly, that he admired Lindsey Mitchell. She never complained, never expected him to do anything she wasn't willing to do herself. As a result he worked twice as hard trying to lift some of the load off her slim shoulders, and her gratitude for every little thing he did only made him want to do more.

She was a disconcerting woman.

Twisting to the left so he could see her, he said, "Mind if I ask you a question?"

Wearing the red flannel and denim that seemed so much a part of her, Lindsey sat in an old-fashioned wooden porch swing sipping her cola. A partially eaten ham sandwich rested at her side. Sushi lay in front of her, exercising mammoth restraint as she eyed the sandwich longingly.

"Ask away." With dainty movements, Lindsey tore off a piece of ham and tossed it to the dog.

"What would entice a pretty young woman to live out here all

alone and become a Christmas-tree farmer?"

The corners of her eyes crinkled in amusement as she wiped her fingers on her jeans. Jesse's stomach did that clenching thing again.

"I didn't exactly plan to be a Christmas-tree farmer. It just happened. Or maybe the Lord led me in this direction." One hand gripping the chain support, she tapped a foot against the porch and set the swing in motion. "My parents are in the military so we moved around a lot. When I was fourteen—" she paused to allow a wry grin. "Let's just say I was not an easy teenager."

Surprised, Jesse swiveled all the way around, bringing one boot up to the top step. Lindsey was always so serene, so at peace. "I can't see you causing anyone any trouble."

"Believe me, I did. Dad and Mom finally sent me here to live with my grandparents. They thought stability, the same school, the country atmosphere and my grandparents' influence would be good for me. They were right."

"So you didn't grow up here?" Now he was very interested.

Lindsey shook her head, honey-colored hair bouncing against her shoulders, catching bits of light that spun it into gold. Odd that he would notice such a thing.

"Actually none of my family is originally from around here. My grandparents bought this farm after they retired. Gramps began the Christmas Tree Farm as a hobby because he loved Christmas and enjoyed sharing it with others."

Jesse decided to steer the conversation toward her

grandparents and their purchase of the farm, feeling somewhat better to know Lindsey had not been involved in what had happened eighteen years ago.

"How long did your grandparents own this place?"

"Hmm." Her forehead wrinkled in thought. "I'm not sure. They'd probably been here three or four years when I came. I've lived here nearly fifteen years."

Jesse did the math in his head. The time frame fit perfectly. He rotated the Coke can between his palms then tapped it against his upraised knee. So her grandfather had been the one.

"Did you have any idea who your grandfather bought this place from?" As soon as he asked, Jesse wanted his words back. The question was too suspicious, too far off the conversation, but if Lindsey noticed she said nothing.

"I haven't a clue. All I know is after Granny passed away, Gramps put the farm and everything on it into my name. By then, I wanted to live here forever, so other than bringing me to a faith in Jesus, this was the greatest gift they could have given me."

The too-familiar tug of guilt irritated Jesse. He had no reason to feel bad for her. She'd enjoyed the benefit of living here for years while he'd wandered around like a lost sheep. Only during his too-short time with Erin had he ever found any of the peace that hovered over Lindsey like a sweet perfume. And he was counting on this farm to help him find that feeling again.

"So you became a tree farmer like your grandfather."

Stretching backward, Lindsey ran both hands through the top

of her hair, lifted the sides, and let them drift back down again. Jesse found the motion as natural and appealing as the woman herself.

"I tried other things. Went to college. Became a lab tech. Then Sean and I—" She paused, and two spots of color stained her cheekbones. "Let's just say something happened in my personal life. So, when Gramps passed away three years ago, I couldn't bring myself to let the tree farm go. After that first year of doing all the things he'd taught me and of watching families bond as they chose that perfect Christmas tree, I understood that this was where my heart is."

Though curious about the man she'd mentioned, Jesse decided to leave the subject alone. Knowing about her love life would only make his task more difficult. "So you gave up your job to dedicate all your time to the farm."

"I still take an occasional shift at the hospital and fill in for vacations in the summer to keep my skills sharp or to put a little extra money in the bank. But this is my life. This is what I love. And unless economics drive me out of business, I'll raise Christmas trees right here on Gramps' farm forever."

Though she couldn't possibly know his thoughts, to Jesse the announcement seemed like a challenge. Averting his eyes, he ripped off a piece of sandwich and tossed the bit of bread and ham to the dog.

Sushi thumped her tail in thanks.

"You spoil her more than I do."

"Yeah." He pointed his soda can toward the north. "We have visitors."

A flock of geese carved a lopsided V against the sky, honking loudly enough to rival a rush-hour traffic jam.

"They're headed to my pond."

"And then to a vacation in Florida."

Lindsey laughed and drew her knees up under her chin. "Watching them makes me feel lazy."

"What's on for this afternoon now that we've cleared that new plot of land?"

"Tomorrow we'll need to go over to Mena and pick up the saplings I've ordered. So this afternoon I thought we'd get ready for the wienie roast."

"Who's having a wienie roast?"

"I am. Well, my church actually, but since I have such a great place for it, complete with a horse to give wagon rides, I host the party out here every fall. I hope you and Jade will come."

"I wouldn't want to impose." In truth, the idea of hanging out with a bunch of church people made him sweat. He'd played that scene before, for all the good it had done him in the end.

"Trust me, after you drag brush for the campfire, whittle a mountain of roasting sticks and set up tables, chairs and hay bales, you will have earned a special place at this function."

"I don't know, Lindsey. I'm not sure I would fit in."

Dropping her feet to the porch floor, Lindsey leaned forward, face earnest, hair swinging forward, as she reached out to touch

his arm.

"Please, Jesse. Jade would have so much fun. And having a little fun now and then wouldn't hurt you either."

He was beginning to weaken. A wienie roast was not the same as going to church. And Jade would love roasting marshmallows over a campfire. More than that, it was high time he got moving on his mission.

Lindsey's words echoed his thoughts. "Winding Stair is full of good people. The party would be a great opportunity for you to get acquainted with some of them."

She was right about that. He needed to get friendly with the townsfolk. But not for the reasons she had in mind. He gulped the rest of his cola, taking the burn all the way to his stomach.

Somebody in this town had to know what had happened eighteen years ago. The more people trusted him, the sooner he could have his answers—and the sooner he and Jade could take possession of this farm.

Likely no one would remember him. Les Finch had not been a friendly man, and they'd kept to themselves up here in the mountains. As a boy, Jesse had been a quiet loner, preferring the woods to school activities. And his name was different from his mom and stepdad. His secret was, he believed, safe from the unsuspecting folk of Winding Stair.

He didn't like playing the bad guy, but right was right. This was his home…and he intended to claim it.

Chapter Four

"Think this will be enough?"

At Jesse's question, Lindsey dumped an armload of firewood into a huge oval depression in the ground. Dusting bark and leaves from the front of her jacket, she evaluated the stack of roasting sticks Jesse had piled next to a long folding table.

"How many do you have there? Fifty, maybe?"

He hitched one shoulder, distant and preoccupied as if whittling enough roasting sticks was the last thing on his mind. "Close."

"That should do it." She knelt beside the campfire pit and began to arrange the wood. "Some of the older boys like to make their own—especially when they have a girlfriend to impress."

"It's a man thing." Jesse tossed the last stick onto the pile and snapped shut a pocketknife, which he then shimmied into his front jeans' pocket. "I think we're about set. What time will the guests arrive?"

"Sevenish. Some will meet at the church and bring the bus. Others will drift in at will throughout the evening." Leaning back on her heels, she gazed up at him. The look on his face said he wanted to be a thousand miles away by then. "It'll be fun, Jesse."

Jade, who resided less than five feet from her daddy at all times, sat on a bale of hay munching an apple with childish contentment. One tennis-shoed foot was curled beneath her

while the other beat a steady rhythm against the tight rectangle of baled grass.

"I never went to a wienie roast before," she said.

She'd been ecstatic, hopping and dancing around her father like a puppy when he'd told her of the plans. Lindsey wished Jesse showed half that much enthusiasm.

"You'll like it. We'll play games and take a ride in the wagon and roast marshmallows." Playfully bumping the child's hip with her own, Lindsey sat down next to her. "You'll need your coat. The temperature gets pretty cool after the sun goes down."

Jesse propped a booted foot on the end of the bale next to Jade. He rubbed at his bottom lip, pensive. "We better head home and get cleaned up."

Jade frowned at one palm and then the other. Apple juice glistened on her fingers. "I'm clean."

Jesse shot Lindsey a wry glance. "Well, I'm not." Scooping his daughter up into strong arms, he rubbed her nose with his. "And we'll stop by the store for some marshmallows."

The gap-toothed smile appeared. "Okay!"

He tossed Jade over his shoulder the way Lindsey had seen him do a dozen times. After a thoughtful pause, he said, "I guess we'll see ya at seven then."

Watching the enigmatic man and his child cross the yard, Lindsey experienced an uncomfortable sense of loss and loneliness. Given the number of times she'd asked him or Jade to church functions, she'd been pleasantly surprised when Jesse

had agreed to come to the party. He'd been more than clear on a number of occasions that spiritual issues were on his no-call list.

Still, she had a funny feeling about Jesse's decision to join tonight's festivities. He'd been almost grim all afternoon while they'd made the preparations, as if the party was a nasty medicine to take instead of a pleasure to be enjoyed.

Going to release a resentful Sushi from her office confinement, Lindsey heard the roar of Jesse's pickup truck fading into the distance and wondered if he would return at all.

By seven-thirty, friends of every age milled around the clearing along the back side of Lindsey's farm, but there was no sign of Jesse and Jade. Disappointment settled over Lindsey like morning fog on a pond as she watched the driveway for the familiar silver-and-blue truck. The party would have been good for father and daughter. That's why her disappointment was so keen, not because she missed their company, although she was too honest to deny that fact completely. Still, she had plenty of other friends around, and the party, as always, was off to a roaring start.

Beneath a full and perfect hunter's moon, the scent of hickory smoke and roasting hotdogs circled over a crackling campfire. The night air, cool and crisp, meant jackets and hooded sweatshirts, many of which lay scattered about on hay bales or on the short browning grass as their owners worked up a sweat in various games.

A rambunctious group of teenagers and young adults played a game of volleyball at the nets she and Jesse had strung up. Smaller children played tag by lantern light or crawled over the wagonload of hay parked at an angle on the north end of the clearing. Most of the adults chatted and laughed together around the food table and a huge cattle tank filled with iced-down soda pop and bottled water.

"Where's that hired hand of yours, Lindsey?" Pastor Cliff Wilson, standing with a meaty arm draped over the shoulder of his diminutive wife, was only a few years older than Lindsey. She still had difficulty believing that this gentle giant had once spent more time in the county jail for drinking and disturbing the peace than he did in church. Just looking at him reminded Lindsey and everyone else of the amazing redemptive power of Jesus' love. "I thought we'd get to meet him tonight."

"I did, too, Cliff," she said. "But it looks like he backed out on coming. Jade will be so disappointed." So was she. Jade needed the interaction, and though Jesse held himself aloof, he needed to mingle with people who loved and served God.

"Jade?" Cliff's wife, Karen, spoke up. "What a pretty name. Is that his little girl?"

Karen and Cliff had yet to conceive and every child held special interest for the pastor's wife.

"Yes. She's adorable. A little shy at first, so if they do come, give her some time to warm up." Lindsey took a handful of potato chips from a bag on one of the long folding tables and nibbled

the salt from one. “Aren’t you two going to eat a hotdog?”

Karen laughed and hugged her husband’s thick shoulder. “Cliff’s already had three.”

The pastor rubbed his belly. “Just getting started.”

Downing a sizeable portion of cola, the minister slid two franks onto the point of a stick and poked it into the flames. “One for me, and one for my lady friend here.”

Lindsey smiled, admiring the open affection between the pastor and his wife.

“Come on, Lindsey.” Debbie Castor, the waitress at the Caboose Diner and one of Lindsey’s closest friends, had joined the volleyball game. “We need someone who can spike the ball. Tom’s team is waxing us.”

Tom was Debbie’s husband, and they loved competing against each other in good-natured rivalries.

“Okay. One game. I still haven’t had my hotdog yet.” To shake off her disappointment at Jesse’s absence, Lindsey trotted to the makeshift court. She was in good shape from the physical aspect of her job and was generally a good athlete, but tonight her mind wasn’t on the game. Up to now, Jesse had always kept his word, and she experienced a strange unease that something was amiss.

When Tom’s team easily defeated Debbie’s, she stood with hands on her knees catching her breath. “Sorry, guys. I wasn’t much help tonight. I must be losing my touch.”

“Maybe after you eat you’ll regain your former glorious form, and we’ll play another game.”

With a laugh, she said, “No deal, Tom. You just want to beat us again.”

“Right on, sister.” Tom teased, bringing his arms forward to flex like a body builder. Balding and bespectacled, the fireman fooled everyone with his small stature and mischievous nature. Only those who knew him understood how strong and athletic he really was.

Still grinning, Lindsey fell in step beside Debbie and headed back to the campfire. “Have you eaten yet?”

“Half a bag of Oreos,” Debbie admitted. “All I want lately is chocolate.” Leaning closer she whispered, “I think I’m pregnant again.”

Lindsey’s squeal was silenced by Debbie’s, “Shh. I don’t want Karen to hear until I’m sure. I wouldn’t want to hurt her.”

“Ah, Deb. She’s not like that. Karen will be happy for you.”

“But to see someone like me have an unplanned pregnancy when she can’t even have an intentional one must be difficult for her.”

Lindsey knew the pain of wanting, but never having children, and yet her joy for her friends was genuine.

“Does Tom know yet?”

Debbie nodded, her orange pumpkin earrings dancing in the firelight. “He’s still a little shell-shocked, I’m afraid. Finances are so tight already with the three we have, but he’ll come around.”

“You and Tom are such great parents. This baby will be the darling of the bunch, you wait and see. God always knows what

He's doing."

"You're right, I know, but it's still a shock." Looking around, she spotted Tom across the way. "I think I'll go over and let the daddy-to-be pamper me awhile."

Lindsey watched her friend snag another cookie as she sashayed around to the opposite side of the campfire where her husband waited. A twinge of envy pinched at her as she gazed at the group gathered on her farm. They were mostly couples and families, people who shared their lives with someone else. Even the teenagers paired up or hung together in mixed groups going through the age-old ritual of finding a partner.

Lindsey loved these people, liked attending functions with them, but times such as these made her more aware than ever of how alone she was.

To shake off the unusual sense of melancholy, Lindsey found a roasting stick and went in search of a frankfurter to roast. She had too much to be thankful for to feel sorry for herself. She'd chosen to live in this remote place away from her family where there were few unattached men her age. If the Lord intended for her to have a mate, He'd send one her way.

An unexpected voice intruded on her thoughts.

"Could you spare two of those for a couple of fashionably late strangers?"

A pair of solemn silver eyes, aglow in the flickering firelight, met hers.

Her heart gave a strange and altogether inappropriate lurch of

pleasure.

Jesse was here.

Jesse stared into Lindsey's delighted eyes and wished he was anywhere but here. From the minute he'd left the farm, he had struggled with a rising desire not to return. Except for his promise to Jade, he wouldn't have. He no more belonged with Lindsey and her holy church friends than he belonged in Buckingham Palace with the queen.

Jade gripped his leg, eyes wide as she watched children running in wild circles outside the perimeter of the firelight.

"You didn't think we were coming, did you?" he said to Lindsey.

She handed him a roasting stick, eyebrows lifted in an unspoken question. "I was beginning to wonder if something had happened."

The open-ended statement gave him the opportunity to explain, but he let the moment pass. His life was his business. Lindsey's gentle way of pulling him in, including him, was already giving him enough trouble.

"We brought marshmallows." Jade's announcement filled the gap in conversation. She thrust the bag toward Lindsey.

"Cool. Let's eat a hotdog first and then we'll dig into these." Lindsey placed the bag on the table and took a wiener from a pack. "Do you want to roast your own?"

Jade pulled back, shaking her head. "Uh-uh. The fire might

burn me."

"How about if I help you?" Lindsey slid the hotdog onto the stick and held it out.

Jesse could feel the tension in his child's small fingers. Her anxiety over every new experience worried him. He squatted down in front of her. "It's okay. Lindsey won't let you get hurt."

Indecision laced with worry played over his daughter's face. Lindsey, with her innate kindness, saw the dilemma. Jade wanted the fun of roasting the hotdog, but couldn't bring herself to trust anyone other than him. Jesse hid a sigh.

"This hotdog will taste better if Daddy cooks it. Isn't that right, sugar?" Lindsey said, handing him the loaded stick. "I'll grab another."

Squatting beside Lindsey with Jade balanced between his knees, Jesse thrust the franks into the flames. Jade rested a tentative hand just behind his.

More than anything Jesse longed to see Jade as confident and fearless as other six-year-olds. Deep inside, he was convinced that regaining his inheritance, giving her a stable home environment and surrounding her with familiar people and places would solve Jade's problem. Tonight he hoped to take another step in that direction.

Letting his gaze drift around the campfire, Jesse studied the unfamiliar faces. Somebody here must have known Lindsey's grandparents and probably even his stepfather. Some self-righteous churchgoer standing out there in the half darkness

sucking down a hotdog might have even been involved in the shady deal that had left him a homeless orphan.

"Everyone here is anxious to meet you," Lindsey said, her voice as smoky and warm as the hickory fire.

Given the train of his thoughts, Jesse shifted uncomfortably. "Checking out the new guy to make sure you're safe with me?"

The remark came out harsher, more defensive than he'd planned.

Serene brown eyes probing, Lindsey said, "Don't take offense, Jesse. This is a small town. They only want to get acquainted, to be neighborly."

He blamed the fire and not his pinch of guilt for the sudden warmth in his face. She was too kind and he wished he'd followed his gut instinct and stayed at the cramped little trailer.

"Here you go, Butterbean." Taking the hotdog from the flames, he went to the table for buns and mustard. Lindsey and Jade followed.

One of the biggest men he'd ever seen handed him a paper plate. "You must be Jesse."

Lindsey made the introductions. "This is my pastor, Cliff Wilson."

Jesse's surprise must have shown because the clergyman bellowed a cheerful laugh. "If you were out killing preachers, you'd pass me right up, wouldn't you?"

Cliff looked more like a pro wrestler than a preacher. A blond lumberjack of a man in casual work clothes and tennis shoes with

blue eyes as gentle and guileless as a child's and a face filled with laughter.

"Good to meet you, sir," Jesse said stiffly, not sure how to react to the unorthodox minister.

"Everyone calls me Pastor Cliff or just plain Cliff." The preacher offered a beefy hand which Jesse shook. "You from around this area?"

"Enid." Giving his stock answer, Jesse concentrated on squirting mustard onto Jade's hotdog. No way he'd tell any of them the truth—that he'd roamed this very land as a youth.

"Lindsey says you're heaven-sent, a real help to her."

"I'm glad for the work." He handed the hotdog to Jade, along with a napkin. "Lindsey's a fair boss."

By now at least a half dozen other men had sidled up to the table for introductions and food refills. Jesse felt like a bug under a magnifying glass, but if he allowed his prickly feelings to show, people might get suspicious. He needed their trust, though he didn't want to consider how he'd eventually use that trust against one of their own.

"A fair boss? Now that's a good 'un." A short, round older man in a camouflage jacket offered the joking comment. "That girl works herself into the ground just like her grandpa did. I figure she expects the same from her hired help."

Jesse stilled, attention riveted. This fellow knew Lindsey's grandparents and was old enough to have been around Winding Stair for some time. He just might know the details Jesse needed

to begin searching the courthouse records.

"Now Clarence." Eyes twinkling a becoming gold in the flickering light, Lindsey pointed a potato chip at the speaker. "You stop that before you scare off the only steady worker I've ever had."

"Ah, he knows I'm only kidding." Clarence aimed a grin toward Jesse. "Don't you, son?" Before Jesse could respond, the man stuck out his hand. "Name's Clarence Stone. I live back up the mountain a ways. If you ever need anything, give me a holler."

A chuckle came from the man in a cowboy hat standing next to Clarence. His black mustache quivered on the corners. "That's right, Jesse. Give Clarence a holler. He'll come down and talk your ears off while you do all the work."

Clarence didn't seem the least bit offended. He grinned widely.

"This here wise guy is Mick Thompson," he said with affection. "Mick has a ranch east of town, though if it wasn't for that sweet little wife of his, he'd have gone under a long time ago."

Mick laughed, teeth white in his dark face. "I have to agree with you there, Clarence, even if Clare is your daughter. I wouldn't be much without her."

Jesse's mind registered the relationship along with the fact that Mick owned a ranch. Now that was something Jesse understood.

"You raise horses on that ranch of yours?" he asked, making casual conversation while hoping to turn the conversation back

to Lindsey's grandparents.

"Sure do. You know horses?" Mick sipped at his plastic cup.

"I've done a little rodeo. Bronc-riding mostly."

"No kidding?" Mick's eyebrows lifted in interest. "Ever break any colts?"

"Used to do a lot of that sort of work." Before Erin died. But he wouldn't share that with Mick.

"Would you like to do it again?"

"I wouldn't mind it." He missed working with rough stock, and breaking horses on the side would put some much-needed extra money in his pocket.

"Don't be trying to hire him away from Lindsey, Mick," the jovial Clarence put in. "She'll shoot you. And I'll be left to support your wife and kids."

"You'd shoot me yourself if you thought Clare and the kids would move back up in those woods with you and Loraine."

Both men chuckled, and despite himself, Jesse enjoyed their good-natured ribbing.

Lindsey, having drifted off in conversation with a red-haired woman, missed the teasing remark. Without her present, Jesse wanted to turn the conversation back to her grandfather, but wasn't sure how to go about it without causing suspicion.

"Tell you what, Jesse," Mick said, stroking his mustache with thumb and forefinger. "When you have some time, give me a call. I have a couple of young geldings that need breaking, and I can't do it anymore. Bad back."

Were all the people of Winding Stair this trusting that they'd offer a man a job without ever seeing him work?

"How do you know I can handle the job?"

Mick's mustache quirked. "Figure you'd say so if you didn't think you could."

"I can."

"See?" Mick clapped him on the back and clasped his hand in a brief squeeze. "My number's in the book. And I pay the going rate."

"Appreciate the offer, but I doubt I can get loose from here until after the holidays."

The familiar sense of dread crawled through his belly. He'd much rather be tossed in the dirt by a bucking horse than spend one minute in Lindsey's tree lot. He'd counted on the old adage that familiarity breeds indifference. So far, that hadn't proven true. If anything, he dreaded the coming weeks more than ever.

Mick sipped at his soda before saying, "After Christmas is fine with me. Those colts aren't going anywhere. Meantime, if you need help hauling these trees, let me know. I got a flatbed settin' over there in my barn rustin'."

"He sure does," Clarence teased. "And it would do him good to put in a full day's work for a change."

An unbidden warmth crept through Jesse. Offers of help from friends didn't come too often, but this offhand generosity of strangers was downright unsettling.

"Jade, Jade." Two little girls about Jade's age came running up

and interrupted the conversation. One on each side, they grabbed her hands and pulled. “Come play tag.”

She looked to Jesse for approval. “Can I, Daddy?”

“Don’t you want to finish your hotdog?”

“I’m full.” She handed him the last bite of the squeezed and flattened sandwich.

He downed the remains and wiped the mustard off her face. “Go on and play.”

She grabbed his hand and tugged. “Come with me.”

Jesse shook his head, standing his ground for once. “I haven’t finished my own hotdog. I’ll be here when you get back. Promise.”

After a moment of uncertainty, the desire to play with her friends won out.

Jesse’s heart gladdened to see his little girl race away with the other children for once instead of clinging to his leg like a barnacle.

Biting into his smoky hotdog, Jesse watched and listened, hoping for an opportunity to casually probe for information. His attention strayed to the gregarious preacher.

Pastor Cliff seemed to be everywhere, laughing, joking and making sure everyone had a great time. The teenagers flocked around him as though he was some football star, begging him to join their games, occasionally pelting him with a marshmallow to gain his attention. Punctuating the air with a few too many “praise the Lords” for Jesse’s comfort, the preacher nonetheless

came across like a regular guy. He'd even overheard Cliff promise to help repair someone's leaky roof next week. The big man sure wasn't like any minister Jesse had ever encountered.

"When are we taking that wagon ride, Lindsey?" Cliff bellowed, indicating a small boy perched on his shoulders. "Nathaniel says he's ready when you are."

"Do you kids want the tractor or the horse to pull us?" Lindsey called back.

"The horse. The horse," came a chorus of replies from all but the preacher.

Jesse knew the big, powerful horse stood nearby inside a fenced lot, his oversized head hanging over the rails, waiting his opportunity. The animal liked people and was gentle as a baby.

"How about you, Cliff? What's your preference?" A man called, his face wreathed in mischief.

The oversized preacher waved his upraised hands in mock terror. "Now, Tom, you know I don't mess with any creature that's bigger than me."

"Which wouldn't be too many, Cliff," came the teasing answer.

Everyone laughed, including Cliff, though the joke was on him. Grudgingly, Jesse admired that. The minister he'd known would have seen the joke as an offense to his lofty position.

"You're out-voted, preacher," Lindsey called, starting toward the gate. "I'll get Puddin'."

Shoving his hands into the pockets of his jean jacket, Jesse

fell into step beside her. Though mingling with the church crowd provided opportunities to gather information, he needed some distance. He hadn't expected their friendliness, the ease with which they accepted him, and most of all, he'd not expected them to be such everyday, normal people. Lindsey's church family, as she called them, was fast destroying his long-held view of Christians as either stiff and distant or pushy and judgmental.

"Need any help?" he asked.

She withdrew a small flashlight from inside her jacket, aimed the beam toward the gate, and whistled softly. "I put his harness on earlier. All I need to do is hook the traces to the wagon."

Jesse stepped into the light and raised the latch. In seconds the big horse lumbered up to nuzzle at his owner while she snapped a lead rope onto his halter. Together they led him toward the waiting wagon.

"He's a nice animal." Jesse ran a hand over the smooth, warm horseflesh, enjoying the feel again after too much time away from the rodeo. "What breed is he?"

"Percheron mostly." She smiled at the horse with affection. "Although I'm not sure he's a full-blood since I have no papers on him, but he has the sweet temperament and muscular body the breed is known for. And he loves to work."

"Percheron." Jesse rolled the word over in his head. He knew enough about horses to know the name, but that was about it. "Different from the quarter horses I'm used to."

"Certainly different from the wild broncs. Puddin' doesn't

have a buck anywhere in him." One on each side of the massive horse, they headed back toward the heat and light of the bonfire. "Every kid within a ten-mile radius has ridden him, walked under him, crawled over him, and he doesn't mind at all." She turned toward him, her face shadowed and pale in the bright moonlight. "What about you? Do you still have horses?"

He shook his head. "No. After Erin died, I—" He stopped, not wanting to revisit the horrible devastation when he'd sold everything and hit the road, trying to run from the pain and guilt. He'd told Lindsey more about his past than he'd ever intended to, but talking about Erin was taboo. "I'd better find Jade."

He stalked off toward the circle of squealing children, aware that he'd been abrupt with Lindsey and trying not to let that bother him. He'd intentionally sought her company, and now he was walking away.

Ruefully, he shook his head. What a guy.

In the distance he spotted Jade, her long hair flying out behind her as she ran, laughing. With a hitch beneath his rib cage, he watched his daughter, grateful for the rare display of playful abandon. Letting the shadows absorb him, he stood along the perimeter of children, hoping this place would ultimately heal them both.

"Hey, Jesse." A hand bigger than Puddin's hoof landed on his shoulder. The preacher. "Great party, huh?"

"Yeah." Though he didn't belong here, he had to admit the party was a success. Just seeing Jade carefree was worth a few

hours discomfort on his part.

"Lindsey's a great gal."

Jesse followed the minister's gaze to where Lindsey, surrounded by too many youthful helpers, attached the patient horse to the wagon. Silently, he agreed with Cliff's assertion. Lindsey was a good woman. Her decency was giving his conscience fits. "You known her long?"

"A few years. Ever since coming here to minister." Cliff nodded at the rowdy crowd around the fire. "Most of these folks have known her and each other much longer, but God really blessed me when he sent me to Winding Stair. I feel as if Lindsey and all the others out there are my family now."

Clarence approached, this time accompanied by a small, gray-haired woman with rosy cheeks who carried a plate of homemade cookies. "That's the way it's supposed to be, ain't it, preacher?"

Cliff reached for the cookies. "Yep."

"How about you, Jesse?" Clarence motioned toward the plate.

Out of courtesy Jesse accepted the dessert, taking a bite. He liked the mildly sweet flavor of the old-fashioned cookie. "These are good."

"Course they are," Clarence said. "Loraine makes the best oatmeal cookies in the county. And if you don't believe me, just ask her."

"Oh, Clarence, you old goof." The smiling little woman flapped a hand at him. "Jesse, don't pay any mind to my husband. This isn't my recipe and he knows it. Lindsey's grandma gave it

to me. Now that woman could cook."

Blood quickening, Jesse saw the opportunity and took it. "You knew Lindsey's grandparents?"

"Sure did. Better folks never walked the earth, as far as I'm concerned." She paused long enough to dole out more cookies to passers-by. Jesse kept his mouth shut, waiting for her to go on, blood humming with the hope that he was about to learn something.

"Betty Jean—that was her grandma—could do about anything domestic. A country version of Martha Stewart, I guess you'd say." She chuckled softly at her own joke. "And she wasn't stingy about it either. Would share a jar of pickles or a recipe without batting an eye. A fine neighbor, she was. A real fine neighbor."

She looked a little sad and Jesse shifted uncomfortably. He needed to keep Loraine and Clarence talking but he didn't want to think of the Mitchells as decent folks. There was nothing decent about stealing from an orphan.

Keeping his tone casual, Jesse said, "Lindsey's a good cook too."

"Betty Jean would have made sure of that." Loraine thrust the nearly empty plate toward him. "Another cookie?"

"Might as well take one, Jesse," Clarence put in with a chortle. "She ain't happy unless she's feeding someone."

Jesse hid a smile. It was hard not to like Loraine and Clarence Stone. "Thanks."

He accepted the cookie, mind searching for a way to gain

more information. He'd suffered through an hour of stilted conversation to get this far. He wasn't about to let this chance slip away.

"What about Lindsey's grandpa? I guess he's the one who taught her to use that rifle…."

"Yep," Clarence said. "That was Charlie, all right. Me and him used to hunt and fish together, and he liked to brag about Lindsey's shooting. Called her his little Annie Oakley."

Jesse's stomach leaped.

Charlie.

His patience had paid off. At last, he had someone to blame along with his stepfather. Lindsey's grandfather, the man who'd stolen this eighty-acre farm from a teenage boy, was named Charlie Mitchell.

In the shadowy distance, snatches of conversation and laughter floated on the night air. One particular laugh—a throaty, warm sound that sent shivers down his spine—stood out from the rest.

Lindsey.

He wanted to put his hands over his ears, to block out the sound. He'd finally discovered some information, and nobody, no matter how sweet and kind, was going to stop him from using it.

Chapter Five

Lindsey draped her jacket over the back of a kitchen chair and went to the sink. She'd had a long afternoon without Jesse there to help, but she couldn't complain. In the weeks he'd worked on the farm, this was the first time he'd asked for time off. So she had spent the afternoon marking the trees they'd soon cut and bale for delivery.

Ever since the night of the cookout, she'd noticed a shift in him. He worked harder than ever on the farm, putting in long hours and cutting himself no slack. But he seemed to be bothered by something—not that there was anything new about that—but this was a subtle mulling as though he had something heavy on his mind.

With a sigh, Lindsey acknowledged how much she'd come to depend upon the mysterious Jesse. She needed him, and regardless of his inner demons, she liked him. He was a good man with a heavy burden. If only she could find a way to help him past that burden—whatever it was.

Two or three times today she'd turned to ask Jesse's advice about something before remembering he was gone. Funny how she'd never needed anyone before other than Sushi and the Lord, but Jesse had changed all that. And she wasn't sure becoming dependent on her hired hand was such a good idea.

Turning the water tap, she filled a glass and drank deeply,

thirsty even though the early November weather was cloudy and cool with the promise of rain hanging like a gray veil over the land. In the back of her mind, she faintly registered a rumbling in the distance but paid little mind. After washing and drying her hands, she headed to the refrigerator.

She had one hand on last night's chicken and rice when the screaming began.

An adrenaline rush more powerful than an electric shock propelled her into action. Faster than she thought possible, Lindsey bounded into the bedroom, unlocked the gun case, removed her rifle and rushed out into the yard, loading the weapon as she moved. An occasional mountain lion roamed these hills.

Peering in the direction of the screams, Lindsey stopped… and lowered the gun.

Jade stood halfway down the gravel driveway, frozen in fear, screaming her head off. Directly in front of her, Sushi lay on her back, feet in the air, groveling for all she was worth.

With a feeling somewhere between relief and exasperation, Lindsey stashed the rifle on the porch and loped down the driveway.

What was Jade doing here? Where was Jesse? And when would the child realize that Sushi was her friend?

"Sushi, come," she called. The German shepherd leaped to her feet, shook off the dust and leaves and trotted to Lindsey's side. Pointing to a spot several yards away from the terrified child, she

commanded, “Stay.”

The dog obeyed, plopping her bottom onto the dirt, tongue lolling, while she watched Jade with worried eyes.

Jade’s screaming subsided, but the harsh sobs continued as Lindsey went down on her knees and took the little girl into her arms. She had a dozen questions, but now was not the time to ask them. Soon enough she could discover why Jesse had not picked up Jade at school as he’d planned.

“Jade, listen to me.” Pushing the tangled hair, damp with tears, back from Jade’s face she said gently, “Stop crying and listen. We need to talk like big girls.”

Jade gave several shuddering sobs, scrubbing at her eyes with her fingertips. “The dog was going to get me.”

“That’s what we have to talk about. Sushi will not hurt you. Look at her. She’s sitting down there begging for you to like her, but she won’t even come near you unless I tell her to.”

“She ran at me. I saw her teeth.”

“She was smiling at you. You’re part of her family now and she was excited to see you. That’s how she behaves when I come home from someplace, too.”

“It is?” Wary and unconvinced, Jade glanced from Lindsey to Sushi and back again.

“Sure. Every time you come home, she whines to be let out so she can play with you. It makes her very sad that you don’t like her.”

Jade’s expression said she was thinking that over, but still she

clung tightly to Lindsey.

"Where's my daddy?"

"I'm not sure, sweetie. He was supposed to pick you up at school."

The little girl's small shoulders slumped. "He's probably dead." And she burst out crying again.

"No, Jade, no." Please God, let me be right. Don't let anything else happen to this child. The loss of her mother had completely destroyed her sense of safety. "Your daddy is running late and didn't get back in time. He'll be here soon, and while we wait, you and I can have a dress-up tea party."

Lindsey could see she scored some points with the idea so she pressed the advantage. "Sushi wants to come, too. She even has some dress-up clothes."

Jade found that amusing. A hesitant smile teetered around her mouth. "Really?"

"Absolutely. All my Sunday-school kids invite Sushi to their tea parties because she's such a nice dog, so she has a hat, a boa and a fancy vest to wear."

"She might bite me."

"No." Lindsey said firmly. "She will not." Sliding Jade to the ground, she took the child's hand. "Come on. I'll show you."

Sushi waited right where she'd been told to stay, eagerly thumping her tail at the first sign of movement in her direction.

Jade pulled back. "Uh-uh."

Lindsey sighed, but relented and swept the little girl into her

arms. “Okay, then. I have another idea.”

She carried Jade to the house. A bewildered Sushi remained in the driveway as commanded.

“Stand here inside the house where you can see Sushi and me through the glass door.” Lindsey took a piece of leftover chicken from the fridge. She’d planned to have the meat for supper, but helping Jade begin the process of overcoming this phobia was far more important. “Watch what a good girl Sushi is and how she loves to play, but she always minds me when I tell her to do something. Okay?”

Nodding and wide-eyed, Jade stood inside the door, her face pressed to the glass while Lindsey stepped onto the porch and called the dog. When Sushi arrived, skidding to a stop at her owner’s command, Lindsey spent several minutes putting the animal through all her obedience commands. Extremely well disciplined, Sushi even resisted the piece of baked chicken, though Lindsey knew the meat was her favorite treat.

Then she played with Sushi, petting her, tossing sticks that the dog retrieved, scratching her belly.

Finally, Lindsey lay down on the porch to show her total trust of the dog. Sushi responded by plopping her big head onto Lindsey’s chest with a delighted sigh that made Jade laugh.

Sitting up, Lindsey rotated toward Jade. “See what a good girl she is?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Would you like to pet her?”

"Uh-uh." But Lindsey could see that, for once, she wanted to.

Confident they'd made progress, Lindsey relented. "Maybe next time?"

Leaving Sushi on the porch, Lindsey dusted her clothes and came inside. She peeked at the yellow teapot clock hanging over the cook stove. Jade had been here at least thirty minutes and still no sign of Jesse. Refusing to worry, she internalized a little prayer, and turned her attention to occupying Jade. The little girl didn't need to fret about her daddy even if Lindsey was.

"I'm starved."

"Me, too."

Using her best imitation of an English lady, Lindsey said, "Shall we prepare tea and dine?"

Jade giggled. "Can we dress up too? And you can be the princess and I'll be the queen?"

"Lovely idea, my queen. Right this way, please." Nose in the air as befit royalty, she led the way to the huge plastic storage bin in her bedroom closet where she kept a variety of thrift-shop and novelty-store play clothes. Jade, getting into the spirit of the game, followed suit. She fell upon the container, carefully lifting out one garment after another, exclaiming over each one as if the clothes came from Rodeo Drive.

In no time, she'd chosen outfits for both of them and they traipsed on plastic high heels, boas trailing, into the kitchen to prepare the Oklahoma version of high tea.

"Let's make fancy sandwiches first. Later, we'll do cookies."

"Do you have Christmas cookie cutters?" Jade shoved at her sun hat, repositioning the monstrosity on her head. Bedecked with more flowers than Monet had ever painted, the hat tied with a wide scarf under the child's chin. Lindsey thought she looked adorable.

"A bunch of them. We can use them on the sandwiches if you want to."

"Cool. Do you gots sprinkles too?"

"Oh, yeah. I have tons of sprinkles. All colors. But let's not put those on the sandwiches."

Jade giggled. "For the cookies, silly. I want to make Daddy a big red cookie." Her face fell. "I wish my daddy would come. I'll bet he's getting hungry."

"He'll be here soon," Lindsey said with more confidence than she felt as she spread the sandwich fixings on the table. "Tell you what. Let's say a little prayer asking Jesus to take care of him and bring him safely home."

She hardly noticed that she'd referred to her own house as home for Jesse and Jade. Semantics didn't matter right now.

"Okay." To Lindsey's surprise, Jade closed her eyes and folded her little hands beneath her chin. Even though Jesse shied away at the mention of God, someone had taught this child to pray.

Closing her own eyes, Lindsey said a short but heartfelt prayer.

"Amen."

Jade's shoulders relaxed. "Jesus will take care of Daddy, won't He?"

"Yes, He will. And He'll take care of you too." She smeared mayo on a slice of bread, handing it to Jade to layer on the meat and cheese. "Did you know you have a guardian angel who is always with you?"

Shaking her head, Jade licked the mayo off one finger.

"Well, you do. Everybody does. But God has very special guardian angels that take care of children. Jesus loves you so much He tells your very own angel to keep watch over you day and night."

"Even when I'm asleep?"

"Yes." She chose an angel from the pile of cookie cutters. "That's why you don't need to be afraid of anything—ever. Your angel is always here, looking after you."

Jade took the metal angel, studied it, and then pressed the shape into a sandwich. "Does Daddy have a guarding angel?"

Lindsey smiled at the mispronunciation. "He sure does."

"Can I save this angel sandwich for my daddy?"

"Of course you can. We'll make enough of everything so he can eat, too, when he gets here."

That seemed to satisfy Jade, and Lindsey wished she were as easily comforted. Where was Jesse? Leaving Jade alone was so uncharacteristic of him. Had something happened? In the weeks of their acquaintance she'd grown fond of him, fonder than was comfortable, and the thought of something happening to him was unspeakable.

Agitated and filled with self-recriminations, Jesse stormed across Lindsey's yard, hoping with everything in him that Jade was here. He couldn't believe he'd gotten so busy, so deeply enmeshed in the stacks of court records that the time had slipped away and he'd forgotten to pick Jade up from school until she was long gone. What kind of lousy father was he anyway?

Sushi bounded out to meet him, a good sign. His spirits lifted somewhat, though he'd feel better if the German shepherd bit him. He deserved to be punished. For all his searching, he hadn't found a bit of useful information; not one single reference to any transaction between Charles Mitchell and Les Finch.

The day as gray as his mood, Jesse mounted the porch—and heard singing. A husky adult voice that sent an unexpected shiver of pleasure dancing along his nerve endings blended sweetly with a higher, childish melody.

Relief flooded him. Jade was here. Pausing at the open door, he could see the two through the glass. They were in the kitchen at the table, their backs turned, singing "Mary Had a Little Lamb" while they worked at something.

He squinted, leaning closer. What kind of get-ups were they wearing?

With an inner smile, he waited until they finished their song before pecking lightly on the door. Two heads swiveled in his direction.

"Daddy!" Jade dropped something onto the table and clambered off her chair. She ran toward him, nearly tripping

over a long, white dress that looked suspiciously like a well-used wedding gown. Taking a moment to hike the yards of wrinkled satin and lace into one hand, she stumbled onward, lime-green high heels clunking against the wooden floor.

Mood elevating with every step his baby took, Jesse opened the door and stepped inside the living room.

"My, don't you look beautiful," he said.

But Jade was having none of his compliments. She got right to the point. "The teacher made me ride the bus 'cause you didn't come."

"I'm sorry I was late, Butterbean. Your teacher did the right thing sending you to Lindsey where you would be safe and happy."

"Where were you? I got scared. I thought you were dead like Mommy."

A searing pain cut off Jesse's windpipe. Of course, she'd think that. That's why he always made a point of being exactly where she expected—to allay her well-founded fears.

Lindsey appeared in the living room. "Your daddy is here now, Jade, and he's just fine."

"Jesus took care of him the way you said."

A serene smile lit Lindsey's eyes. "Yes, He did."

Jesse didn't know what was going on with their talk of Jesus and decided not to ask. He looked to Lindsey, grateful for her care of Jade, but not wanting to tell her where he'd been. Wearing a hat with peacock feathers sticking out the top, and a rather

bedraggled fake fur stole over someone's old red prom dress, she looked ridiculously cute. If he hadn't felt so guilty, he would have laughed.

"I'm sorry for putting you out this way."

"Jade is no problem. But we were a little concerned about you."

Exactly what he didn't need—Lindsey's concern, although he knew it was there, felt it day in and day out as she carefully avoided subjects she'd discovered were painful or taboo. Always, that gentle aura of peace and inner joy reached out to him.

"I had some personal business to handle which took much longer than I'd planned. Somehow the time got away from me, and by the time I rushed over to the school…" He lifted his hands and let them fall.

"Well, you're here now." Lindsey smiled that sweet, tranquil smile that changed her face to a thing of beauty. Jesse tried, but failed, to resist the pleasure that one motion gave him.

And then she made things worse by asking, "Are you hungry?"

An unbidden rush of warmth filled him from the inside out. Coming to this house and this woman was starting to feel far too natural and way too good.

"Come on, Daddy. Come see. We're making a tea party, and I'm the queen." Skirts sweeping the floor, Jade led the way into the kitchen and lifted an odd-shaped bit of bread from the table, thrusting it at him. "I made this guarding angel for you."

"Tea, huh? And an angel sandwich." He took the offering,

examining the small figure with all due seriousness. “Sounds delicious. Anything I can do to help?”

Lindsey nodded toward a plate of fresh fruit. “You could slice up the apples if you’d like.”

“Lindsey.” Jade’s plaintiff protest drew both adults’ attention. She eyed her father skeptically. “He can’t come to the tea party without dress-up clothes.”

An ornery gleam flashed in Lindsey’s brown eyes. “She’s right, Dad. Tea requires formal attire.”

Before he could object on purely masculine grounds, Jade rushed off, returning with a purple boa, a tarnished tiara, and a yellow-and-black satin cape. “Here, Daddy, you can be king.”

Lindsey laughed at the pained expression on Jesse’s face and in return, received his fiercest glare of wry humor.

“I’ll get you for this,” he muttered under his breath as Jade dressed him, carefully twining the boa around his neck before placing the crown on his head with a triumphant—if somewhat crooked—flourish.

Lindsey wrinkled her nose at him and adjusted her stole with a haughty toss of her head. “Mess with me, mister, and I’ll find you a pair of purple plastic high heels to go with that dashing feather boa.”

Jesse surprised himself by tickling her nose with the aforementioned boa. “I’m the king, remember. Off with your head.”

She laughed up at him, and he realized how much smaller she

was than he, and how feminine she looked in a dress, even a silly outfit like this one. Out of her usual uniform of jeans and flannel, she unsettled him. Lindsey was a pretty woman as well as a nice one.

One more reason he needed to find the answer to his questions and get out of here. He couldn't get attached to a woman he'd eventually have to hurt.

For all his searching today, he'd found no record of this farm or the transaction between his stepfather, Les Finch, and Charles Mitchell. If he didn't find something next time, he'd be forced to ask the clerk for information, a risk he hadn't wanted to take. Asking questions stirred up suspicion. Someone was bound to want to know what he was up to. Sooner or later, word would filter back to Lindsey and he'd be out of a job and out of luck. Discretion made for a slow, but safer, search.

Lindsey whacked his shoulder with her boa. "Are you going to slice that fruit or stand there and stare at my glorious hat?"

Her humor delighted him. "The hat does catch a man's eye."

Lindsey and Jade both giggled at his silliness. Even he wondered where the lightheartedness came from. He'd had a rotten afternoon, but the warmth of this house and the company of these two females lifted his spirits.

Taking up the stainless-steel knife, he sliced an apple into quarters. "What kind of sandwiches are we making?"

"Baloney and cheese."

"Ah, a gourmet's delight." Placing the apple slices on a plate

in as fancy a design as he could manage, he plucked a few grapes and arranged them in the center.

Lindsey clapped a slice of wheat bread on top of the meat and cheese. “And afterwards, we’ll make sugar cookies.”

“With sprinkles,” Jade chimed in, her face a study in concentration as she pushed the metal cutters into the sandwiches.

“Jesse, why don’t you arrange the fancy sandwiches on this plate while Jade finishes cutting them. Then we’ll be ready to eat.”

They were only sandwiches. Bread, baloney, cheese and mayonnaise. He could do this. Looking at his beaming child instead of the Christmas shapes, Jesse made a circle of sandwiches on the platter.

“What about the tea?” Jade asked.

“Oh. The tea!” Lindsey clattered across the floor in her high heels, opened a cabinet and removed a quart fruit jar. “I hope the two of you like spiced tea.”

“Hot tea?” Jesse asked doubtfully.

She dumped a healthy amount of the mixture into a blue ceramic teapot. With a twinkle in her eye, she admitted, “Spiced tea tastes a lot like apple cider. Grandma taught me to make it. It’s a conglomeration of tea, orange drink mix, lemonade and a bunch of yummy spices.”

“Sounds better than hot tea,” he admitted, pointing an apple slice at her before popping it into his mouth. “Maybe I can stand

it."

Lindsey sailed across the floor and tapped his hand with the spoon. "Even the king has to wait until we all sit down together."

"Meanie." He snatched a grape. At her look of playful outrage, he laughed and snitched another.

She stopped dead, spoon in one hand, silly hat tilted to one side in rapt attention. "Jesse," she said, her smoky voice breathy and soft.

"What? Am I drooling grape juice?"

"You laughed."

He opened his mouth once, closed it and tried again. Sure he laughed. People laughed when they were happy. The realization astonished him. He'd laughed because he was happy. When was the last time he'd felt anything even close to happiness?

"I won't do it again."

"Oh, yes you will." All business and smiles, she shouldered him out of the way. "Go get that little card table in the laundry room and set it up. Jade will put on the table cloth and centerpiece while I finish our tea fixin's."

"Yes, ma'am." He saluted, slung his cape over his face in a super-hero imitation and did as he was told.

By the time the table was ready and they'd sat down to dine on the odd little meal, Jesse had gotten into the swing of the tea party. Wearing a get-up that would make his rodeo buddies howl, knees up to his chin, he reached for one of Jade's raggedy cookie-cutter sandwiches.

"Let's bless the food," Lindsey said, folding her hands in front of her.

A worried expression replaced the glow on Jade's face, and nearly broke Jesse's heart. Seated across from him at the small square table, she looked from Lindsey to him, waiting. Jesse did the only thing he could. He bowed his head, closed his eyes, and listened to Lindsey's simple prayer. When he looked back into his daughter's face, he knew he'd done the right thing. Playing the hypocrite for fifteen seconds hadn't killed him.

Stunned to realize he not only hadn't been bothered by the prayer or the other Christian references, Jesse chewed thoughtfully on the most delicious baloney and cheese sandwich he'd ever tasted and watched Lindsey do the same. He wondered at how time spent with her had changed him, easing the prickly sensation that usually came at the mention of God. Most of all he wondered at how easily Lindsey Mitchell, the lone pioneer woman, had become a part of his and Jade's lives. Considering how dangerous that was for him, he should toss down his Santa sandwich and run. But he knew he wouldn't. Lindsey's gentle female influence was so good for Jade. He tried to be a decent dad, but there were things a little girl needed that a man never even thought of.

"Tea, your highness?" Lindsey said to Jade, holding the pretty teapot over a dainty cup.

"Yes, your princess-ness. Tea, please." Pinky finger pointed up—he didn't know where she'd learned that—Jade lifted the

poured tea and sipped carefully. “Delicious. Try it, Daddy.”

“That’s ‘your daddy-ness’ to you, queenie.” Taking a sip of the surprisingly tasty tea, Jesse relished the sound of his child’s giggle.

Yes, Lindsey was good for her. And as disturbing as the thought was, she was good for him, too.

Taking a sandwich from the serving dish, Jade said, “I think Sushi wants this one.” She handed the food to Lindsey. “Will you give it to her so she won’t be sad?”

Jesse couldn’t believe his ears. Jade was worried about upsetting the dog? Capturing Lindsey’s glance, he asked a silent question with his eyes.

Brown eyes happy, Lindsey only shrugged and said, “We’re gaining ground.” Getting up from her chair, she started toward the door. “Come with me, Jade. You can watch from inside.”

When Jade followed, Jesse couldn’t be left behind. He had to see this with his own eyes—if he could keep his tiara from falling down over them. Sure enough, Jade stood inside the glass door, a tentative smile on her face, while Lindsey stepped out on the porch and fed the dog.

If Jade overcame her fear of dogs, he’d almost believe in miracles.

Lindsey must have noticed his bewildered expression because she laughed.

“Doubting Thomas,” she said to him, then leaned toward Jade. “Did you see the way Sushi wagged her tail? That means thank

you."

Holding onto her flowered hat, Jade pressed against the glass and whispered to the dog. "You're welcome."

When Sushi licked the door, Jade jumped back, almost stumbling over her skirts, but at least she didn't scream.

"Sushi gave you a kiss, Butterbean," Jesse offered after he'd swallowed the thickness in his throat.

"Uh-huh. I saw her, but I didn't want a doggy kiss. I'm the queen." Resuming her air of royalty, she lifted the tail of her dress and clomped to the kitchen. "Can we make cookies now? It's almost Christmas."

Lindsey, satin skirts rustling, peacock feather flopping, followed behind Jade like a cartoonist's version of a royal lady-in-waiting. "You're right. Christmas will be here before we know it. Guess what your daddy and I are doing tomorrow?"

Jesse had a sneaky feeling he didn't want to know.

The gap in Jade's mouth flashed. "What?"

"We're going to put up the decorations and get the Christmas-tree lot ready for visitors."

"Yay! Can I help? Can I decorate a tree? Can I put up the angel?" Jade wrapped her arms around Lindsey's red-satin-covered knees and hopped up and down. "Please, please, please."

Jesse's stomach sank into his boots. The day he'd dreaded had come. The Christmas season was upon him.

Chapter Six

"It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" blared from a loudspeaker positioned over the gate that opened into the Christmas-tree lot. The smell of pine mingled with the musty scent of Christmas decorations brought out of storage this morning. Though the temperature was in the high thirties, Jesse stripped away his jean jacket and hung the worn garment on the fence next to Lindsey's red plaid one.

He didn't have to look around to find the jacket's owner. Every cell in his body knew she was near—a sensation he found singularly disconcerting, to be sure. Last night, in the midst of a costumed tea party, some subtle shift in their boss/employee relationship had occurred. And Jesse didn't know if the change was a good thing or a very dangerous one.

From his spot stringing lights on staked poles, he turned to find her just inside the entrance, rubbing dust from a large wooden nativity scene. She'd shared her plans with him for the lot, and though the overwhelming dose of Christmas wasn't his idea of a good time, Lindsey's customers would come for this very atmosphere of holiday cheer.

Shoppers would park outside the gate then ride in the horse-drawn wagon down a lane aglow with Christmas lights and dotted with various lighted holiday ornaments: the nativity, a sleigh with reindeer, angels, snowmen. Jesse couldn't imagine anything she'd

forgotten.

Chest tight, whether from watching Lindsey or thinking too much, he turned his concentration to the electrical part of his job. Electricity he knew. Lights he knew. The rest he'd ignore. And as soon as the opportunity arose, he'd kill that music.

"Jesse, could you put more speakers along the drive and down into the lot? I'm not sure we can hear the music all the way."

His shoulders slumped. So much for killing the tunes. After twisting two wires together, he rose from his haunches and asked, "Wouldn't my time be better spent cutting and baling those trees we marked this morning?"

She paused, pushed back her hair with one hand and studied him. When those eyes of hers lasered into him he couldn't do anything but wait until she finished speaking. She had pretty eyes, golden-brown and warm and slightly tilted at the edges like almonds.

"Why do you dislike Christmas?"

He blinked, squeezing hard on the pliers in his fist. "Never said I didn't like Christmas."

"Okay, then," She gave a saucy toss of her head. "Why do you dislike Christmas decorations?"

If the subject weren't so problematic, he'd have smiled. Lindsey's way of injecting humor into everything could lift anybody's mood.

Sushi chose that moment to insinuate her furry self against his legs, almost knocking him into the row of linked-together stakes.

Squatting, he took refuge in the dog, scuffing her ears with both hands. “Did I remember to thank you last night?”

“You just changed the subject.”

He gave a little shrug. “So I did.”

“Okay, I’ll let you off the hook—for now.” She lifted the hair off her neck, a habit of hers that Jesse liked. The movement was so utterly female. Erin had done that. Jade did it sometimes too.

“What are you thanking me for? Or was that just a ruse you use to avoid answering my question?

He shook his head. “No ruse. I owe you big-time.”

“For what?”

She really didn’t know?

“About a dozen things. Looking after Jade until I got here. For supper.”

“Such as it was.” She laughed, letting her hair tumble down. Even without the sunlight, her hair looked shiny and clean.

“I’ve eaten worse than baloney sandwiches and sugar cookies.”

“Don’t forget the fruit.” She tilted a wise man backwards and washed his ancient face. “Last night was fun, Jesse.”

“Yeah.” No point in denying the truth. Rising, he gave Sushi one final stroke. “Most of all, I appreciate your patience with Jade about the dog. I know leaving her outside is a pain.”

Lindsey captured him with her gaze. “I don’t want thanks for that, Jesse. I just want to see Jade confident and unafraid.”

Taking up the next strand of lights waiting to be hung, he sighed. “Me, too.”

"She'll get there." The wise man satisfactorily cleaned, she left him and the rest of the nativity. Coming up beside Jesse, she took one end of the lights, holding them in place while he secured them to the poles. "She's already less fearful than when she first came."

"I noticed. She didn't even fuss when I put her to bed last night. She said her guarding angel would watch her sleep." He glanced toward her, noticed the curve of her cheek and the tilt of her lips, then quickly looked away. "She talked a lot about that."

"I hope you didn't mind me telling her."

He hitched a shoulder, not wanting to go there. "It's okay. Whatever works."

Lindsey laid a hand on his arm. "The Bible works because it's true, Jesse," she said, her smoky voice soft. "Aren't you comforted knowing your own special angel watches over you?"

The warmth of her fingers spread through his shirt sleeve. He tried to concentrate on twisting plastic fasteners.

"Can't say I've given it much thought."

"Maybe you should." She dropped her hand and went back to straightening the tangle of lights, but her touch stayed with him like a promise made.

Could Lindsey be right? Was there more to this Christian thing than he'd ever realized? Being around her and her church friends, witnessing her steadfast faith and the way she handled the bumps in her life with a certain assurance had him thinking about God with a fresh perspective. As a boy he'd believed, had

even accepted Jesus as his savior at church camp when he was twelve. And then life had turned him upside down, and the God of the universe had seemed so far away.

But why would a caring God, a God who assigned each person an angel, take a man's wife and leave a little girl motherless? Why would He allow a vicious drunk to steal a boy's home and toss him out on the streets to fend for himself? Where was God in that?

He didn't know. But more and more lately, he wanted to reconcile Lindsey's God with the one in his head.

"Silent Night" drifted into his awareness. Lindsey moved away, back to the nativity. Other than the floodlights she'd asked him to rig up, the set looked ready to him. As she adjusted the sheep and fluffed the hay inside the manger, joy practically oozed from her.

Sure she was happy. Why shouldn't she be? Other than losing her elderly grandparents, Lindsey had probably never had a moment's heartache in her life. Loving God and exuding tranquility was easy for her.

Frustrated at his line of depressive thinking, he yanked hard on a tangled cord, and turned his mind to more important matters —his search.

They had trees to haul this week which would give him the time and opportunity to ask questions in town. Yesterday at the courthouse he'd slipped up once, expressing to the clerk his interest in the transaction that gave Lindsey's grandfather

ownership of the Christmas Tree Farm. When the woman had looked at him curiously, he'd covered his tracks with vague remarks about Lindsey's plans for expansion. If only he could talk freely with someone like Clarence or Loraine Stone, the couple who claimed to have known Charlie Mitchell so well. Sooner or later, by biding his time and listening, he'd have his opportunity.

After dusting and organizing the main pieces of the nativity, Lindsey went back to the storage shed for the final figure—the eight-foot-tall animated camel who blinked long-lashed eyes and mooed. She tugged and pulled, careful not to damage the heavy object in the journey across the rough field. Stopping to readjust, she saw Jesse leap the fence and trot in her direction.

"Why didn't you say something?"

"I can get it."

With a look of exasperation, he hoisted the camel into his strong arms. "You shouldn't have to. That's why you hired me."

Oddly touched and feeling more like a helpless female than she'd ever felt in her life, Lindsey traipsed along beside him. How could she not admire this man? Every time she turned around, he was lifting work from her shoulders, both literally and figuratively. She'd nev-er seen anyone work so hard for so little pay. And for all his silences and secrets, Jesse had a way of making her feel special.

Lindsey wasn't sure if that was such a good idea, given the

spiritual differences between them, but she liked Jesse Slater. And she loved his little girl.

As if he'd heard her thoughts of Jade, Jesse spoke. His voice came from the opposite side of the camel's hump.

"Jade will be excited when she sees all this."

"You don't think she'll be disappointed that we did so much without her?" She'd worried about that all day. After the way Jade had begged to take part, Lindsey didn't want her hurt. But setting up the farm for Christmas took time.

"I explained to her last night that we'd have to do most of the work today. She was okay with it as long as she gets to do something."

A jingle bell came loose from the saddle and Lindsey ducked beneath the camel's neck to retrieve it.

"I promised to save the 'best stuff' until she gets here. She and I are going to put up the wreaths and decorate that tree up front." She pointed toward the entrance, the bell in hand jingling merrily. "And she can flip on the lights as soon as the sun sets. I hope that's enough."

Jesse's silver eyes, lit by an inner smile, slanted toward her. "You're amazing with her, you know it?"

Buoyed by the compliment, Lindsey shook the bell at him and grinned. "I cheat. I use Christmas."

The teasing admission moved the smile from Jesse's eyes to his lips, changing his rugged, bad-boy expression into a breathtaking sight. That solitary action shot a thrill stronger than

adrenaline through Lindsey. Someday, she'd break all the way through the ice he'd built around himself and make him smile all the time.

Startled at such thinking, Lindsey rushed ahead to open the gate. Where had that come from? Jesse was her employee and maybe her friend. But that was all he could be.

Heart thudding in consternation, she analyzed the thought. As a Christian, she wanted to see him happy. She wasn't falling for him. Was she? She'd been in love with a man like Jesse before—a devastatingly handsome man filled with secrets. And Sean had betrayed her so completely she'd come home to the farm and promised never to fall for a pretty face again.

Jesse eased the camel into place alongside the rough wooden building that sheltered the baby Jesus and his earthly parents. He'd already positioned bales of hay around the site and spread straw on the ground. Later, he'd rig up the spotlights and the Star of Bethlehem to bring the scene to life.

In minutes, he had the camel bellowing and blinking.

With a grimace, he shut off the mechanism. "Jade will love that monstrosity."

With laughter and a clap of her hands, Lindsey put aside her troubled thoughts. "I thought as much. We'll let her turn it on as soon as she gets home from school."

Jesse dusted his hands down the sides of his jeans, one corner of his mouth quirking ever-so-slightly. "What's next? Singing Santas? Yodeling elves?"

"Nothing quite that fun. We'd better begin cutting and baling. I'd like to haul the first load tomorrow if we have enough ready."

"So soon?"

"The rush begins on Thanksgiving. That's only a week away. Stores and lots like to have their trees ready to sell."

Switching off the last strains of "Silent Night," he gestured in the direction of the trees. "Lead on, boss lady."

Though disappointed to lose the beautiful music, Lindsey hummed Christmas carols as they began the process of cutting the marked and graded trees. Jesse manned the chain saw and as each tree toppled, Lindsey slid a rolling sled-like device beneath the pine and pulled it to the waiting baler.

Accustomed to lifting the heavy trees, Lindsey manhandled each one into the cone-shaped baler to be compressed into a tight bundle and secured with netting.

Saw in one gloved hand, Jesse poked his head around a tree. "Leave those for me to lift and bale."

"We'd never get finished that way. I'm used to the work, Jesse. Stop fretting."

But pleasure raced through her blood when he laid aside the saw long enough to lift the baled tree onto the flatbed truck. She might be accustomed to heavy work, but being treated like a girl was a novel and somewhat pleasant, if misguided, occurrence.

Following him back into the wide row, and lost in thought, Lindsey never saw the danger coming. One minute, she was examining a hole in her glove and the next she heard the crack

and whine of falling timber.

"Lindsey, look out!"

She looked, but all she saw was green blocking the gray-blue sky and rapidly closing in on her.

Then all the air whooshed from her lungs as Jesse came flying and knocked her to the ground, taking the brunt of the felled pine across his back and head.

She tasted dust and pine sap. Prickly needles poked over Jesse's shoulders and scratched the side of her face. Her pulse pounded and her knees trembled as if she'd done jumping jacks for the last hour.

One arm flung protectively over her head, his chest lying across her back, Jesse's warm breath puffed against her ear. "Are you okay?"

He sounded scared.

"Fine." She struggled to draw air into her lungs. "You?"

"Yeah." Jesse's heart raced wildly against her shoulder blades. The situation was anything but intimate, and yet Lindsey was aware of him in an entirely new way.

"You're crushing me," she managed.

"Sorry." He shoved the tree to one side before rolling to a sitting position.

Offering a hand, he pulled Lindsey up to sit beside him. Breath coming in rapid puffs, his concerned gaze checked her over.

With a tenderness usually reserved for Jade, he stroked one calloused finger down her cheek. "You have a scratch."

She studied his face, but resisted the urge to touch him. Already her skin tingled from his simple gesture, and her insides were too rattled from the accident to think straight. Her throat felt tight and thick. "So do you."

He flicked one shoulder, tossing off her concern like an unwanted gum wrapper.

"I'll heal." He took a deep breath and blew out a gusty sigh. "Man, that scared me. I can't believe I let that tree get away from me."

"Not your fault. I heard the saw. I knew you were harvesting, but I was…distracted." She wasn't about to tell him that he'd been the distracting element. And now she was more discombobulated than ever. Jesse had put himself in harm's way to protect her. And she liked the feeling of having a man—of having Jesse—look after her.

Oh, dear. She could be in real trouble here if she didn't watch her step. There was no denying Jesse's attractiveness, but the idea of letting another handsome face turn her head was worrisome. Jesse's secretiveness and his resistance to the Lord bothered her, too. But as a Christian, she wanted to provide a shining example of Christ's love; to share the incomprehensible peace of mind the Lord had given her.

Somewhere there had to be a midway point between being Jesse's friend in Christ and falling for him.

She only wished she knew how to find it.

Chapter Seven

"Are you sure you don't mind?" Jesse asked the moment he and Jade arrived on Thanksgiving Day. "We can still head down to the Caboose and grab a bite to eat."

A sharp wind, the likes of which rip and tear across Oklahoma with the energy of wild, vicious dogs, swept a draught of cold air into the farmhouse.

Though the oven had warmed the place considerably, Lindsey wasn't one to fritter away expensive heating fuel. She plucked at the quilted sleeve of Jesse's coat and pulled him inside.

"And waste this feast I've been cooking all morning? Not a chance, mister. You are stuck with my home cooking. No arguments."

Ducking beneath her daddy's arms, Jade slipped into the house and started shedding her outerwear. She wore a red wool coat Lindsey had never seen before over a plaid jumper, black tights and patent-leather shoes. Lindsey's heart did a funny stutter-step. Jesse had dressed her up for Thanksgiving dinner.

"You guys toss your coats in the bedroom. I need to check on the dressing and sweet potatoes."

Hands on the snaps of his jacket, Jesse stood in the kitchen doorway sniffing the air. "Candied sweet potatoes?"

She nodded. "With marshmallows and brown sugar."

He let out a low groan. "Forget the Caboose. I wouldn't leave

now even if you chased me with that shotgun of yours."

Lindsey couldn't hold back the rush of pleasure. She knew she was blushing and quickly bent over the oven door to blame her increased color on the heat.

Asking Jesse and Jade to Thanksgiving dinner made perfect sense. They had no other place to go, and she had no family living close enough to cook for. In fact, she'd been as energetic as that silly bunny for the three days since Jesse had agreed to share the holiday with her.

"So," Jesse said, coming back into the kitchen from putting away his wraps. "What can we do to help?"

The foil-covered turkey was nicely basted and already out of the oven. The dressing and sweet potatoes were almost ready as were the hot rolls. Though she didn't want to admit as much to Jesse, she'd gotten up earlier than normal to bake everything the way her grandmother always had.

"We'll be ready to eat soon." She turned with a smile, wiping her hands on her bib apron. "You could set the table if you'd like."

"Come on, Butterbean," he said to Jade. "The slave driver is putting us to work."

He was in high spirits today, a rare occurrence to Lindsey's way of thinking. And she liked seeing him this way, without the load of care he usually wore like an anvil around his neck.

Jade's dress shoes clicked on the kitchen floor as she helped her daddy spread the white lacy tablecloth and set out three of Granny's best Blue Willow place settings.

After carefully positioning a knife and fork on top of paper napkins, she looked up. A small frown puckered her brow. “Where’s Sushi going to eat?”

“Sushi?” Lindsey hesitated, a potholder in one hand. “I put her in the extra bedroom.”

“Oh.” Turning back to her job, Jade said nothing more about the dog. The adults exchanged glances.

Jesse mouthed, “Don’t ask me.”

Jade seemed unmindful that she’d raised adult eyebrows with her concern for a dog she supposedly despised. Letting the subject drop, Lindsey returned to the task of getting the food on the table. In her peripheral vision, she caught the red flash of Jade’s plaid jumper and gleaming shoes.

“You sure look pretty today,” she said.

“Well, thank you, ma’am.” Jesse’s teasing voice had her spinning toward him. “You look pretty, too.”

Jade burst into giggles. “Daddy! She meant me. I’m pretty.”

On tiptoes, the little girl twirled in a circle.

Jesse slapped a hand against one cheek in mock embarrassment. “Do you mean to tell me that I don’t look pretty?”

Gap-tooth smile bigger than Dallas, Jade fell against him, hugging his legs. “You’re always pretty.”

Lindsey had to concur, even though she’d never before seen Jesse in anything but work clothes. Seeing him in polished loafers, starched jeans, and a light blue dress shirt that drew

attention to his silvery eyes took her breath away.

Considering how decked-out the Slaters were, she was glad she'd taken the time to dress up a bit herself. Though her clothes were still casual, she'd chosen dark brown slacks instead of jeans and a mauve pullover sweater. And she'd put on earrings, something usually reserved for church. They were only small filigree crosses, but wearing them made her feel dressed-up.

With a wry wince of remembrance, she glanced down. If only she'd exchanged her fluffy house shoes for a snazzy pair of slides…Ah, well, she was who she was. As Granny used to say, you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.

Delighted to have guests on Thanksgiving Day, she didn't much care what anyone wore. Just having them here was enough.

After sliding a fragrant pan of yeast rolls from the oven, she slathered on melted butter, and dumped the rolls into a cloth-covered basket.

Without waiting to be told, Jesse put ice in the glasses and poured sweet tea from the pitcher Lindsey had already prepared.

"What's next?" he asked, coming to stand beside her at the counter. He brought with him the scent of a morning shower and a manly cologne that reminded Lindsey of an ocean breeze at sunrise.

She, on the other hand, probably smelled like turkey and dressing with a lingering touch of pine.

"I think we're about ready." She handed a bowl of cranberry sauce to Jade. "If you'll put this beside the butter, your daddy

and I will bring the hot stuff."

Jade took the bowl in both her small palms, carefully transferring the dish to the table. Jesse and Lindsey followed with the rest and settled into their places.

The trio sat in a triangle with Jesse taking the head of the table and the two ladies on either side of him. Lindsey, out of long habit, stretched out a hand to each of them.

Jade reacted instantly, placing her fingers atop Lindsey's. After a brief, but noticeable interval, Jesse did the same, and then joined his other hand to his daughter's.

The moment Jesse's hand touched hers, Lindsey recognized her error. She hoped with all her might that the Lord would forgive her, because she was having a hard time concentrating on the prayer with Jesse's rough, masculine skin pressing against hers.

Somehow she mumbled her way through, remembering to thank God for her many blessings during the past year, including the blessing of Jesse and Jade.

Jesse tensed at the mention of his name. At the closing "amen," he cleared his throat and shifted uncomfortably. Jade, on the other hand, beamed like the ray of sunshine she was.

"Guess what?" she offered, with the usual scattered thought processes of a six-year-old. "I have a loose tooth."

"Let's see." Lindsey leaned forward, pretending great interest as Jade wiggled a loosening incisor. "Maybe it will fall out while you're eating today."

Jade's eyes widened in horror. "What if I swallow it?"

The poor little child was afraid of everything.

"Well, if you do," Jesse said, helping himself to the sweet potato casserole, "it won't hurt you."

"But I can't swallow it. I have to show it to my teacher so she can put my name on the tooth chart."

Doing her best to suppress a laugh, Lindsey placed a hot roll on her plate and passed the basket to Jesse. His eyes twinkled with his own amused reaction. Swallowing the tooth wasn't the problem. Jade was afraid of being left out, a perfectly healthy, normal worry for a first-grader.

"I don't think you'll swallow the tooth, Jade, but if you do, the teacher will still put your name on the chart."

Green eyes blinked doubtfully. "How will she know?"

"She can look at the new empty place in your mouth."

The little girl's face lit up. She wiggled the tooth again. "Maybe it will come out today."

"We have corn on the cob. That's been known to do the trick."

"Okay." Jade reached eagerly for the corn Lindsey offered. "Eat one, Daddy."

Jesse quirked an eyebrow in teasing doubt. "I don't know, Butterbean. Your old dad can't afford to lose any of his teeth."

"Oh, Daddy." She pushed the platter of steaming corn in his direction. "It's good."

"Okay, then. I just hope you don't have to go home with a toothless daddy."

Jade grinned around a huge bite of corn as her daddy filled his plate.

"This all looks terrific, Lindsey." Jesse added a hearty helping of turkey and dressing. "You've worked hard."

"Cooking was fun. I haven't had a real Thanksgiving dinner since Gramps died."

He spread butter on the golden corn, his surprised attention focused on Lindsey. "Why not? Don't you usually visit your family for holidays?"

"Some holidays, but not this one. I can't. Thanksgiving begins my peak season, and lots of families want their tree the weekend after Thanksgiving."

"Then your family should come here."

"Oh," she gestured vaguely, then scooped up a bite of green bean casserole. "They're all pretty busy with their own lives. Kim, my sister, is expecting a baby early next year. She's in Colorado near her husband's family so naturally, they have their holidays there."

Chewing the creamy casserole, Lindsey had to admit the food tasted incredible. Could she credit the home cooking? Or the company?

Jesse absently handed Jade a napkin. With a sweet smile filled with yellow corn, she swiped at her buttery face.

Having a child—and a man—at her dinner table gave Lindsey an unexpected sense of fulfillment.

"What about your parents?" Jesse asked, coming right back

to the conversation.

"Like Kim, they want me to come to them. Right now they're in Korea, so that wasn't possible this year."

"You wouldn't leave the trees anyway."

"I might sometime if I could find the right person to run the place for a couple of days."

He chewed thoughtfully, swallowed and took a drink of tea before saying, "I would have done it this year if you'd said something."

Lindsey's insides filled, not with the sumptuous Thanksgiving meal, but with the pleasure of knowing Jesse meant exactly what he'd said. She mulled over the statement as she watched him eat with hearty male abandon.

"I never would have considered asking you."

Fork in hand, he stiffened. His silver eyes frosted over. "You don't trust me to do a good job?"

"Of course, I trust you." Almost too much, given how little she knew about him. "I only meant that leaving you to do all the work while I vacationed would be a huge imposition."

His tense jaw relaxed. "Oh."

He studied the rapidly disappearing food on his plate, some thought process that Lindsey couldn't read running amok inside his head.

A vague unease put a damper on Lindsey's celebratory mood. Why had Jesse reacted so oddly?

She bit into the tart cranberry-and-sage-flavored dressing,

pondering. Had she offended him? Or was the problem deeper than that?

Jade, who'd been busily doing damage to the ear of corn, stopped long enough to take a huge helping of turkey.

"You won't eat that," Jesse said, reaching for the meat.

Jade slid the plate out of his reach. "It's for Sushi. She's hungry and lonely. She might be crying."

Lindsey couldn't believe her ears. Jade worried about the dog without any encouragement from the adults? Was this the break she'd been praying for?

Jesse seemed to recognize the moment, too, for he tossed down his napkin and said, "Can't have Sushi crying." Chunk of dark meat in hand, he pushed back from his chair. "Let's take her this."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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