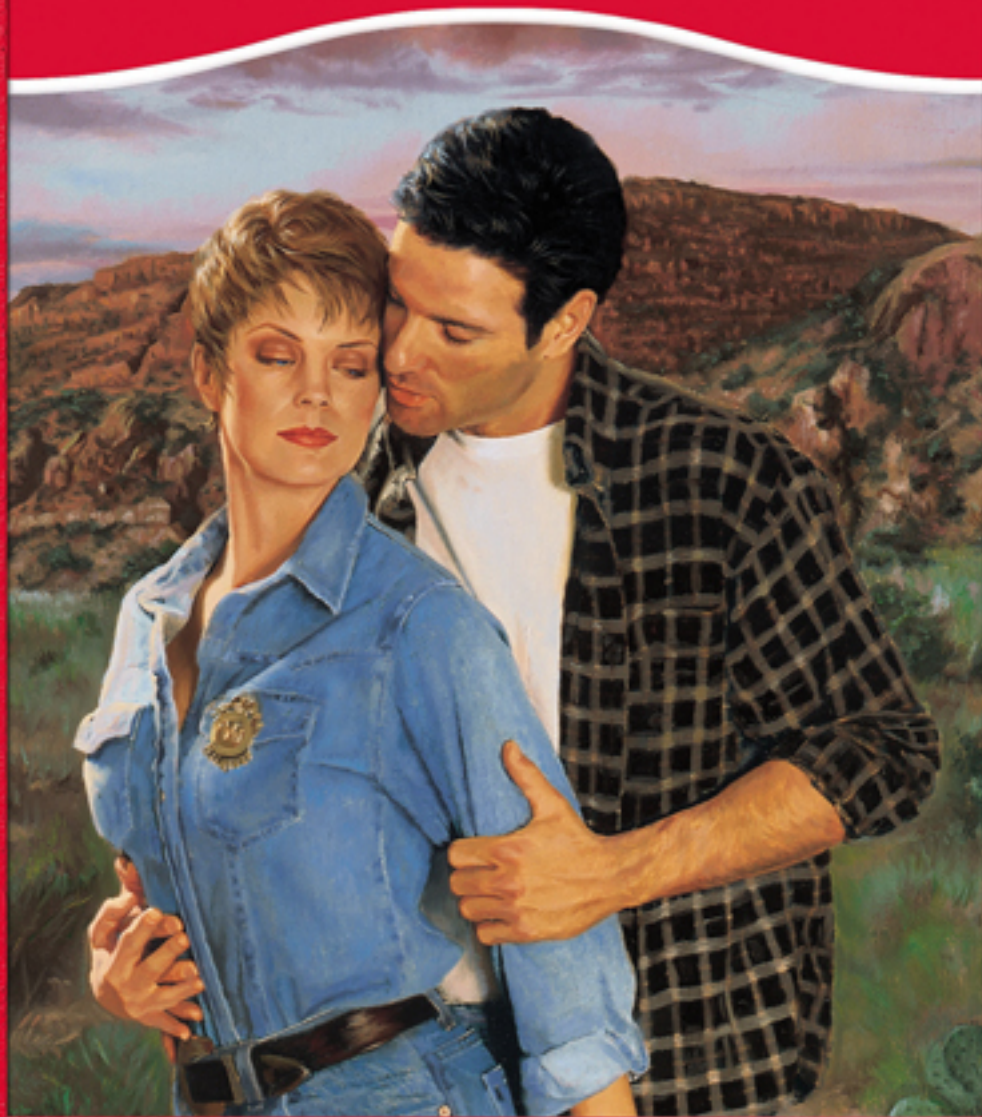


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The Officer And The Renegade

Helen R. Myers



Vintage 90s

Helen Myers

The Officer And The Renegade

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TELL ME YOU'RE INNOCENT! Taylor Benning's urgent plea seared Hugh Blackstone's heart. All the spurned half-breed had to do was admit he'd been wrongly accused. He knew the right words would prompt her to throw her arms around him, maybe even win him a night in her bed... They'd once been as close as two people could possibly get. But how could he forget that Taylor had failed him all those years ago - in the name of love - and continued to betray him with the secret of their son?

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Theirs Was Some History....

Taylor had been the one for Hugh, the only woman who ever knew the feel of his strong, magnificent body against hers, and of those callused gentle hands exploring and claiming. From the day they'd met as kids, back when their relationship had been about kinship and understanding, through the sweet, sweet years of discovering love, then passion...all the way to the moment court bailiffs escorted him away, there had never been anyone else for either of them. That was a huge stack of memories for a woman to repress....

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—Rendezvous

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Please address questions and book requests to:

Silhouette Reader Service

U.S.: 3010 Walden Ave., P.O. Box 1325, Buffalo, NY 14269

Canadian: P.O. Box 609, Fort Erie, OnL L2A 5X3

The Officer And The Renegade

Helen R. Myers



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HELEN R. MYERS

satisfies her preference for a reclusive life-style by living deep in the Piney Woods of East Texas with her husband, Robert, and—because they were there first—the various species of four-legged and winged creatures that wander throughout their ranch. To write has been her lifelong dream, and to bring a slightly different flavor to each book is an ongoing ambition.

Admittedly restless, she says that it helps her writing, explaining, “It makes me reach for new territory and experiment with old boundaries.” In 1993 the Romance Writers of America awarded Navarrone the prestigious RITA for Best Short Contemporary Novel of the Year.

One

“Jeez...look at the place. You really expect us to live way out here?”

As Taylor Grace Benning eyed the small town coming into view beyond the highway’s exit sign, she gripped the steering wheel of her aging red Jeep Cherokee and struggled to keep calm. It wasn’t the view that got to her, though, it was her son. No less than thirteen-point-three years old, yet he remained cranky when he first woke from a nap just as he had at three months.

You’d think I would be used to him by now.

Well, there was used and used. Besides, her nerves weren’t at their best, and the hurried marathon drive from Detroit hadn’t improved on that status, either.

“Come on, Kyle, you sound as though this were your first trip. So far things don’t look that much different since the last time we visited.”

“That’s the point—last time we weren’t planning on staying. Besides, I was a little kid. I didn’t know any better.”

Taylor eyed the extralarge T-shirt that hung on him like a parachute over a sapling, and his baggy, ripped jeans, and wondered what kind of emotional explosion she would have to deal with if she told him that he still didn’t have a clue. She opted for a mild cold war.

“It’s not that bad.”

“Right. Who wouldn’t want to live in a ghost town that’s been painted every gross shade of neon ever invented?”

Ignoring him, she exited Interstate 40, which went on to Albuquerque, and eyed their destination nestled at the base of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Kyle was right; these days Redoubt, New Mexico, was like a surprise streak of paint on an otherwise no-nonsense canvas. The salmon pink, canary yellow, peacock blue and electric white buildings that she could see so far were startling against tree-covered cliffs. After driving for hours along the flat, then rolling, prairie tempered with spotty vegetation, this shocking splash of color was unexpected, despite her father’s warning that the town was attempting once again to reinvent itself. Aside from the fresh coat of paint, though, there was no missing that most of the structures were a half-century old and spare. No Frank Lloyd Wright or Taj Mahal creations here. On the other hand, glamour and grandeur weren’t what she and her son needed at this stage in their lives. The challenge was to make Kyle understand that.

“Forget aesthetics for the moment, okay? Your grandfather’s counting on us.” She hoped the reminder would trigger his conscience. “Once you get a chance to stretch your legs and take a better look around, I bet you’ll see things aren’t so bad.”

“Compared to what?”

“Reform school for one.”

“Not funny.”

She wasn't trying to be; she was thinking about what he could have—probably would have—had to look forward to if they'd stayed much longer in the urban hotbed they had previously called home. “Sorry, dear heart. You leaned straight into that one.”

The young teen slouched lower in his seat and crossed his legs, further exposing a bony knee sticking through his torn and fraying jeans. Her only child was at a difficult stage in more ways than one. While physically sprouting into a man, emotionally he was light-years away from adulthood. As a result, when he wasn't bumping his long legs or those clodhopper feet into walls and furniture, he was pining after girls aeons ahead of his maturity and experience, or else hanging out with boys too reckless and angry for any parent's peace of mind. A month ago, when her fellow officers on the Detroit police force brought him home for the second time for offenses almost worthy of arrest, she'd begun giving serious thought to returning to the land of her birth. A few days later, a call from her father had convinced her to follow through with the idea.

Despite the dark lenses on her sunglasses, Taylor had to squint against the late-June sun, which was nearing its midpoint in the cerulean sky. But her eyes stung for another reason, too: having been away from the state for fourteen years with few visits between—and brief ones at that—the emotions rushing through her were as painful as they were sweet. As a girl, she'd ridden bareback across this land, slept under the canopy of this incredible sky, made love for the first time in this relentless heat. Once she'd made up her mind to come back, she'd understood she would have to deal with those memories, the old feelings... many things. But she'd hoped that she would be too busy to be susceptible to the “what if...” demons. Apparently those gremlins were more resilient than she'd anticipated.

“I sure hope Gramps has indoor plumbing,” Kyle muttered, twisting in his seat as they passed a weather-beaten shack with an even shakier-looking outhouse behind it.

Taylor felt her lips twitch. “You know he does. You're just having withdrawal pangs because there's no mall.” Thank goodness, she added silently.

“Yeah, and now that you brought it up, what do you expect me to do all day while you're working?”

“Count grains of sand and dodge rattlesnakes.”

“I'm serious.”

“All right, so this ground is more clay than sand. I'll still expect you to be careful about rattlers.”

Her son tugged his Detroit Tigers baseball cap lower over his eyes. “Maybe I'll hitch a ride back home. Al Deaton said I could move in with him if I wanted.”

Despite a sinking sensation in her abdomen, Taylor kept her gaze on the row of stores coming up. “What a delightful thought. Considering how infrequently he practices any form of personal hygiene, being his roommate would be a genuine treat.”

“You know what, Mom? I live for the day you don't have a wise-guy answer for everything.”

“No doubt you do. But you'll be an old, old man before it happens, compadre. Even your grandfather said that the only thing faster than my draw was my mouth. Deal with it.”

Usually that would have earned her a reluctant smile from Kyle, but he was locked in too stubborn a mood to let her see it—a little trait he'd inherited from his father. To hide his feelings, he turned to look out the passenger window. Taylor didn't mind the break in the conversation, though. She wanted a minute to take in the view herself.

The town of Redoubt hadn't been “discovered” per se. It had evolved quite by accident when in the early 1880s Murdock Marsden's great-grandfather camped in the area as part of a wagon train heading for California. The topography of the land had reminded this ancestor of the area in Africa an uncle had described to him. A member of the small British contingent that in 1879 held Rork's Drift from the onslaught of thousands of Zulus, the uncle, through his letters, had made a lasting

impression on Murdock's other ancestor. Enough of one to stay behind when the rest of the wagon train moved on. Enough to carve not only a town but a prosperous ranch out of the territory, which Murdock now ruled.

Today the sign at the outskirts of town announced Redoubt's population as 914, about double what it had been when she'd lived here. It would be 916 if the residents showed a fraction of the enthusiasm for her and Kyle's return that her father did. He thought she was worrying for no reason, but she had legitimate ones. In the past she'd made her biggest mistakes by assuming too much, falling in love too hard, planning too quickly, racing toward tomorrow with an energy that had bubbled up from some bottomless well inside her. No more. She wasn't the eighteen-year-old spitfire who'd raced out of Redoubt all those years ago with a broken heart and shattered dreams. She was a thirty-two-year-old mother of a troubled teenager. A divorcée who'd walked away from a challenging but promising career. And although she still had more energy than most people her age, she no longer took any of it, anything at all, for granted.

"Hold me back. Is that supposed to be a burger biggie joint? I don't remember that being there before."

At Kyle's mocking query, she eyed the yellow frame building with the green-and-white lettering on the window announcing Boo's Biggest Burgers. "Me, neither. But now you know you won't starve to death. And there's the public library," she added, pointing to the narrow red brick building next door. "While you're feeding your stomach, you might think about feeding your brain."

"It all depends on how long the line is to check out the book."

She groaned at the joke that had been corny even when she'd been a kid, and scanned the rest of stores that made up Main Street. Many of the businesses had been handed down from one generation to the next, and she could easily recall the names of their proprietors—Graham, Redburn, Yancy and Montez; however, there were a number of new businesses—mostly antique shops and art galleries—that were part of the town's turn toward becoming a miniartist's colony. She hoped those newer residents would also be openminded about having a female law enforcement officer in their midst. Her father didn't seem to think there would be a problem—and that, regardless, he expected her to do what had to be done.

"We'll soon see," she murmured.

"See what?"

Jarred out of her mild brooding, she shook her head. "Nothing. We're here."

She pulled into the parking lot next to the low adobe building on the far eastern side of town. The Spanish architecture, which would have been taken for granted in Albuquerque, seemed misplaced in Redoubt. As expected, the town's single patrol car was there. So was her father's white Chevy Blazer. How he'd driven it here in his condition she didn't want to guess.

"Let's go say hello and get him back to the house," she said after parking.

"I hope he doesn't try to hug me."

It was all Taylor could do not to laugh out loud. "Don't tell me you've forgotten his man-to-man handshakes, too? You may end up wishing he still treated you like a kid."

They walked to the front of the police station, Kyle barely an inch or so shorter than her own five-eight. By next year, she would be lucky if she didn't have to look up to the feisty pup. Her heart swelled with pride as she remembered the thoughtful, kind boy he could be when not under the influence of his schoolmates, and how his grades once reflected his good mind and considerable talents. Hopefully it wasn't too late to get the old Kyle back.

Things just had to go well.

As they entered the station, a deep baritone called out, "There they are! Hey, what did you do, break every speed limit between here and Detroit?"

A grinning Emmett Kyle Benning hobbled out of his office balanced on crutches. Injury aside, the sixty-year old still cut a striking image, although his dark brown hair was now mostly salt-and-pepper, and his face had turned ruddy from too much sun and an unapologetic affection for beer.

“Hiya, Dad.” Taylor reached for him to give her son time to prepare himself. “You look good for a one-legged cop.”

“You’re the one. Damn, honey, if I’d remembered how cute you were, I’d have thought twice about offering you this job. The guys in this town are likely to look for trouble for the sheer pleasure of getting arrested!”

Taylor had heard variations of that line more often than she cared to remember over the years, but she knew her father didn’t have an ounce of male porky in him; he was simply making all of the right noises because he knew she’d never been overly impressed with her gangly body and unremarkable looks. Although she supposed she’d improved somewhat with time, she didn’t miss her son rolling his eyes, or how Orrin, her father’s longtime “volunteer” dispatcher and drinking buddy, was suddenly preoccupied by an itch in the graying peach fuzz growing out of his chin.

“I don’t know how you ever earned your driver’s license, let alone became the fine marksman you are,” she said, “when it’s obvious you’re as blind as a bat.” She added a nod at his cast. “And what are you doing on your feet? Didn’t you say the doctor wanted you in bed with that leg propped?”

“I couldn’t very well leave the town fending for itself. But now that you’re here, I’ll be glad to kick back and play invalid. Who’s that big lug you brought with you? Maybe I’ll deputize him while I’m at it and get me a real bargain.”

Kyle all but elbowed her out of the way. “Hey, Gramps.”

Her father held out his hand, and Taylor could almost hear her boy sigh with relief when awarded a formal, unchallenging handshake.

“You’re looking fine, son. How’s your blackjack these days?”

“My poker’s better.”

Emmett threw back his head and roared. “Orrin—you remember my family? Taylor Grace and Kyle Thomas Benning.”

They were summarily reintroduced to baby-faced Orrin Lint, whose thinning white hair and near colorless gray eyes looked at the world as if constantly trying to figure out the punch line to a joke.

Although he rose—which did little to improve his height—and thrust out his hand like a trained robot, he whispered to Emmett, “What’re they doing with your name? I thought she got hitched?”

“Divorced,” her father whispered back through a stiff smile.

“Both of them?”

Her father’s smile grew strained. “Say hello, Orrin. Then shut up.”

Still looking confused, Orrin shook Taylor’s hand. “Sure glad you’re here, Miz Taylor. But I am sorry our plans for your arrival party kinda fell through. Things changing the way they have, them new folk just don’t know—”

“Orrin, what did I just say about flapping that yap of yours? Come on, Taylor.” Her father took her arm. “Let’s get you sworn in.”

Although Taylor couldn’t be more relieved to skip a formal celebration, she wondered what Orrin had begun to say and wished he’d had a chance to finish. “Dad, what’s the rush? Can’t we visit a few minutes first?”

Her father glanced back at her son. “Kyle, can you drive your mama’s car yet?”

The boy nodded eagerly—a surprise to Taylor, since as far as she knew he’d never been behind the wheel of anything.

“Terrific.” Her father beamed. “Soon as we get you legal, Taylor, Kyle’ll drive your car to the house for me, and you can take mine.”

“Take it where? And why can’t I drive the patrol car?”

“You can if you want, I’m just used to the radio and stuff in mine. I thought you’d like it better, too. In any case there’s something I need for you to do.”

As he spoke his blue-gray eyes avoided her gaze, and when she combined that shiftiness with his odd behavior toward Orrin, it triggered Taylor’s suspiciousness. Something about this situation was suddenly not the cut-and-dried affair he’d assured her it would be during their phone conversations.

“Exactly what is going on? Dad?”

“Where’s my Bible? Oh, heck, there’s no need to waste time searching around for the thing. Everyone knows that once a Benning gives his word he doesn’t break it. Besides, if anyone tries to say this ain’t legal, I’ll whack ’em alongside of the head with one of these tree stumps,” he said, banging one rubber-tipped crutch on the dull gray linoleum. “Now raise your right hand and repeat after me. I—and state your name...”

She remained more than a little confused, but Taylor took the oath and became the first female police officer in Redoubt, New Mexico. For the next six weeks she would be the only active cop, since her father had been forced to let Lew Sandoval go only days before injuring himself. As she looked down at the badge that he pinned matter-of-factly on her Save A Vegetable, Eat Popcorn T-shirt, she experienced another flood of doubts. Had her father done the right thing? She didn’t want anyone accusing him of nepotism. And why couldn’t he have waited for her to change into something more suitable?

“All right, out with it,” she said, accepting the gun he’d shoved across the desk at her. She began slipping the holster’s belt through the loops of her jeans. “What’s so important that we can’t all go to the house and get you and Kyle settled?”

“Blackstone’s out.”

Taylor gripped the Smith and Wesson .357 revolver as though it was the only link between her and oblivion. The last time she’d come anywhere close to losing control had been in her rookie year as a Detroit cop, when she’d held her first partner’s hand while an internist had sewn shut a knife wound over the veteran cop’s eyebrow. This felt worse.

She had to lick her lips before they would form words. “Hugh’s escaped from prison?”

“Hell, no! Paroled. About time, too. Damn Murdock Marsden for almost convincing the judge to throw the book at the guy. As it was he made sure several parole boards kept him locked up.”

“What changed things this time?”

“Apparently the old goat himself. He didn’t even show up at the hearing.”

That was good news for Hugh...and anything but for her. “Surely he won’t come back here. You said that Jane still has the feed store, and that running the place without him has been rough on her, but—”

“He’s already arrived, hon. Got in around dark yesterday. I hear Jane drove her old jalopy to Albuquerque herself to meet his bus.”

Suddenly it all made sense, and fury surged from a deep, dormant place inside her. “You sneaky, conniving—” She looked at her son now gaping at her. No doubt the combination of heat and anger was turning her face the color of a well-cooked sugar beet. “Kyle, go ask Orrin to show you around the station, please. Your grandfather and I have a few things to discuss.”

“I’d rather stay put. It’s not every day I get to hear you cuss.”

Wise guy. He was right, and she intended to keep things that way. “Do it, young man. Now.”

As expected, he pouted, but he left. Taylor shut the office door after him.

“Now, Gracie...honey...”

“Don’t you Gracie me. You’re lower than a snake, do you know that? Sneakier than a roach! All this pleading to me to come back because you broke your leg.”

“Well, you can see that’s true!”

“But you knew Hugh was getting out!”

“Who could say it was a sure thing until he got here?”

“Oh, you knew, all right. And you knew I would never have agreed to come if I’d heard there was the slightest chance of running into him again.”

“Listen, all I’m asking is that you go talk to him. Tell him that things are changed here more than ever, that the new blood in town sides with Marsden on just about everything. Tell him no way he can stay. If anyone can make Hugh Thomas see reason, it’s you.”

“You couldn’t be more wrong—and Kyle and I are out of here.”

She reached for the badge. Before she could unhook it, though, her father managed to shuffle around his desk again and gripped her shoulder, stopping her.

“Don’t desert me. Hell, all of the old-timers know and respect you. They’re glad you’re back.”

“How can they? They knew about Hugh and L”

“Yeah, and they remember your integrity even more. That will count for bunches, and they’ll convince the others no matter what earful Marsden feeds them.”

She doubted it. In any case, he didn’t get it. “I can’t be here,” Taylor said, enunciating slowly. Her voice sounded desperate even to her own ears. “I can’t face him again. What’s more, I don’t want to have to go through that—and considering what I did to him, I doubt he wants to get within a thousand miles of me!”

Her father gripped her shoulder harder. “Listen to me. You did what you had to do. Anyone with half a brain knows it’s only because of you that he’s still alive.”

“Right. I’m sure he thanked me every day that he spent in prison.” Taylor backed out of his reach and raked her hands through hair she wore almost shorter than some boys did. “This is a nightmare. What were you thinking? Didn’t you realize what you were doing?”

“Absolutely. You needed to get out of Detroit. I needed to keep this town from rioting.”

And for that he was willing to sacrifice her sanity. Maybe she could have managed somehow if there was only herself to consider, but... She pointed at the shut door. “What about that boy out there?”

“Aw, Kyle’s gonna be fine.”

Exasperating man. “Now you’re a psychic? Have you heard anything I’ve said? You made decisions that weren’t yours to make. I don’t want my son exposed to gossip and heaven knows what else!” She didn’t want to think about all of the rumors and truths that Kyle would hear. To think she’d believed their relationship on tenuous ground before. What a joke!

“I thought of a heap of things, Taylor Grace, and I made a judgment call.” Her father stood before her proud and unapologetic. “You understand the necessity of those well enough.”

Unfortunately she did. And, as a result of one she’d made long ago, Hugh had gone to prison. Because of another she had moved to Detroit. Yet another had brought her back here.

Her father must have seen the crack in her defenses. With a sad smile, he inched closer, this time easing his arm around her shoulders. “Don’t tell me there isn’t a small part of you that wants to see him again?”

“I’ve often wondered what it would be like to stand on the moon and look back at the earth, too, but you don’t see me climbing into a metal canister and letting someone light a few million gallons of fuel under me.”

“You’re worrying about the bottom line, aren’t you? You’re thinking that you were never certain yourself whether he was guilty or not, and how that didn’t change what you felt for him. Maybe now you’ll get your answer.”

“Curiosity is not an adequate motivator for something like this.”

“Bull. So why’d you try to contact him after he was sent to the penitentiary. Sheriff Trammell told me that Hugh’s attorney said you even wrote from Detroit.”

“Well, if he told you that, then he also must have told you that my letters were returned unopened. I think that was a fairly clear message to assume the worst.”

Her father sighed. “Okay, then. Let him take one look at you and maybe it’ll convince him and his mother to sell the business and move on, the way Murdock and his friends in the chamber of

commerce have been trying to coax her to do all along. Shoot, Jane's barely getting by. Except for Mel Denver and a handful of referrals from him, most of her business is from the reservation folks. Maybe that's been enough for her, but I can't see how the two of them will manage."

Taylor suspected he was right, but that only made her feel worse. She had to ask the question she'd only asked him once before. "Do you think he killed Piers Marsden, Dad?"

He took his time answering. "Hon, he was angry enough to. And if someone had done to you what Piers did to Noel, I could see myself that angry. What's more, a number of people considered Piers's death a personal favor. Remember all those rumors about what a creep he was?"

"That's not what I asked." Taylor was no more happy to hear these evasions than she wanted to feel the familiar, dull pain in her chest. She'd believed, hoped, that she'd gotten over Hugh. "Do you think he killed Murdock's son?"

Her father bowed his head, a strand of graying hair slipping low over his forehead. "Yeah, Gracie, I'm afraid I do."

So did she, and that was the tragedy of it. It didn't matter that, like her father, she'd understood the anger that would have compelled him to do it. There had been a moment when she'd first learned what Piers had done to Hugh's sister, after she'd witnessed the poor girl's trauma in the hospital, that she had wanted to hurt the bastard herself. The difference was, she had too much respect for the law.

"See, another reason I have to get this resolved," her father continued, "is because people are saying that once word gets around that he's out, the whole place will become a ghost town...especially after sundown."

"That's ridiculous. Hugh loved this town and most of the people who lived here. He's not at risk of being a repeat offender." Unless he saw her again.

"I'm merely repeating the consensus of opinion." Her father gave her a sidelong look. "Well? Can you handle this for me?"

The sympathy in his voice decided her. She snatched his straw cowboy hat off his in-box and slammed it on her head. "I took the oath, didn't I? What choice do I have?"

"Atta girl. Now make sure you tell him that I'm not asking for him to get lost overnight. All we need is some assurance that he will leave. Soon."

Taylor handed over her keys and picked up his from his desk blotter. "When I get to the house, I'd better find you stretched out on the couch with that leg up, and holding a cold beer."

"Can't have any. Doc's got me on damned pain pills," her father replied as she reached for the doorknob.

"Not for you. For me."

By the time Taylor made a right onto Main Street, her stomach was churning and cramping. If it wasn't for Kyle, she knew she could easily have made a U-turn and directed the old Chevy for the interstate, she felt that much the coward.

Hugh. Heaven help her. Until minutes ago, she'd believed she would never see him again; she had buried the dreams she'd once cherished for their future. The news that he had gained his freedom should have sent her shouting with joy and relief...only, thanks to her father's explanation, there was nothing to celebrate, and everything to dread.

Somehow she had to keep her wits about her, do what she'd been hired to do. The past couldn't be allowed to matter. Nothing else could matter.

It was barely a mile drive to Blackstone Feed and Supplies. A left turn at Crooked Pine Road and she saw the metal building. The plywood doors of the warehouse were wide open, and as she pulled into the dirt-and-gravel parking lot she saw a silhouette of someone moving around in there. She drew in a deep breath to ease the growing discomfort in her stomach, killed the truck's engine and climbed out.

He was restacking fifty-pound sacks of range cubes. A quick glance to her left and right to make sure no one else was around told her that her father had been correct; this was a modest operation.

There wasn't so much as a forklift to help with the lifting and hauling, nor was there that much inventory. However, as she got closer, she could see powerful muscles flexing and stretching across Hugh's bronzed back, and realized that he wouldn't have needed any help if the business had been larger. But then, he'd always been capable.

She didn't like that her mouth went dry again. After fourteen years, she expected more from herself, regardless of their history. On the other hand, theirs was some history.

She had been the one for him, the only one who ever knew the feel of that strong, magnificent body against hers, and those callused yet gentle hands exploring and claiming. From the day they'd met as kids, back when their relationship had been about kinship and understanding, through the sweet, sweet years of discovering love, then passion...all the way to the moment the court bailiffs escorted him away, there had never been anyone else for either of them. That was a huge stack of memories for a woman to repress, even a woman with a profession like hers.

When she'd pulled up, he had glanced over his shoulder and recognized the truck, but he finished stacking the last two sacks before he faced her. Only now did she realize he'd been expecting her father. It was there in the way he suddenly froze. Because of where she was standing, she supposed she was little more than a silhouette against the blinding New Mexico sun. But apparently there was nothing wrong with his memory.

Finally, slowly, he began to walk toward her.

"How the hell did he get you to come back?"

She thought of potential replies. Since they would all require a strength and control she didn't possess quite yet, she simply said, "It's good to see you, Hugh."

He stepped closer, so close she could smell salt, heat and man. Suddenly it all came back—the way he kissed, the care he took undressing her, how it felt to hold him deep, deep inside her. The memories struck like one tidal wave after another, until she wanted to slump to the concrete floor and weep for dreams and innocence lost. But somehow she remained upright, and met his furious scowl.

He glared at her badge and read her T-shirt. Sort of. Mostly his gaze raked up and down her, and she concluded years of incarceration had changed his tastes. No doubt he now thought her about as appealing as a telephone pole. It was only a guess, though; his sharp black eyes gave nothing away.

He finally settled his focus on her gun. "Is that supposed to be some kind of joke?"

"No. I just haven't had time to change into my uniform yet."

"So that's why you're here. Funny how social calls mean different things these days."

"Please, Hugh." She saw no point in hiding the weariness in her voice. "I didn't know you were here until fifteen minutes ago. I've only been back in town for about twenty myself."

She hoped he could find it within himself to ignore the badge and gun, as she wanted to. If only she could reach him on the level she once did. As once no one else could. How furious she was with her father for taking advantage of their past.

"This is no place for you." Bitterness and defeat chilled his words. "It's not going to be a pretty homecoming."

"Yes, well...I don't know about pretty, but one thing it isn't going to be is violent."

"You think that badge and gun will stop the inevitable?"

He was starting to sound as though he was heading for the gunfight at the O.K. Corral or something. She needed to try another approach. "Regardless of what you think, Hugh...I'm glad you're out."

"Then you're one of the few."

"That's not what I heard."

"Isn't it?"

His piercing, unrelenting gaze threatened to turn her into a coward. She suspected a scorpion sting would feel friendlier. On the other hand, he had a legitimate reason for the attitude. "We need to talk."

Once again he considered her badge and the gun. “While you’re wearing that stuff? I don’t think so.”

“I’m willing to put the gun and badge in the car if that will help.”

Something primitive flashed in his eyes. “You can take off anything you want.”

“Is talk like that necessary? We were friends once.”

“Friends don’t send friends to jail.”

“I didn’t send you to jail. A judge and jury did.”

“But you told your father where to find me.”

“To save your life! To keep Murdock Marsden from ordering someone to hunt you down like an animal and kill you in cold blood. I won’t apologize for that.”

He didn’t respond, at least not with words. He did, however, close the few yards remaining between them. The lazy, almost insolent stride gave her ample time to confirm that he hadn’t wasted his time in prison, but had made full use of the gym. Beneath the black mat of chest hair, there wasn’t an ounce of spare flesh on him. Every inch of exposed skin was glistening, toned muscle. He’d been something to look at as a young man of twenty-two. Now at thirty-six, without a strand of gray in his black hair, she had no words to describe him, beyond breathtaking. But, dear Lord, his face... The hardness and bitterness in those sharp, sculpted features were too much to endure. In his eyes she saw a man who’d suffered every day of the fourteen years taken from him. This was a man whose entire aura vibrated outrage.

It took all of her courage to stand her ground, and she couldn’t deny a brief impulse to place her hand on her revolver. Making matters worse, when he stopped a spare foot away from her, she had to tilt back her head thanks to her father’s dratted hat blocking her view.

“When’d you cut your hair?”

The question came as a surprise, but it was better than others he could have asked. “When I entered the Detroit police academy.”

It shouldn’t have been possible, but his expression grew more grim; nevertheless, once again he took his time with this closer inspection. He lingered longest on her mouth. Once he’d told her that she had a heartbreaker smile and that her kisses alone could make him come. Older and wiser now, she knew men said things like that to women all the time to get them into bed. But Hugh hadn’t. She’d been the one doing the begging—for what had seemed like forever. He had turned her down each and every time because she’d been only seventeen then. Turned her down, although he’d said himself that there would never be anyone else for either of them.

He’d wanted to wait, and had shown the discipline to do so.

Until her eighteenth birthday.

Taylor almost sighed with relief when he again lowered his gaze to her badge.

“If you’re a Detroit cop, what are you doing wearing that one?”

“I quit.”

“Why?”

“Personal reasons.”

“Must have been a whopper to throw away what could have been a nice pension.” He slowly reached out and fingered the shiny metal. “This won’t bring you anything near that.”

It was unbearable to think of how close his fingers were to her breast. Could he see her nipple hardening? “Sometimes money can’t be allowed to matter.”

Hugh let his hand fall to his side. “I heard that your old man hurt his leg. Is he all right?”

“He will be in six weeks or so.”

“What happened to Sandoval?”

“The town got fed up with his bullying ways. My father had to let him go.”

“And no one else wanted the job?”

“I’m the most experienced.”

That had him lifting one straight eyebrow. “How much do you have?”

“Too much.”

As expected, that had him searching her face again, this time focusing on her eyes. For a small eternity he just looked, and she knew he was reading and gauging, but she wasn’t quite the open book she used to be. She did, however, let him see her regret...and that she refused to be intimidated by him. Neither emotion seemed to impress him.

“Qualified or not, you shouldn’t have come back,” he said at last.

Taking hope in the quieter note she’d picked up in his voice, she allowed herself to continue with what she’d come to say. “You shouldn’t have, either. People are nervous, Hugh.”

“Afraid the half-breed may go on a bloodthirsty rampage?”

She hated hearing him talk that way. Except for snobs like the Marsdens, no one around here had ever said anything derogatory regarding his heritage. Even now, she’d been given no hint that people’s concern was ethnically motivated.

“Let’s just say you have friends here who are concerned that you might have some form of revenge on your mind.”

“Now what right does a guilty man have to think of revenge?”

She wasn’t going to fall into that trap. But he wasn’t going to like what she had to say next any better. “My father—The chief says he wants assurance from you that you plan to leave before anything happens that we’ll all regret.”

“Tell him not to hold his breath.”

“No one wants any trouble, Hugh.”

“Right. That’s why you came to see me wearing a gun.”

“It comes with the badge, you know that.”

“Go away, Taylor. Get off my mother’s property and get out of this sorry excuse for a town. It’s not the place you remember. Maybe we were kidding ourselves to ever think it was better.”

“I wish I could leave, but it’s too late. I already gave my word that I’d stay.”

He twisted his compressed lips into a smirk. “You gave me your word once. We found out fairly quickly what that was worth.”

Had she thought him hardened? He was ruthless.

So be it. Let him understand that I’ve changed, too.

“Congratulations,” she snapped. “Now you’ve proven that you can sound like a bastard. But the message stands. There’s to be no trouble. Understood?”

“Oh, I understand, all right.” Without warning, he took hold of her belt and jerked hard, slamming her pelvis against his. “You try understanding this. If you ever come near me again wearing that gun, you’d better plan on using it!”

Two

“Hugh!”

At the sound of the reproofing female voice, Hugh released Taylor and slowly backed a step, then another, away from her. Only at that point did he feel it safe to face his mother. Only then did he begin to trust his emotions again.

As expected, his mother strode quickly across the warehouse’s concrete floor, and with each step her worn cowboy boots sounded a staccato beat in the already throbbing silence. She had changed a good deal since they’d locked him away, and the greatest difference was that, like him, she rarely smiled these days—not that there was anything to smile about at the moment. Boots, jeans and a man’s plaid western shirt remained her uniform, and as usual she wore an apron with huge pockets. At the store it was always denim, at home she switched to cotton. None of that had changed since she’d started the business. As for the no-nonsense German bun, it was still a standard, too. More gray than sable now, but it hadn’t thinned much that he could see.

When she drew closer, he spotted the pinched quality of her features, noted that her eyes were shadowed with concern and disapproval, the once-warm hazel irises shooting off metallic sparks. That hardened her handsome face even more, a face already marred by sun and stress-etched fine lines. Since Taylor was responsible for some of Jane Thurman Blackstone's biggest disappointments and heartache, it was only natural that there should be no sign of her gracious businesslike demeanor.

"It's all right, Mother. I'm not going to do anything foolish that will get me sent back to prison."

Even so, she stopped a few feet from them and crossed her strong, tanned arms. "Exactly what do you think you're doing?" she demanded of Taylor. "You're not welcome here."

"I'm aware of that, Mrs. Blackstone," Taylor murmured with a nod that might have done double duty as a greeting. "But I have a job to do. Perhaps you heard about Chief Benning falling while doing some repairs on the roof of our house?"

His mother's expression indicated that Taylor's question matched her fashion sense. "This is Redoubt. Everyone hears everything."

"Then you know he hasn't yet replaced Lew Sandoval. As a result, I've agreed to take the job. I—" Taylor gestured to her clothes "—apologize for the attire. But I only just arrived." She added more gently, "How've you been?"

"How do you think I've been? My son isn't home twenty-four hours and already you're here. You're worse than a bad penny and rotten apple combined!"

"That will be enough, Mother." Hugh may not have done such a good job of it so far, but he wanted to handle Taylor himself.

Ignoring his quiet command, she lifted an already stubborn chin and scoffed at Taylor. "What qualifies you to wear a gun?"

Taylor lifted her chin, as well. "Nine years with the Detroit P.D."

"It seems," Hugh added before his mother could respond, "that she wants me to leave by sundown. Apparently my presence is making the citizenry nervous."

That had her fisting her hands and setting them on the hips that had carried two healthy children full-term. "How dare you! All of you! The law can't or won't do what it's supposed to do, so you bully my son? Well, it's not going to happen. He's paid enough, and then some. And for what? A crime he wasn't guilty of! Have you no shame?"

"More than you can imagine," Taylor replied, almost too softly to hear. "But I also have my orders. Believe me, I'm very sorry—"

"We don't want your regrets!" Despite standing a good two inches shorter, his mother shook a fist at her. "You had your chance, but you betrayed Hugh, betrayed all of us. Go away and leave us alone!"

For a moment Taylor looked as if she would ignore the command, try to reason with his mother. But suddenly something inside her deflated and those unforgettable blue eyes shifted to him. "I've said what I was asked to say. The rest is up to you. Be careful, Hugh."

As far as threats went, hers had been all but wrapped in cotton. If she'd been like that in Detroit, small wonder she hadn't lasted. But as he watched her walk away, Hugh had difficulty holding on to his sarcasm. Strange...the last time she'd walked away from him, the emotions that had churned and stabbed at his insides were clear and acute—disbelief, pain and an anger that had left him impotent and all but frozen for a long, long time. He wished his current feelings could be as easily defined.

Prison had indeed changed him, hardened and embittered him. If necessary, he could stand before this entire town and tell them all to go to hell. At least that's what he'd believed before Taylor had driven up here. But now...

Hell, it wouldn't take a magnifying glass to spot the chink in your armor, pal.

If only time hadn't been so kind to her. He'd always thought her a natural woman, someone not unlike his mother who had a no-nonsense approach to her gender, but Taylor was more feminine nonetheless. That's why it had been such a shock to learn she was a cop. Shapeless T-shirt and ancient

jeans aside, she remained one of the sexiest women he'd ever known, her fine-boned, slim body always moving with an easy grace he knew she didn't recognize let alone appreciate. Lady Blue, Wind Woman, he'd dubbed her when as kids they'd ridden over the hills and prairies. He had only to close his eyes to remember her incredible hair back then, how it would fly behind her like a golden eagle's wing. How could she have cut it off? He didn't want to acknowledge that the shorter style accented the angles and contours of her face, and added a youthfulness and vulnerability that was echoed by her sensitive mouth.

Damn. He had to forget that mouth.

"Can they do it?"

He welcomed his mother's intrusion into his thoughts. "Anybody can do anything if they're determined enough."

"Then what are we going to do?"

"Ignore them for as long as we can. Take one day at a time." It was a lesson he'd learned white caged. Consequently, he doubted few people out here could match his patience. In prison there had been little else to do but wait...and try to survive. "Don't dwell," he said as much for his own benefit as for his mother's. "You knew my coming back wouldn't be easy."

"Knew, yes. But a mother can still hope." She glanced at the departing Blazer. "It wasn't fair of Emmett to send her. That cunning coyote never did play fair."

She hadn't always spoken with such resentment toward the Bennings. Once she'd treated Taylor, who'd been motherless for most of her childhood, as tenderly as she had Noel. Then Piers Marsden raped his little sister. Everything changed after that.

Fourteen years. Noel was thirty-one now, and although still single, she was finding some peace living in Arizona where she worked for a private foundation that helped women in trouble. Several times over the years she had tried to convince their mother to join her out there. So far she hadn't succeeded.

"Would it be so bad to move?" he asked, curious to see if his mother had reconsidered.

"Your father was born here. He's buried here. This is my home."

His father had been Laughing Max Blackstone, half Jicarillo Apache and half Navajo, a strong, kind man who had been the center of Hugh's life. A state road department supervisor, he had been killed at a job site when an eighteen-wheeler lost its brakes and had gone out of control. Hugh had been twelve, Noel seven. Their mother had just opened the feed store only weeks before, and suddenly what had begun as a comfortable life became a challenging one as they all worked together to make ends meet. There had been some insurance money, but their mother had tried to keep those funds for his and Noel's education. He'd made her use his share for other things because he hadn't been in a hurry to go off to college, not when she'd become so dependent on his help. There had also been Taylor...

Words couldn't explain the way it had been between the two of them. Kindred spirits seemed a flowery, empty expression, and yet from their childhood they'd shared a strong connection, an understanding. By the time he was graduating from high school, friendship and adoration had grown into an unbelievable passion, and the mere thought of being away from her—even if only until weekends—had been unacceptable. He'd been willing to wait until she started college and his mother's business was solid to where extra help could be hired. But then Piers Marsden entered their lives and sent everything and everyone into a tailspin.

"That settles things, then," he said, turning back to the feed sacks. "You're too stubborn to leave, and I have nowhere to go. Guess we'll hang around and see what happens."

"What about Taylor?"

"What about her?"

"Don't try acting indifferent with me. I lived those years right beside the two of you. I had eyes, and there's nothing wrong with them yet. Will you be able to cope, to deal with seeing her every day?"

Just the idea of that made him feel as if he'd swallowed a plateful of broken glass, but he managed a one-shouldered shrug. "We'll find out that, as well."

"But—"

"Mother," he said with quiet warning. "Enough for now."

His mother sighed, and once again glanced outside. "I wonder why she never married. Did you notice? She's not wearing a ring."

He'd noticed. And his heart continued its assault on his ribs thanks to that brief but intimate contact with her. Thanks to a lack of female companionship over the years, he knew he would have reacted to almost any woman; that it was Taylor who had reawakened his sexual appetite had to be the cruelest of jokes. So was finding himself pleased that she remained single.

"We aren't going to get past this if we keep talking about it," he muttered. He flung a fifty-pound sack onto the new pile with a little too much energy. As it landed, the multilayered brown paper split as though it was the finest wrapping.

Brown oblong pellets poured across the concrete floor. Hugh swore.

His mother eyed the mess and nodded. "I'd better go make some iced tea. You're going to need some cooling down. Are you getting hungry yet?"

"No!" he snapped, glaring at what constituted several dollars of wasted feed. But he quickly checked his temper. "No, thanks. The tea will be fine for now."

"I'll be back in a few minutes."

Hugh didn't reply and didn't watch her head back toward the office. But once he heard the door shut, he walked out onto the dock—not in search of more air than was available in the stifling warehouse, although he did rub his forearm across his sweaty brow—to look farther down the road.

The Blazer was gone. For the time being. However, it would be back, and he and Taylor would cross paths again. For both of their sakes, he hoped it wasn't soon.

"So what did he say?"

The screen door barely had time to shut behind her, yet Taylor's father was already sitting up on the couch and lowering the volume on the TV. She looked from him to her son sprawled on the armchair beside him. Kyle's open curiosity made her wish he'd waited until she'd sent the boy from the room.

"Use your imagination. It certainly wasn't, 'Gee, I'm glad to see you again. What? You want me to leave town? Sure, no problem.'"

Her father grimaced and scratched carefully at the two-inch scar beneath his chin where days ago stitches had been. Fingernails against several days' growth of beard stubble sounded like sand being crushed under the sole of a boot. "Guess I deserved that, but can I help it if the suspense is killing me? Will he or won't he cooperate?"

"My gut hunch is that I doubt it. At the same time, he doesn't want trouble. I came away with the feeling that if people leave him alone he'll reciprocate in kind."

Her father didn't look pleased. "That's not going to satisfy Murdock or his allies."

"Then you're going to have to talk to Mr. Marsden," Taylor replied, slipping off the borrowed hat. "Because I happen to believe that if the parole board saw fit to release Hugh, he has a right to try to start his life over wherever he pleases."

She set the hat on the coffee table and retreated to the kitchen, as much to get a badly needed drink of something cool as to regroup. Being surrounded by familiar, nostalgic things helped.

The two-story house was an old friend, the kitchen still blue and white and in desperate need of repainting. No doubt the whole house did at this point, she mused, having already noticed the peeling paint on the outer walls. If her father didn't do something soon, the place was going to look like a giant dalmatian dog.

After filling a glass with ice and water and taking several deep swallows, she refilled her glass from the tap and returned to the living room. Along the way she caught sight of her hair. Flattened and

damp from wearing her father's hat, it left her looking about as attractive as a wet rat. No wonder it had been so easy for Hugh to act so coldly toward her. She wished she could say she'd been indifferent.

"Mom?" Kyle leaned forward when she returned to the living room. "Is this Blackstone guy dangerous or not?"

Taylor eyed her father, wondering what he'd been saying while she'd been taking care of his dirty work. While it was inevitable that Kyle would hear of Hugh, not to mention meet him, she wished she could spare him any of that.

"I'm not sure it matters what I think," she told him. "What does is that there are people in town who are afraid he might be."

"So tell them to take a hike. You're the law and what you say goes, right?"

She couldn't help but smile. When she was in favor with her son, he was prone to think her too capable. "Police uphold the law, dear heart, we don't make it." She gestured upstairs. "Would you do me a favor and start unpacking? I need a few minutes to speak with your grandfather about business matters."

As expected, his expression turned wounded. "Can't I stay? I won't tell anyone. You've let me listen before when you discussed cases on the phone."

"And will again. Sometimes. But I'm afraid this isn't one of them."

When she was serious, she always spoke quietly, choosing her words with care to let him know she saw him, not as her equal but definitely as someone she respected. The gesture worked as it usually did. Although he didn't like being shut out, he pushed himself up from his chair.

"I'll turn on the TV, too, so you don't have to worry about me overhearing anything."

"Is he terrific or what?" Taylor asked her father. "He reminds me of me at that age."

"Lucky for you, he inherited his father's big feet."

Everyone groaned and Kyle stomped upstairs. When Taylor heard him noisily shut the door to his room, she slumped into the chair he had vacated. She shifted again as the revolver pinched into her waist.

Her father watched her, his expression growing sympathetic. "It was bad, huh?"

"You have to ask?"

"At least you're not bleeding externally. How're you doing on the inside? I see you resisted that beer."

"Barely. Since I am all the law that's available for the foreseeable future, I thought it best to abstain."

"I'm sorry, hon. This is some mess I'm bringing you back into."

Talk about understatements. "You have no idea."

"So he refuses to leave, huh?"

"Can you blame him? Jane has a business. He won't abandon her." She shrugged to indicate the rest was moot.

"Then you're right We'll have to convince Murdock to behave himself until things change."

"I said you'll have to convince him." Taylor pointed her thumb at herself. "You know he's going to laugh in my face if I try to strong-arm him. All he's going to see is the girl who used to be crazy about Hugh Blackstone."

"Am I hearing this correctly? What happened to the sharp cookie who took on gang members in Detroit and wasn't afraid to face off a two-hundred-pound mugger?"

"Don't start with that kind of nonsense. You know it's an entirely different situation when you're carrying the clout of a huge department and that backup is on the way, than compared to paying a social call to someone who knew you when you were in diapers." She thought of the tough and resilient rancher who'd once survived a winter night in the elements after the fall and tragic death of his mount as he hunted a poacher. "Besides, no one tells Murdock Marsden what to do. If he wants Hugh out of town, he'll do what he thinks is necessary to make that happen."

“Well, he won’t listen to you dressed like that, that’s for sure.”

How typical. When he’d been in a hurry to get her to talk to Hugh, he’d dismissed her attire as unimportant, but now he was a fashion critic. “Speaking of uniforms and psychological clout, what do you expect me to wear?”

Her father frowned. “Good question. I can’t blame the town for being tightfisted with my budget because they’re keeping taxes low in order to draw in more entrepreneurs. But it’s embarrassing that we can’t afford two patrol cars, let alone salary someone to man the office during regular hours. If Orrin wasn’t content to accept that cell to sleep in as trade for his services, I’d be in a real bind.”

No small truth there, except that Taylor suspected Orrin would be as happy to sleep at his desk if a cell was unavailable. What’s more, if someone ever complained about the trade-off, no doubt her father’s longtime sidekick would be camped out in one of the spare bedrooms here. Still, her question hadn’t been answered.

“Lew used to wear what you did, right?” She’d always done her best to avoid any contact with the ex-cop who’d grown increasingly arrogant and difficult to control over the years.

“Same as me, a blue shirt and jeans.”

“Okay, then...I brought along a few of my summer uniform shirts. I’d planned to take off the patches and wear them around the house, but will they and my jeans suffice?”

“Shoot, sure. And you’d better dig out your old straw hat from your closet. That sun out there’s more brutal as ever.”

Taylor had thought the same thing herself this morning when she and Kyle were on the interstate. The whole world was talking about the depleting ozone layer and the increasing threat of skin cancer, but in the southwest precautions had been a way of life for ages.

“I’ll go up and get it in a minute.” She would also take the scissors to a shirt right away so she could change. “I thought after that I’d pick up some lunch and, after we eat, head back to town to start saying hello to everyone.”

“You take care of you, don’t worry about us. We have a whole plate of chicken and potato salad in the refrigerator. I had Lola make it for that exact reason.”

His consideration came as a pleasant surprise, as was the revelation that he and café owner Lola Langtry sounded like more of an item. Growing up, and even when she would visit, he’d tended to take advantage of having a female in the house. She didn’t mind; she simply had wanted him to know that she’d noted it.

“Thanks. I was afraid I was going to have to train you before you realized I wasn’t about to play superwoman around here. I barely have Kyle broken in. You’d require a serious five-year plan.”

“You want me to really dazzle you? I drafted Lola to get her kin to move my things down to the back bedroom, so I wouldn’t have to deal with those damned stairs, and you two would have more space and privacy up there.”

Not only was that safer for him, but Taylor was touched by his awareness that she wanted to retain a bit of her independence, and her sole parental control over her son. But almost as interesting was the repeated mention of Lola Langtry. “Why haven’t you married her yet, Dad? You two have been an item for...what? It’s been at least ten years since her husband died.”

“Things are fine as they are, thank you very much. In case you haven’t noticed, we Bennings don’t do so great in the romance department. Look what happened with me and your mother. Then there’s you and Hugh. And we won’t even get into you and Jim.”

Taylor winced. She’d long gotten over her mother, who’d been an ambitious and restless woman who left them when Taylor was a baby. The last she’d heard of her was back when she’d first gone to Detroit and had played with the idea of reacquainting herself with the woman who’d given birth to her. It hadn’t been difficult to track her down—Ruth Grace Taylor hadn’t attempted to hide. By then a high-powered business executive in New York, she also wasn’t interested in a reunion. Polite but firm, she’d made it clear during the brief phone conversation. “It wouldn’t work out, Taylor. I

do wish you all the best life has to offer, but you'd be disappointed in the morsels I have to offer. Seek your own destiny."

This second rejection had hurt, but not as much as her brief relationship with Jim Patrick continued to eat at her conscience. She'd never explained what happened, the whys, to her father, and considering what was inevitably going to happen she knew it was time.

"Dad, I need to tell you something."

He waved away her hesitant statement. "There's nothing you can say about that jerk. Any guy who won't even give his son his name—"

"That wasn't Jim's fault. I made the decision for Kyle to have only my name."

"Sure. Because Patrick was a two-timing bum."

"No, because he fell in love. Really in love and not the sham our marriage was."

Her father clearly didn't know where to go with that. "Okay...maybe...you two did put the cart before the horse as the saying goes and were forced to get married, but that's no reason to excuse his behavior with that...that—"

"Dad." Taylor sat forward, willing him to listen and understand. "I was already pregnant when I met Jim."

That finally silenced him. She could see him doing some counting and coming up with an answer he didn't like.

She'd been so careful, so clever, so afraid. She'd told so many lies. Before he found out the truth in a less sensitive way, which was bound to happen now that she was here again. Taylor decided her father should hear it from her first. Of course, he was a bright man; she could see he was already drawing conclusions.

"Wait a minute...you two met the day you arrived in Detroit to move in with your old school friend, Ally."

"That's true. I was about to jaywalk and Jim grabbed me, saving me from getting killed. One thing led to another and..."

Her father held up a hand. "Don't tell me details."

"I didn't intend to."

"But you were pregnant when you arrived in Detroit?"

She nodded.

"Hugh? Kyle is Hugh's son!"

"Shh!" she whispered at his outraged cry. Anxious, she glanced toward the stairs. "Kyle has to be told, too, but not like that."

Her father wasn't listening. His face diffused with color, he glared at her as if she'd just announced she'd stolen a nuclear warhead and had it tucked away in their garage freezer. "Why didn't you tell me? I didn't have a right to know? You lied! You lied when I asked if you two had been...well, you know."

"I know. And, Dad, if you want to be honest, you knew, too. But I didn't come out and announce anything for the simple reason that the one person who needed to know about my condition refused to talk to me. Had I said something to you, you would have turned right around and told him."

"Am I missing something? What would have been wrong with that? You were a kid. You needed all the help you could get."

"Great. Then he would have done the right thing, even though he hated me. Do you think I could have survived that? Would it have benefited Kyle to have a convicted felon as a father? No, it was better to take Ally up on her invitation and leave Redoubt." Her old school friend's gesture had been a lifesaver. "As for Jim, you're being too hard on him. He has a big noble streak in him and he did fall a little in love with me. Enough to want to help me. But just as he realized he couldn't be the cop his father and grandfather had wanted him to be, he learned he couldn't stay married to me. A short time before Kyle was born he met Janet. I wasn't blind. I could see how it was between them

—maybe better than I otherwise would have, because I had experienced something equally strong with Hugh. There was no way I was going to stand between them. Even as I was packing to go to the hospital to deliver Kyle, I told Jim that he needed to divorce me and marry her.”

“And to think I believed you when you told me that you and Kyle kept your maiden name to simplify paperwork.”

Taylor saw emotion work on her father’s face and felt another pang of regret. “I’m sorry, Dad. I played it the way I thought fair and easiest on everyone.”

“Damn it, I should have known,” he replied, now more angry with himself. “I should have. You were a wreck before you left. But I thought you were upset because Hugh refused to see you after his arrest. Then learning he would be sent away for up to twenty years...”

“That’s all true.”

“And the boy did bear a strong resemblance to Jim.”

Jim’s Irish background had been an asset, and had their relationship worked out, it’s doubtful anyone would have ever guessed. What’s more, his father’s middle name had been Thomas. Thinking of the Patrick family, she felt a wave of amusement and sorrow; they had been a lively bunch to be around, and were disappointed when she and Jim discreetly met with them to admit their dilemma, and that they were divorcing.

“At first glance, Kyle did look like Jim,” she told her father. “But all you have to do is compare his baby pictures with Hugh’s, or have them stand side by side now....” She bit her lip. “That’s why I was so upset when I first heard he was here. Dad, he’s going to know the instant he sees the boy.”

Her father struck the coffee table with his fist. “Good! I hope it knocks his feet out from under him.”

“Prison did that more than enough.”

“Hey, you tried to tell him, but he acted the stubborn mule!”

“And here for a moment I’d begun to suspect you were plotting to get us back together.”

He did well at ignoring her gentle sarcasm. “One has nothing to do with the other. Only, what if I was? You two were nuts about each other. Don’t tell me feelings that strong die easily?”

Her father was turning into a sweetheart in his senior years. Potentially a troublemaker where her head and heart were concerned, but a sweetheart. “Do you hear what you’re saying? One minute you sound as if you believe he did deserve to go to prison, and the next you’re aglow with the idea of a family reunion.” When her father guiltily avoided her gaze, she grew more exasperated. “Dad, regardless of what I think, my decisions can’t be based on what I might want. I have to consider Kyle. He’s at a vulnerable stage. How can I announce that his real father missed his birth and all thirteen of his birthdays because of a murder rap?”

“It would be a helluva lot more sensible than what you have been telling him.”

“What? That I’d made a mistake once that had nothing to do with Jim, and that I was sorry for shortchanging him? That’s the truth.”

“Is it? Hugh was a mistake?”

“You know who I was referring to,” Taylor said with a speaking look. “In any case, Kyle has taken our divorce well.”

“Give him a bit more credit. He might take the rest well, too.”

“You’re romanticizing things again. All he’ll hear is that I lied to him—and that I’ve been a hypocrite because I’ve always been hard on him when he’s lied to me.” She exhaled as a whole swarm of possibilities spawned to attack her conscience. “I don’t know who’s going to end up being more upset—Kyle, Hugh or Murdock Marsden.”

“I don’t get a spot in this?”

“No. Because you triggered this whole disaster. You know. Dad, I meant what I said before. When Mr. Marsden finds out that my son is also Hugh’s child, he’s going to see a conflict of interest and demand you fire me.”

“Let him try. He’ll have to explain why a cop I fired for excessive behavior is now a valued addition to his crew.”

Good grief! Was there any news that wasn’t a potential land mine? “In other words, any way you look at this, there are going to be explosions going on around here from now on.”

“We’ll cope. You tell Hugh, honey, before he finds out from someone else. Tell him...and Kyle. They need time to get used to the idea before the rest of the community hears about them.”

Taylor saw a bigger hurdle. “You swore me in, Dad. Redoubt might not have the crime ratio of Detroit, but I have a responsibility to this community. The first thing I need to do is to get downtown and reassure everyone that there’s someone on the job. The rest has waited thirteen-plus years. It will have to wait a few more days.”

It had to.

Her father considered that. “I see your point...and for your sake I hope you have the time, but hurry, Gracie. If either Hugh or Kyle hear about this first, it might cause a break between you—”

Before he could finish there was a slam and a crash upstairs. Both Taylor and her father were startled by the violent sound. Taylor recovered first and hurried upstairs.

“Kyle? Are you okay? Kyle?” His bedroom door was locked. There was no sound coming from beyond the thin plywood, either. “Kyle! I need to know you’re in there, son, otherwise I’m going to have to force the lock.”

“Taylor...you’d better get, down here!” her father called from below.

Something in his voice told her that there was a good reason to put off forcing her way inside. Wondering what else would go wrong today, she hurried downstairs to see that her father had hobbled to the dinette window.

He pointed. “Look.”

Taylor crossed to him and saw her son racing down the road, heading toward town as if a pack of ravenous wild dogs was chasing him. “Heaven help me,” she breathed. “He heard.”

“He’s your son all right, Gracie. You used to be a grade-A sneak, too.”

Did she need this? “Where do you think he’s going?” she asked, already retracing her steps to get the car keys she’d thrown onto the coffee table along with the hat.

“If I was thirteen and had finally found out who my father was...?”

Taylor didn’t wait to hear more, she simply burst out the kitchen door and ran for her father’s truck.

Three

“It wasn’t the smartest thing you could do. But at the same time I don’t blame you. That rooster deserved becoming soup.”

Hugh attached Esmerelda Calderone’s loading receipt to the clipboard on the wall and reached for a brown grocery sack sturdy enough to hold five pounds of chicken scratch. He began scooping from the larger bins framing both sides of the warehouse doors, while trying to shut out the feeble crone’s voice. She might be only their fourth customer of the day, but at the same time she was the fourth to think she had a right to comment upon his return to Redoubt.

“You were always a good boy, Hugh Blackstone. And everyone knows who was the bad hombre when young Marsden died. Bad, bad blood in that one.”

Hugh kept measuring and scooping. Before long the sun was going to be inching into the warehouse; and the temperatures would climb high enough to slow-bake his brains. He hoped the humpbacked woman was gone by then, otherwise he couldn’t guarantee to hold his tongue. As it was, he was tempted to tell her that she should save her breath because he didn’t give a damn what anyone thought anymore.

“How are your grandsons, Mrs. C.?” If he couldn’t stop her one way, at least he could redirect her focus.

She raised an arm that was almost as thin as the handle on the push broom he'd set aside to wait on her. "Eiyeeee. Little Manuel is wonderful. He's with the archdiocese in Philadelphia. Can you believe that? My Emilio's firstborn becoming an important man in the church. As for Roberto —" her expression grew more whimsical "—he's now Mr. Rob at the Crimson Curl in San Francisco and paints people's hair purple and green. A strange boy. I think maybe chickens are easier to raise."

She could say that again. Hugh didn't weigh the sack he'd filled almost full. It would register way over, but he knew the old woman lived on social security and what her kids could afford to give her on the side, so he simply taped the sack as though that was normal procedure. Maybe Blackstone Feed and Supplies would go bankrupt, but it wouldn't be as a result of giving away a few cents worth of extra grain.

"That should fix you up. Let me put this into your truck, and I'll help you off the dock," he told her.

After setting her purchase on the front seat of the dilapidated vehicle, he took hold of the crone's tiny waist and lifted her from the concrete platform. She tittered like a schoolgirl as she hurried into the truck, her dark eyes twinkling with delight.

"Be careful driving home!" he said, standing back to escape being swiped by the closing door.

"Hmph. Been driving for sixty-three years. Should know the way by now."

No doubt, but she'd never gone more than ten miles per hour, Hugh thought as she inched the old relic away from the dock. As he wondered how many people had suffered wrecks or nervous breakdowns from driving behind her, he raised a hand in answer to her wave into her sideview mirror.

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