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**Vintage** *SUPER*  
*ROMANCE*

**Somebody's  
Baby**

TARA TAYLOR QUINN

# Tara Taylor Quinn

## Somebody's Baby

### Аннотация

Caroline Prater: A lost twin. A widow. A pregnant woman. When she discovers she has a twin living in an Arizona town called Shelter Valley, Caroline Prater decides to go there. Pregnant and a widow, she leaves her Kentucky hometown and drives west. She'll try to connect with her twin sister, Phyllis Sheffield. And she'll seek out John Strickland, the father of her baby—if only to let him know. John is a well-known architect, a still-grieving widower who's settled in Shelter Valley. He and Caroline met six weeks earlier when he traveled to Kentucky....Caroline's waiting for the right moment to approach Phyllis, unsure whether her unsuspecting twin will welcome her presence. And she develops a deeper relationship with John—but that's just for the baby's sake. Or is it?

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## **“John, I’m pregnant.”**

He sat back and looked at the bare wall opposite him. He was mistakenly caught in someone else’s life. He had to be.

“Did you hear me?” Caroline Prater’s voice, though soft, seemed to grate.

“I’m sorry.” He turned to look at her. “What did you say?”

“I said I’m pregnant.”

Uh-huh. Well. What did he do now? “I, uh, I’m sorry,” he told her. “I don’t really know what to say.”

“I had to tell you. You have a right to know.”

This was a right?

“Aren’t you going to ask if it’s yours?”

His eyes met hers. Their brown depths were as luminous as he remembered them. Her slim, strong, perfectly curved body was pretty impressive, but it was those eyes that had captivated him that cold December night in Kentucky. What, six weeks ago?

“I’m assuming you wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t.”

Dear Reader,

Whether you’ve been to Shelter Valley before or find yourself here for a first visit—welcome! It’s never too late to join us in this town—a home away from home for many readers around the world. Shelter Valley has become a place of refuge, of hope and happiness, of new beginnings, of strength through adversity, of life.

If you're here for the first time, don't worry. So is Caroline Prater. Join this intelligent but uneducated farm girl as she comes to town with a big heart...and some shocking secrets. You'll travel with her from her home in Kentucky, find a boardinghouse, meet the residents of Caroline's new town. And if you've been here before, I think you'll enjoy seeing the world of Shelter Valley through her eyes. You'll meet old friends and find out what they're up to, how they've fared since you saw them last. Pretty much everyone you've met in Shelter Valley appears in *Somebody's Baby*.

Don't let me give you the impression that this is going to be a lighthearted romp through town. It's not. Caroline and John and the rest of the Shelter Valley residents are living life—real life—with its ups and downs, its fears and hardships. They ask questions of themselves and each other, the same questions we all ask. Hard questions that don't always have answers. Certainly not easy answers...

So come to Shelter Valley! We're waiting. With refuge and hope, the promise of happiness, the possibility of new beginnings and—most of all—with the belief that love truly is the greatest thing of all.

Tara Taylor Quinn

I love to hear from my readers. You can reach me at P.O. Box 13584, Mesa, Arizona 85216 or through my Web site at [www.tarataylorquinn.com](http://www.tarataylorquinn.com).

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## Tara Taylor Quinn



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For all the members of my family, blood and otherwise, who manage to hang on through all my life's changes and love me, regardless. Who accept my love for them, regardless. You've shown me the real life strength of love—a knowledge I now share with the world.

# THE RESIDENTS OF SHELTER VALLEY

Will Parsons: Dean of Montford University.

Becca Parsons: Mayor of Shelter Valley, wife of Will.

Bethany Parsons: Daughter of Becca and Will.

Ben Sanders: Husband of Tory, cousin of Sam Montford.

Tory Sanders: Wife of Ben.

Alex Sanders: Daughter of Ben, stepdaughter of Tory.

Phyllis Christine Sanders: Daughter of Ben and Tory.

Randi Foster: Sister of Will Parsons, married to Zack Foster.

Manages women's athletic department at Montford.

Zack Foster: Veterinarian. Husband of Randi.

Cassie Montford: Veterinarian. Married to Sam Montford.

Sam Montford: Descended from the founder of the town.

Married to Cassie.

James Montford: Father of Sam, married to Carol.

Mariah Montford: Adopted daughter of Sam and Cassie.

Phyllis Sheffield: Psychologist. Prominent in psychology department at Montford. Married to Matt Sheffield.

Matt Sheffield: Married to Phyllis. Works in theater at Montford University.

Calvin and Clarissa Sheffield: Twin children of Phyllis and Matt.

Beth Richards: Found refuge for herself and her son after escaping abusive ex-husband. Married to Greg Richards.

Greg Richards: Sheriff of Shelter Valley. Married to Beth.

Bonnie Neilson: Sister of Greg. Runs local day care. Married to Keith Neilson.

Katie Neilson: Daughter of Bonnie and Keith.

Martha Moore: Friend of Becca Parsons. Married to David Cole Marks, minister.

Ellen Moore Hanaran: Martha's daughter, married to Aaron.

John Strickland: Architect. Widower. Originally from Chicago.

Caroline Prater: New to Shelter Valley...

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# CHAPTER ONE

“ARE YOU CRAZY, Ma? You’ve lived in Grainville your whole life!” Caroline Prater could hear her son clearly, even with the phone held at arm’s length. “You can’t just pack up and move across the country all by yourself! And where is Shelter Valley, anyway? I’ve never even heard of the place. This is nuts! I knew I should never have left home....”

“It’s in Arizona, Jess.” She moved the phone close enough to speak into the mouthpiece, but kept the earpiece as far from her head as she could.

Sitting on the front porch of the little white farmhouse she’d lived in for almost eighteen years, Caroline snuggled more deeply into her old winter coat and pushed gently against the ground with one booted foot, setting the aged rocker in motion—and waited for Jesse to slow down enough to be able to listen to her. At not quite thirty-five, she was far too young to have a son who was a freshman at Harvard.

And way too old to be in her current predicament.

“What about Gram and Papa? And Grandma and Grandpa? You can’t just leave them....” Her parents. And Randy’s. She shored up her defenses against the twinge of guilt as Jesse’s words hit their mark. Randy’s parents had taken his death hard. He’d been their only son. Seeing her seemed to make things worse. And they had four daughters in Grainville—four sons-in-law.

They'd be fine.

But her parents... Caroline looked out over the slush-covered two-acre yard in front of the house. She was going to have to get out the plow to smooth the potholes in the two dirt paths that served as a driveway or she'd never get her little and embarrassingly old pickup out of the gate.

She was going to miss her parents terribly, especially her mother, but there were things about her parents—about her father—that Jesse didn't know. And something about her that no one knew.

“Why didn't you say anything when I was home at Christmas, Ma?”

“Because I hadn't made up my mind then.”

“It was only a week ago!”

Their first Christmas without Randy had been hard on all of them. It was harder on Caroline than anyone knew. Not only had she just lost the man she'd loved since childhood, but she'd suddenly become far too aware that, other than Jesse, none of the family with whom she'd been surrounded all her life were actually related to her. That had never been an issue before.

Jesse went on for another five minutes, reminding her about her responsibilities to the small cattle farm she and Randy had worked for the nearly eighteen years they'd been married.

He was right about that.

And he talked about her friends. All women who were resigned, most of them happily, to living out the lives that had

been mapped for them in Grainville since the day they were born. The girls she'd gone to school with who'd stayed in town after graduation were married, with high-school-aged children.

Her son reminded her how unsafe it was for a woman to travel alone these days. Since Randy was killed when the tractor he was riding had exploded last summer, Jesse had taken to warning her about everything. Mostly she only half listened—just in case he said something she needed to hear, although that wasn't usually the case. Who did he think had been taking care of her—and him—all his life?

“I can't believe you aren't listening to me!”

Taking off a mitten, she glanced at her nails. They'd need to be fixed before she dared leave this town. “I'm listening, Jess.”

“No, you aren't.” His tone was filled with disgust. “I'm just gonna have to come home.”

“No, you aren't.” She didn't raise her voice as she repeated his words back to him. She didn't need to; Jesse knew the tone.

At seventeen, Jesse Randall Prater, one of the youngest freshmen at Harvard, was intelligent beyond his years, and also emotionally young. She'd been living with his outbursts of frustration most of his life. And giving them the credibility they deserved—which was none.

He huffed. And then again.

As she stared down at the peeling wood floor of the porch, a strand of auburn hair fell forward over her shoulder. It was clean. And that was about all she could say for it. Panic filtered down

from her throat to her stomach. She couldn't afford some fancy hair salon.

And she was never going to pass for anything other than what she was—an uneducated country bumpkin—if she showed up in Shelter Valley looking like this. Her clothes were all wrong. Old jeans. Homemade shirts. Her makeup, which she'd worn maybe three times in the past year, had come from the grocery store in town. And she didn't own a single pair of shoes that hadn't, at some time or other, been in contact with cow manure.

"I don't get it, Ma. There's something you aren't telling me, isn't there?"

Caroline tensed. Her smart boy was back. It was the moment she'd been waiting for. And dreading.

I'm prepared, she reminded herself. Just do it like you practiced it last night. And the night before that. And the night before...

"Yes, my new cell number, for one." She rattled it off. "If you need me for anything in the next week, until I get settled and perhaps have a more permanent number, you can reach me on that."

He repeated the number. "I'm glad you got a cell," he added. "You're there all by yourself, driving back and forth to town with no one at home to know if you made it okay. You need a cell phone. And with the extra field we planted last year, you can afford it."

"Jess, I'm moving."

He swore again. And in the space of a second switched from maturing young man to little boy. “You can’t move, Ma! Grainville’s our home!”

Perhaps, but she couldn’t dwell on that. Not if she was going to be able to leave.

“It’s a town with a house. A mostly empty house.”

He was quiet again. Caroline, desperately needing to fill the silence, to tell him the rest of why she’d called, didn’t know what to say. She’d forgotten all her well-rehearsed lines. Her little boy was hurting and she was trapped by life’s circumstances and couldn’t help him.

More trapped than anyone knew.

“So, what is it you aren’t telling me?” His words, when they finally came, were soft, compassionate.

Caroline’s recently rehearsed lines popped into her chaotic brain. “You know I’m adopted.”

“Yeah. So?”

The phone wasn’t the right way to do this. It was, however, her best shot at getting through while standing her ground. An uneducated country woman, Caroline understood her role—to be accommodating and obedient. And fell into it all too easily.

“Jess? Hear me out, okay? Without judgment or commentary?”

A pause. Then he said, “Sorry—yeah, I’ll listen.”

“Remember when I told you last fall about going through all the boxes in the cellar?” That first month after he’d left for school

she'd thought she was going to die. Had prayed to die. Newly widowed with her only child gone, she'd never felt so alone. Her life seemed pointless, as if it might as well be over. Burying herself in memories, sorting them, preserving them, had been her only way to stay alive.

"Yeah. You sent me that comic Dad drew in high school." Randy had only been dead a couple of months before Jesse left for college. But the rift between him and the boy who looked so much like him had been in place long before that. They'd just been so completely different....

"I took some things to Gram one day, too, some old pictures. And after seeing them, she brought up a box from her cellar and gave it to me."

"What was in it?"

Caroline gave a shove against the ground, scraped the almost threadbare fabric of her jeans with one finger, willing her queasy stomach to calm. "She wouldn't tell me, wouldn't let me look until I got home, wouldn't talk about it at all. It was little—an old stationery box." It had pink roses all over it. Caroline couldn't imagine her mother ever having written a letter on a piece of paper covered with pink roses.

"So what was in it?" Jesse's voice was quiet now. But it still sounded as though he was waiting to take charge.

"A letter. And a ring."

Glancing at the bare hand growing pink with cold, Caroline studied the ring she'd worn since that day—although normally,

when she was with other people, it was on a chain around her neck.

“It’s the most beautiful piece of jewelry I’ve ever seen,” she told her son. “A sapphire. Set in gold.”

“Where’d it come from?” Jesse asked. And then, before she could answer, he burst out, “If it’s so great, why did Gram have it stuffed away in some old box in the basement?”

“The letter—and ring—were from my birth mother.” Caroline blinked as her eyes blurred, still staring at that ring. Jesse was going to think her a fool. Her father—and Randy’s—would surely agree with him. And maybe she was.

Still...

“Who was she? Some teenager who got knocked up?”

“Jesse Randall Prater!” Caroline’s cold cheeks burned, every nerve beneath her skin tensing. Did her son think of her with that same disrespect?

And if so, God help her, what would he think of her now?

“Well, isn’t that why you had me, Ma? Because you knew what it felt like to be given away and you couldn’t bear to do that to anyone else?”

She’d forgotten he knew that. It wasn’t a part of her life that she talked about—it wasn’t part of the reason she normally gave. But once, when Jesse had been about fourteen, and his father had taken his own insecurities out on his son, leaving the child feeling insignificant and unwanted, she’d told him her secret. That she hadn’t just kept him because she’d loved his father and

wanted to get married. Or because his maternal grandparents, who'd never been able to have children of their own, were fully supportive of their sixteen-year-old pregnant daughter, offering to help wherever they could to make it possible for her to keep her child. She'd kept him because she didn't ever want him to feel unworthy of life's basic necessities—food, shelter and unconditional love.

She'd never, for one second, regretted the decision. But there were times when being Jesse's mother hurt. A lot.

"I'm sorry, Ma." The apology came after only a minute of silence. She'd have waited ten if that was what it took. "You're just freaking me out with all this going-away stuff."

Jesse was scared. So was she. Terrified.

"My birth mother was well into her forties when she had me. My father was in his early fifties. She'd gone through menopause. They thought pregnancy was impossible."

"Wow," Jesse said softly. "You'd think, being that old, they'd have been able to provide for a kid."

Pulling both knees to her chest, Caroline laid her head on them, the worn denim soft against her cheeks as she gazed out at the yard that had barely changed since she'd moved there at seventeen. The old red maple tree was bigger. But it had already been huge. They'd put up a new fence ten years before. And the mailbox had been replaced when the old one was knocked down by a snowplow when Jesse was still a toddler.

"They did provide for one," she told her son. "They just

couldn't manage two.”

“Two!” His voice cracked. “You’re a twin?” She almost smiled. It hadn’t taken long for her genius son to figure that out.

“Yes.”

She really should go inside where it was warm. But it was so empty. Unless she counted the memories that wouldn’t leave her alone.

“Cool! Two Mas.” He sounded like he was grinning. Caroline was grateful for the diversion, even knowing it would be short-lived. “Wait. Was the other kid a girl or a boy?”

“A girl.”

“Were you identical?”

“No.” Not that the letter had said one way or the other. Caroline had found out for herself, from pictures in newspaper articles on the Internet about her very successful twin. Her mother had given her the box at the end of September and within a week she’d joined a couple of Internet tracking services and had a folder on her computer filled with information.

“Damn!” Jesse said, quickly adding, “Uh, darn—sorry, Ma.”

“You’re a freshman in college, Jess,” Caroline said, walking over to the porch rail, wondering how many more years it would stand up to Kentucky’s weather. “Certainly old enough to make your own vocabulary choices.”

“It’s just so fantastic.” His voice was more that of her intense little boy than the man he was quickly becoming. “I wonder how they chose which one of you to keep.”

“Birth order,” she told him. “They kept the first. I was born second.”

Silence fell on the line.

“This had to be pretty hard on you, huh?” he asked a moment later. “Here I am, going on like some kind of jerk, not even thinking how this must’ve made you feel. Being the one given away and all.”

“It’s okay, Jess,” she told him, hoping that someday the words would be true. “I’ve always known I was given away.”

“Yeah, but knowing that one was kept—”

A chill swept through Caroline. She brushed some twigs off the top of the chipped porch rail and wrapped her arms around her midriff.

“And there I go again, putting my foot right in it,” Jesse said, bringing a slow grin to his mother’s face.

“So...does this, uh, talk about Shelter whatever have to do with the letter?”

“Yes.” With the thumb of her left hand she reached for the sapphire on her ring finger. According to the letter from Caroline’s birth mother, her twin had been given a ring, too. An opal. Apparently their mother had liked jewelry. “Her name is Phyllis Langford Sheffield. She’s a professor of Psychology at Montford University in Shelter Valley.”

“She married?”

“Yes. To a man named Matt Sheffield, Fine Arts Technical Coordinator at Montford.” She wasn’t too sure about her brother-

in-law. She'd found an article about him, too. A disturbing one. Several years before Mr. Sheffield had taken the job at Montford, he'd been charged with statutory rape and sentenced to prison. He'd allegedly impregnated one of his students. That was a piece of news she was definitely not going to share with her son.

"They have any kids?"

"Two." She thought of the grainy newspaper photo she had in her wallet. "Twins. A boy and a girl. They're three."

"Damn!" Jesse said again. "Must run in the genes, huh?"

Her heart gave a little flip at his mention of genetics. "Yeah."

"Okay, I can see why a trip to Shelter Valley's important," Jesse said, almost magnanimously. "I'll be home for spring recess the last week of March. We can go then."

Pulling open the buttons on her coat, Caroline went inside, letting the screen door fall shut behind her. Randy had bought her year-round windows for the door a few Christmases ago, so she could leave the big old wooden door open, even in winter, and see out into the yard.

"I'm moving to Shelter Valley, Jess. This weekend."

"No way, Ma! You can't! You're being ridiculous. I get it about wanting to see your sister. Hell, I even get that you're feeling lonely, what with Dad dying and me gone almost right after, but you can't just up and move! What about the farm?"

"I'm going to hang on to it for a while. At least until I see how I like Shelter Valley. It's all paid for and the taxes are practically nothing...."

“We have cattle, Ma,” Jesse said, as though speaking to a child. “They aren’t just gonna wait around to see how you like life on the other side of the country. And we sure as hell can’t afford to pay someone to look after them for us.”

Us. It sounded so good. Too good. Because it wasn’t true anymore. Jesse was off starting a life of his own. And Caroline had her own life to tend to. Whether she wanted to or not. She had some consequences to pay.

“I sold the cattle.”

“You what?”

Even with the phone at arm’s length, she could hear Jesse’s yelp. She’d wanted to talk to him about the cattle—had thought he deserved to be a part of the decision—but she knew he’d talk her out of selling. And going.

And sister aside, she had to go. There was more reason to go to Shelter Valley than she could tell her son. He’d have to know eventually, her saner side kept reminding her.

But there was only so much she could handle at a time. And right now, that didn’t include Jesse’s likely reaction to her other news.

“I sold the cattle to give me enough money to live off until I get settled.”

“I can’t believe this!” He was sighing and whining and groaning all at once. “How do you expect to support yourself?” he asked. “You never even graduated from high school!”

“I got my equivalency years ago, you know that.”

“And that’ll get you a great career for sure,” he said sarcastically.

In the tiny kitchen she’d lived in her entire adult life, Caroline poured a cup of coffee into her favorite mug, careful to miss the chipped part of the rim as she took a gulp.

“I’m planning to enroll in college,” she said quietly, trying to control the fear and the doubts clutching at her heart. There was no one else on earth she’d have dared tell. “The semester doesn’t start for another two weeks.”

“You have to apply, Ma.” Jesse’s voice was equally soft. And loving.

“I did.”

“And?”

“I’ve been accepted, Jess.”

This time the silence was almost unbearable. With a shaking hand, Caroline lifted the mug again, took another sip of coffee that had been kept too hot by the old warming plate she’d been using with the old metal pot since high school. And burned her mouth.

She poured the stuff out. She shouldn’t be drinking it, anyway. Not for the next eight months, at least. Although she’d drunk coffee when she’d been pregnant with Jesse.

“Congratulations, Ma.” The pride in Jesse’s voice was her undoing.

“AH, MERI, HERE I AM AGAIN...”

With an embarrassed look, John Strickland slid into the

bubbling spa in his professionally landscaped private and walled yard. He leaned back and closed his eyes. It wasn't late, just dark. He'd had a long day. But his inner vision wasn't restful. Meri was there, her memory filling his mind. She was dressed in his favorite red gown, diamonds glittering at her throat and wrist, laughing.

And then not.

Now the glittering came from the lights of the fire truck, police cars, the ambulance. Meri was lying inside the ambulance, wearing the red gown. But she wasn't laughing.

"Breathe," he said aloud. "Breathe." He could almost feel her struggle for air.

And then he opened his eyes. As long as he opened his eyes, she'd still be breathing.

"I know I promised we'd quit meeting like this." His words fell into the not-quite-freezing Shelter Valley January night, becoming part of the air around him, floating aimlessly in space. Just as he was.

"I'm supposed to be at dinner at Will's," he told his wife, as he imagined her sitting across from him. "Instead, here I am again, forgoing life to sit and talk to a dead woman."

A cold breeze wafted over the water. And his face.

"I need a drink."

He hoped to God his neighbors couldn't hear him over the bubbling water. Not that there was much chance anyone would be lounging around a backyard in what, for Shelter Valley, was

considered a major cold front. Any time you could see your breath, it made the news.

“I’m still traveling more than you liked.” He squinted at the empty space across from him, an idiot who was weak and disappointing himself even as he gave in to the overwhelming need to connect with the woman who’d left his life more than six years before.

He wiped at a trickle of sweat making its way from his forehead down between his eyes.

“Business is good. Finished another signature Strickland design last week.”

The water was hot, but it didn’t warm the blood in his veins. Nothing was going to do that. He’d resigned himself to the truth.

He hadn’t told Meri about the capitol building dedication he’d attended in Kentucky the first week of December. Hadn’t talked to her at all over the holidays, keeping his promise to her—and to himself.

“I’m still working on my own,” he reported aloud. “I have to commission some of the menial stuff, but I’ve been able to hang tough and not give in to the pressure to commercialize the Strickland trademark.”

She’d cautioned him about that often. Said the world would be better off with fewer Strickland buildings if the ones it had were pure Strickland and not some watered-down version.

He currently had a small office in Shelter Valley with draftspeople and clerical staff, and another in Chicago. Most of

his work he did out of his home.

“I have two state capitol buildings coming up in the next year. One on the East Coast, one on the West.”

She'd want the details. So, as his butt turned numb, buffeted by jets while he sat on a cement bench, John gave them to her.

His backyard was really quite something. On one side was an arboretum shaded by a couple of olive trees that he'd paid a bundle to have brought in mature. From there, desert landscaping stones led down to a brick divider and then grass lush and green enough to have been on a tournament golf course. The grass led around to the wall in the back, where flowering bougainvillea climbed randomly, covering every available inch. In front of the grass was a negative-edge pool that appeared to be fed by a waterfall from the big boulder that flanked it. Off to the right was a gazebo with wet bar and stools and a gas barbecue. He'd had them put in when he bought the house.

He'd never used them.

“I broke off my engagement.” He'd meant to tell her that right off. But he'd needed some time alone with Meri before he brought another woman between them. Even if it was only to tell her there was no other woman between them.

John took a deep breath, ducked under the water, blew out the breath and came up for air. Pushing the hair off his forehead, he blinked and sat on the other side of the spa. There was still time to get inside, take a quick shower and get over to Will's before Becca served dinner. He could make some excuse for having missed

the appetizer and drinks portion of the evening.

“I’ve tried, Meri.” The pain and hopelessness in his voice scared him. Glancing at the star-filled blackness above him, he searched, as he had countless times, for some sign that he was being heard. That there was meaning to his existence, guidance from something stronger than his weak and pathetic self. “I just don’t know how to live without you.”

Oh, he had his moments. Times when his mind was preoccupied with other things and he actually behaved like a fully functioning, relatively normal human being. But they were only moments.

“I hurt Lauren.”

But not as much as he would’ve hurt her if he’d married her and then remained committed to Meredith.

“You’d have liked her.” John had liked her.

Pressure built in his head. He was getting too hot. He’d move inside. Soon. Get himself a drink. And maybe throw a frozen dinner in the microwave. Though he was relatively skilled in the kitchen, he didn’t feel like cooking. Too much trouble for too little benefit.

“Martha Moore got married.”

She was the first woman John had dated after Meri’s death. He’d had a lot of talks with his wife about that. The day he’d met Martha. Whenever he’d passed her on the street. After the time—the only time—he’d been intimate with her.

And on the night last year, when he’d heard that the young

woman who'd been raped in Shelter Valley was Martha's nineteen-year-old daughter, Ellen.

“Shot a thirty on the back nine today. Not my best, but still under par.”

The spa, operating on an automatic timer, shut off. John got out, cooling off while he walked over to push the button again, then slid back into the dark depths, watching as his body slowly disappeared from sight. He needed a little more time before he rejoined the living.

Even if it was in name only.

He fought the urge to close his eyes and rest. He couldn't risk picking up the inner vision where it had left off. He wasn't going to let Meri stop breathing.

## CHAPTER TWO

IT TOOK HER two and a half days to get to the Arizona border. And another five and a half hours to reach Shelter Valley. Or, at any rate, to take the turnoff for the town she couldn't wait to see. She passed Wal-Mart. Remembered reading about the kidnapping and subsequent rape that had taken place nearby the year before.

Felt again the tug at her heart as she pictured the town ahead, almost as though these people were already part of her. She wondered if Phyllis knew the girl who'd been raped. Or if John Strickland did...

That was when Caroline yanked the car onto a deserted-looking dirt track, turned off the ten-year-old half-size pickup with its brand-new locking bed cover—under which she'd packed most of her cherished possessions and the few articles of clothing she'd thought the least offensive—and sat.

Was it legal to sit on the side of the road in a nonemergency situation in Arizona? That was something she could check as soon as she got settled someplace and was able to hook up her computer. The cobbled-together piece of equipment was buckled into the seat next to her. Next to Jesse, that machine was the most important thing in the world to her. Though she'd had different versions of it through the years as various parts grew obsolete and were replaced, either using funds saved from

egg money or by begging the library to give her cast-offs, the computer had long been her very best friend. Many times, it had felt like her only friend.

But soon she was going to be dealing with more than just a screen she could manage at will. Up ahead were real people.

And at least one of them wasn't going to be happy to see her. With a hand on her stomach, Caroline reached for her journal, a companion she referred to often and turned to the page she hadn't read since the night she'd made the entry.

Saturday, January 1, 2005

I took the test today. It told me what I already knew....

With a finger marking the page, she closed the book. She'd written those words only a week ago. But there were more. Another entry she hadn't dared to look back on.

She reached for the sapphire ring she'd put on a chain around her neck before leaving Grainville. It was there, hidden beneath her blouse, reminding her who she was.

She wasted a few minutes staring out over the unusual plants scattered across the desert to her right. She'd come this far. She could do this. Continue on, into town. Face whatever waited there. Begin her new life.

She deserved the chance.

Straightening her shoulders, Caroline opened the book again, flipped back several pages.

And forced herself to read.

Monday, November 22, 2004

I want to die. It would be so much more expedient to die. I went from being a child to being Randy's wife and Jesse's mom and now, suddenly, unexpectedly, I'm neither. Who am I, then? I ask and ask, and find there are no answers. And more frightening yet, I ask my heart who I want to be—and still can't find answers.

I've been married. Given it all I had. Imagined Randy and me in our eighties on the porch swing, smiling and trying to listen through our respective hearing aids to Jesse's grandchildren playing around the vibrant flower beds set off by a lush green yard. In this vision, the swing is treated birch, soft and supple, the porch floor solid oak. The house newly painted pristine white with forest-green shutters. And the porch rail strong enough to withstand any kind of weather.

Just like my real porch rail, my visions are chipped and faded, and any possibility of having them come true is lost forever. I will never, no matter what, grow old with Jesse's father and, with him, watch Jesse's grandchildren at play.

And what else do I have to offer? How can I change my future? I have no money. And no training that would allow me to make money. I can run the farm by myself for now, but even I know I won't always be able to do that.

My heart is empty. There is no joy. No excitement or anticipation. I've lived my best years and

Oh, God, what am I going to do?

Tears fell on the page, bringing Caroline out of that heartache and into the present. She held her breath, the sobs threatening

to break free. She wasn't going to lose control now. She just couldn't.

She could turn the page. Travel to Frankfort, Kentucky. To the dedication of a building that had been designed by a Shelter Valley architect, and the political gathering that had been part of the proceedings. She could read what happened next.

Instead, Caroline hid the book in her glove compartment. It would be safe there. Safe from harm. And she would be safe from it.

Starting the truck, thanking it silently for cooperating on the first turn of the key, Caroline backed so slowly she barely kicked up any dust. She clunked the old vehicle into gear and drove toward Shelter Valley.

Before she could worry about starting college at the age of almost thirty-five, or coming face-to-face with a twin sister she'd never met, before she looked for a new home, or a bed to sleep in that night, she had something else to do.

Some news to deliver.

The town came into view. A streetlight glistened. Houses dotted the side of the road, growing more dense, and she saw her first Shelter Valley citizen, an older woman, carrying a plastic grocery bag, walking a dog without a leash. Her stomach fluttered with comfort. And then panic.

She thought she might throw up. She hadn't thrown up in years.

She watched for Mojave Street. And promised herself that

whatever lay ahead, whatever his response, she could accept it.

She pulled into the driveway. Knocked on the door. Waited. Knocked again. And eventually returned to her truck. What did she do now? Every single time she'd imagined the beginning of her new life, this stop had been first—as though nothing else could happen until it was done.

It was stupid to sit there. He might not be home for days. Or maybe he'd be back in an hour.

The journal in her glove compartment drew her, as though the answer to her current dilemma lay in the revelations she'd decided to avoid.

Ignoring the impulse, she waited another half hour. Reached for the key in the ignition. And ended up at the glove compartment instead.

Wednesday, December 1, 2004

I read an article this morning and I can't think of anything else. An architect from Shelter Valley is going to be in Frankfort this weekend to dedicate a building he designed. His name is John Strickland. I read in an old Shelter Valley newspaper last week that Will Parsons hired an architect named John Strickland to design the new classroom building at Montford University. Will's the president of Montford. He hired Phyllis!

Oh, God, I know I'm crazy, but I have to go! This man might actually know my twin sister!

JOHN SHOT ONE HELL of a game of golf Saturday afternoon. Probably one of his best. Meredith would have teased

him about his bragging. And later, she would've congratulated him with a kiss filled with pride—and a passion that never seemed to lose its urgency. He congratulated himself instead with a mug of beer at the bar, joining the other guys who didn't have wives and children to hurry home to. There were three of them that afternoon. John and two men whose wives had taken their children to the zoo in Phoenix to do research on a school project involving apes.

Sometimes, as much as he loved the peace and sense of home he found in Shelter Valley, John hated the place.

Trying to concentrate on positive thoughts, he pulled his Cadillac into the driveway of his two-year-old ranch-style custom home to find someone there ahead of him. It was a testimony to the state of his mind—of his life—that the surprise visitor brought a tinge of anticipation. For the next few moments, anyway, he wasn't going to be home alone trying to find ways to entertain himself during the remaining hours until the world once again became a workplace full of challenging issues and busy people. People demanding the kind of interaction he was capable of delivering...

A particularly telling testimony, considering the fact that the vehicle in his driveway probably belonged to the new yard guy. He'd never seen the old and rusty pickup before.

Parking to the side of the truck in the double driveway, he got out and approached just as the driver's window was lowering.

“Can I help y—”

The last word stuck in his throat. The driver wasn't his landscaper. It wasn't even a guy.

The woman stepped down from her truck. She was wearing jeans, a blue turtleneck, a worn-looking thickly knitted beige cardigan and the same brown leather boots she'd had on the first time he met her. She held out a hand with freshly polished nails. "John? I don't know if you remember me. I'm Caroline Prater."

He remembered.

"Caroline, hi." Fresh from the golf course, he wanted to shower and change out of the golf slacks and slightly sticky sweater he was wearing. The sun was shining as brightly as usual from clear blue skies. And although the temperature was only about sixty degrees, it had been hot out on the golf course.

"You don't seem pleased to see me, and I don't blame—"

"No!" He cut her off. Took her hand. It was as rough as he remembered. Working hands, she'd said. Something about that had touched him. "I'm just surprised. Kentucky's a long way off."

"And Shelter Valley is a very small town," she added with a nervous smile. He remembered that about her, too. Her air of uncertainty. As though she wasn't quite sure she was worth the space she took up but was going to occupy it anyway.

Neither of them spoke after that.

"Uh...do you want to come in?" he asked a moment later. Why was she there? Surely not to see him. He'd never given her any indication that he'd expected to see her again.

Of course, with the way she'd vanished while he'd still been

sleeping off the bottle of wine he'd bought them at dinner and then drunk most of himself, she hadn't given him a chance to actually say as much.

Though he rarely used the front entrance himself, he walked her up to the door and unlocked it.

"So what brings you to Shelter Valley?" He hoped the question wasn't as bald as it felt scraping past his throat. She'd passed him in the hall, leaving a brief lily-of-the-valley scent in her wake. Her shampoo, if he remembered correctly.

"I've been accepted at Montford," she told him with a hesitant grin. "I start school in another week."

Oh. Well, good then. She had a reason for being here. Other than him. She'd mentioned, that night in Kentucky, that she'd already applied to college; she'd been unable to attend after high school because she'd married young. Caroline seemed to consider that a pretty big deal. He'd felt a little sorry for her over it.

"Can I get you something to drink? A beer? Or a glass of wine?" More relaxed now, John walked over to the wet bar dividing his formal living room from the dining room he'd never used.

"Do you have a diet soda?"

While she perched on the very edge of one end of the sectional couch, he grabbed a glass, filling it with ice. "You look different," he said, smiling, deciding this might not be such a bad turn of events. Maybe she'd join him for dinner.

They could catch up like old friends, though they hardly knew each other. He could wish her luck with her new scholastic endeavor, and then, if they ever ran into each other in town, they could smile and say hi without some residual awkwardness hanging between them.

Her smile was tenuous. John poured the drink, then carried it over to her, wondering if she'd be able to unclasp the hands in her lap long enough to take hold of it.

"It's your hair," he said.

"I...had it shaped. And conditioned." She took the glass. But not before he noticed how badly her hand was shaking.

He'd never met anyone like her. One minute confident enough to walk up to a total stranger at a political gathering and introduce herself, and then the next, so insecure she barely allowed herself to breathe.

"You left it long, though," he said, returning to the bar for a can of beer. He didn't usually drink more than one on any given day, but what the hell. He was still recovering from his vigil with Meri the other night.

"Yeah." She took a sip. Sort of. He wasn't sure any liquid actually passed her lips.

"I like it."

"Thanks."

"These days so many women keep their hair short." Meredith had been one of them.

"It's easier to deal with."

That was what Meri had said.

“I like it long.”

“Thanks.”

She sipped again. John took a seat and did the same. She watched him openly—yet said nothing.

“Did you want something from me?” he finally asked.

“No!”

Well, that was clear.

“I...just...”

For the first time since she'd arrived, she wouldn't meet his gaze. Frowning, John sat forward. He'd thought dinner would be nice, but not if it was going to get complicated. He just didn't have what it took to deal with complicated.

Hell, based on the way he'd broken his promise to himself and run back to his memories of Meredith the other night, he didn't have what it took to deal with living.

“Well, it was nice of you to stop by.” He hadn't really intended the words but was relieved when he heard them. Yes, better just to end this and get on with the boring evening ahead. There were no surprises in boring.

“John, I'm pregnant.”

He sat back, the half-empty can of beer resting on his lap, loosely cupped by both hands, and looked at the bare wall opposite him. He was mistakenly caught in someone else's life.

“Did you hear me?” The woman's voice, though soft, seemed to grate.

“I’m sorry.” He turned to look at her. “What did you say?” The beer can was soothingly cool to the touch. He lifted it, drank. And kept drinking until it was empty.

“I said I’m pregnant.”

Uh-huh. Well. What did he do now? The beer was gone. He crushed the can between his fingers, just to confirm that.

“I, uh, I’m sorry,” he said. “I’ve never been in this position before. I don’t really know what to say.”

Mostly, he didn’t know how to make sure he didn’t feel.

“I had to tell you,” she said. “You have a right to know.”

This was a right?

“Aren’t you going to ask if it’s yours?”

His eyes met hers. Their green depths were as luminous as he remembered them. Her slim, strong, perfectly curved body was pretty impressive, but it was those eyes that had captivated him that cold December night in Kentucky. What, six weeks ago?

“I’m assuming you wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t.”

He couldn’t breathe properly. The cords in his neck tightened; his skin was hot. He wanted her out of his house. Now.

He wanted her never to have arrived. He wanted never to have met her.

“I could be lying. Or I could have done this on purpose, to trap you. I orchestrated our meeting, after all. I could’ve had a carefully thought-out plan—you know, the lonely widow trying to get out of a tiny little town that’s suffocating her.”

Some small part of him that was outside, watching the horrific

scene unfold, could almost have smiled—if he hadn't been so terrified.

“Yes.” He looked her straight in the eye. “You could have.”

“I didn't.”

“I didn't think you had. You aren't the artificial type.”

She nodded, her lips tremulous as she lifted the still-full glass with a shaking hand. He hoped she didn't spill the drink. He didn't think he was up to standing at the moment, let alone going for paper towels.

He'd never felt so awkward in his own home. Or helpless. Lost, yes. Hopeless, yes. But not this.

There were things he should be saying. He just had no idea what they were. He sat there watching her, drawing a complete blank.

“I'm not here to ask anything from you,” she said, after excruciating seconds had turned into even more excruciating minutes.

He appreciated that. John passed the remains of the beer can back and forth between his palms. Her focus followed the movement.

“I just had to tell you.”

It was the second time she'd said that.

She stood, set the glass on the low, square wood table in front of the sectional. “I guess I'll go, then. Thanks for seeing me.”

He was suddenly looking at her back.

“Wait!” John didn't move. He couldn't.

“What?” Her eyes were wide.

“Can you come back? Sit down? It seems like we should talk.”

“Okay.”

She sat.

She wasn't a bad-looking woman. Different than he was used to. She didn't wear makeup. And her clothes were baggy and without any discernible style. But they were clean. And she wore them with a curious and understated grace that was no less powerful for its unobtrusiveness.

“You're pregnant.” John found himself back at the beginning.

“Yes.”

“With...my baby.” The words were so completely foreign to him that he felt stupid saying them.

“Yes.”

Her hand slid down to cradle her stomach.

Oh, God.

She had a baby in there.

His chest cramped as he tried to draw in a breath.

His baby.

He jumped up. Tripped over the table. Threw away his beer can and missed the trash bucket. Leaving the can crumpled on the hardwood floor, he pulled another from the mini refrigerator behind the bar. Popped the lid and drank.

He looked over at her. Tried to figure out his next move. What was right. And best.

All he wanted to do was run. As far as he could.

“I have to take responsibility.” The words came of their own volition, but as soon as he said them, he knew they were right.

“No, you don’t. Really. I’ll be fine. I have plans. A little money put aside. I wasn’t just talking when I said I don’t want anything from you. I really mean it.”

The sincerity in her eyes was unmistakable. An open sincerity that was all the more remarkable because of its contrast to her usually unrevealing expression.

“I’m sure you do,” he said. “But you misunderstood. I don’t have to take responsibility because of you, I have to do it because of me. The point is not negotiable. As you said earlier, I have rights.”

Her chin dropped to her chest.

“Is there another man in the picture?”

“No!” That brought her head up. She looked horrified by the very idea.

He shrugged. “You could’ve met someone between then and now.”

“In six weeks? Over the holidays? In Grainville, Kentucky?” She shook her head with a self-deprecating laugh. “I haven’t met anyone new in my hometown in years! And certainly not a male in my age bracket.”

He wasn’t sorry to hear that. It uncomplicated things a bit.

And then, suddenly, he was hit with a thousand complications at once. Everyone in this town knew him. Would know about this. He was going to have a baby to consider. In his home—at

least part-time. In his life.

While he stood there, his mind wandered to the Little League field he'd become familiar with when he'd been friends with Martha Moore. Her only son, Tim, was one of the town's best hitters.

Would he have a son?

Or a daughter?

He felt a pain that was harsh and physical. He'd said goodbye to this moment six years ago. And before that, had imagined it. He and Meredith holding each other. She had tears in her eyes. He'd touch her belly reverently. They'd kiss....

"John? Are you okay?"

No. He wasn't okay. John wasn't sure how much longer he'd be able to stand there without climbing out of his skin.

"What are your plans?" he asked. "Do you have a place to stay?"

Anger flooded through his pores. But he didn't want to lash out at her.

"I have a computer printout of possibilities. Shelter Valley appears to be a lot like Grainville in that there are plenty of people with big houses who are willing to rent out a room."

He nodded. "There are a couple of boardinghouses, too."

"I saw that. They're more expensive. And really, for now, one room's all I need." She shrugged. Smiled a sad kind of smile. "It's not like I have much stuff."

"Did you sell your house?"

“No.”

He let out a relieved breath. That would have made everything so final.

“My folks are going to take care of the farm for the rest of the year. I’ll decide what to do after that.”

After the baby came.

“Do they know?”

“About the baby?”

What else could there possibly be? John nodded.

“No. My enrolling in college was enough for them to digest.”

He frowned, leaning against the bar as he sipped on the remainder of his beer. “Didn’t they wonder why you came so far just to go to school?”

If, when she’d first appeared, his mind had been functioning, it would’ve occurred to him to wonder the same thing.

Caroline glanced up at him and then immediately away, and John tensed.

“I...spend a lot of time on the Internet—checking out different places.”

Eyes narrowed, John studied her. She’d told him she was pregnant, looking him straight in the eye. And now she wouldn’t look at him at all. Was there another reason she was here? Something her parents knew that he didn’t? Something she didn’t want him to know?

He guessed that if there was, it had to do with him.

And she had been pretty forward about their meeting.

“You told me you couldn’t get pregnant,” he remembered suddenly, straightening.

She nodded, looked at him fully. “I hadn’t had a period since my husband died last summer. The doctor said it wasn’t all that unusual. My system had simply shut down because of the stress. He said it might start back up again. And it might not. In any case, at the time, as far as I knew, it wasn’t working. Chances were pretty slim that it would choose to resume normal activity again a day or two before I met you.”

Her face was dark red when she finished. But during those words her gaze had never wavered.

John crushed his second beer can. Tossed it in the direction of the garbage pail. Thought about taking himself out to the golf course to beat the hell out of some balls.

He felt strangely like crying, something he hadn’t done since the night his beloved wife had died in his arms.

“Do you have a cell phone?” he asked. “Some way I can reach you?”

Caroline fumbled in her homemade purse for a scrap of paper and scribbled the number on it. Then she rose and handed it to him.

He set it on the bar. “Thanks.”

She headed for the door.

“I’ll be in touch,” he said.

He thought she nodded. Hoped to God she wasn’t crying. And couldn’t wait to hear the door shut behind her.

He didn't breathe much easier after it happened. Her news lingered. He was going to be a father. With a woman he barely knew.

He, who was no longer capable of caring about a living human being, was going to be a father.

John had to get out. Go somewhere. Find an escape.

He made it to the window in time to see Caroline drive off.

The sun was still shining.

## CHAPTER THREE

CAROLINE TOOK the first room she looked at. Her landlord, Mrs. Bea Howard, reminded her of old Mrs. Thomaswhite who ran the bakery back home in Grainville. With graying hair and wrinkled hands, she was plump, cheerful and seemed to know everything there was to know about everyone in town. A good source, Caroline surmised, for stories about her sister.

And someone to stay away from, in case she revealed more of herself than she wanted anyone to know.

The room was fairly small. The predominant piece of furniture was an old-fashioned four-poster bed that stood a good three-and-a-half-feet off the ground and boasted a down-filled homemade granny-square quilt in all the colors of the rainbow. There was a long dresser with a white lace runner, six drawers and a full-size mirror, plus a nightstand that had a lamp bright enough to read by. There was also a closet in which she could store the few belongings she'd brought with her. Best of all was the desk along the far wall directly beneath a window that looked out over the quiet street. Behind the desk was a high-speed Internet hook up. And a plug. Her computer could be up and running by nightfall.

There was no room for Jesse's old bassinet, waiting at home in Grainville.

Mrs. Howard lived alone but had two other tenants—both of them single women who worked at Montford and had not yet returned from visiting family over the holidays. Caroline handed over first and last month's rent and didn't ask if Mrs. Howard allowed children.

Monday morning, after a sporadic night's rest accompanied by a couple of long nocturnal visits with her computer, Caroline quickly showered in the bathroom she shared with the other tenants—both women she had yet to meet—pulled on her daily attire of loose-fitting jeans, sweater and boots. Then she grabbed the instructions she'd printed off an Internet map service to get to Montford University. Craning her neck, she absorbed every impression of Shelter Valley that she could process. Harmon Hardware looked like a slightly smaller, and equally old, rendition of Jim's Hardware back home and the Valley Diner a larger, more modern place than the diner cum pub in Grainville. Weber's Department Store had a display of baby equipment in the window.

With butterflies swarming in her stomach, she made the last turn into the university parking lot. Large old buildings lay before her amid a breathtaking expanse of perfectly green lawns broken up with the occasional cement table and bench. While the place was currently deserted, she could envision students sitting at those tables, enjoying the sunshine while they grabbed a quick lunch or studied. She imagined couples huddled together on the benches, having private conversations. She counted at least three

cement-mounted swings on white latticework gazebos—a far cry from the splintery version that hung on her porch at home.

It was only the second week in January, still the semester break, so there was little chance that her sister was anywhere in the vicinity. But as she filled out the necessary papers, retrieved required signatures, met with the proper people to register for her college classes, Caroline strained for a glimpse of a not too tall, fairly thin redhead with green eyes and an opal on her finger.

“Here you go, ma’am—this is your copy.” The skinny young dark-haired man behind the counter at the registrar’s office smiled almost condescendingly as he handed Caroline a copy of her first-ever college schedule.

“Classes start on the nineteenth. A week from Wednesday.”

“Thank you.” She smiled back, not because she appreciated his making her feel like an incompetent dinosaur, but because she’d seen the schedule. Relaxing for the first time in months, she almost skipped out into the Shelter Valley, fifty-degree sunshine. Right there on the first line, it guaranteed that she’d meet her sister. Along with a couple of required freshman courses and two English classes, Caroline had been admitted to Phyllis’s Introduction to Psychology.

CAROLINE HAD BEEN in town three days. She’d spent much of the past twenty-four hours staring at her meager wardrobe, hot with humiliation at the prospect of sitting in class with eighteen-year-olds, looking like a bumpkin off the farm. But she’d need most of the cattle money for rent, and panicked

at the thought of spending any more of her little nest egg from Randy's life insurance than she had to—even at a secondhand store. She had no idea how long that money would have to last.

And there was a baby to think about....

For once the Internet produced no solution. Tuesday afternoon, sitting at her desk in a room that was spotlessly tidy in spite of the cramped quarters, with paper stacked neatly on the floor beneath the desk, and all the other supplies she'd brought from home beside her, Caroline didn't know whether to cry or get angry. Web site after Web site was only confirming what she already knew. Her appearance was wildly out-of-date. She could pull her hair up into a ponytail—a fashionable clip would cost a couple of dollars—but after that...

Even if she was lucky enough to find more fashionable clothes at a secondhand store, she'd have to spend fifty dollars or more to update herself, and that fifty dollars could go toward the coming doctor's bills.

A tinny rendition of Beethoven's Fifth sounded and she jumped, looking around to figure out where the sound was coming from. Then she remembered the cell phone in the drawstring bag she'd made out of one of Randy's old shirts a couple of years before.

Only three people had that number. Her mother. Her son. And John Strickland.

Scrambling for the phone, her fingers tangled in the rope threaded through a casing at the top of the purse, holding it

closed. If it was Jesse, she didn't want to miss his call. Talking to her son made her happier than anything else on earth.

And if it was her mom—if there were more problems with her dad...

The number on the display had a Shelter Valley area code.

She answered it anyway.

“Caroline? This is John Strickland.” Even on the phone, his voice sounded just as she remembered it.

“Oh. Hi.”

“Am I bothering you?”

Her hands were shaking, her stomach queasy. Did that count?

“No.”

“I'd like to see you.”

Glancing around her room with desperate eyes, Caroline said,

“Why?”

“To talk.”

She didn't want to talk to him. She'd done her duty where he was concerned. He made her uncomfortable. Unsure of herself. Around John Strickland, pregnant Caroline Prater felt like an idiot.

She heard herself saying, “Okay.”

“Would you like to go for dinner? We could drive down to Phoenix.”

She'd driven through Phoenix on her way to Shelter Valley. She'd told herself she'd go back to explore as soon as she could afford the gas. Which wouldn't be until she had a better idea of

how much having this baby was going to cost.

Growing warm with embarrassment, Caroline said. “I was planning to eat here.” Board was included with the room.

“Can’t you let me take you out? I’d like to. My treat.”

She opened her mouth to deliver an adamant no, turned away from the bed where she’d dropped her bag and caught the trapped look in her eyes in the mirror attached to the dresser across from her.

“You don’t owe me anything,” she said.

“I know you really believe that, and maybe that’s why I really want to.”

Hot again, she sat down. “I’m not...um...that woman you were with in December. She was just...” Caroline swallowed. Silence hung on the line. “I was—it was my first Christmas without Randy...um, my husband...and, well I don’t usually act like that.”

“I’m not sure what you’re trying to tell me.”

“I’m not interested in you—like that.” Her palms were sweaty with the effort of asserting herself. This was all so new to Caroline, a woman who’d spent the first thirty-four years of her life trying to fit in by giving in. Who’d grown up in a small town where people still defined a woman’s worth by how happy she made her husband.

He didn’t say anything, and Caroline half hoped he’d decided against dinner. Or ever talking to her again. Except that might be difficult considering the circumstances.

“I can’t go on a date.”

John sighed—which sounded as if it was accompanied by a slight chuckle. “Caroline, you are unlike anyone I’ve ever met.”

Was that a good or bad thing?

“We need to talk. I need to eat. You’ve already spent at least some money on a test to diagnose a condition for which I am half-responsible. I can pay back my half with tonight’s meal. From there on, hopefully, we’ll have reached some other arrangement.”

“I told you, I don’t want anything from you. This is my... situation. I’ll deal with it.”

“The child is mine.” There was a certain hardness to his voice now. “I will share in the responsibility.”

Caroline sighed, too. She didn’t mean to—at least not out loud. But he was right; there was no way of avoiding a conversation between the two of them.

God, what a mess.

“Okay, do you want me to meet you somewhere? Or I can drive to your house.”

“Call me old-fashioned, but I’d rather pick you up.” John’s deep voice brought peace even while his words frightened her. “What’s your address?”

She didn’t want to give it to him. Didn’t want to give anyone more information about her than necessary. She had too many secrets.

In a voice that was thick with tangled emotions, Caroline gave John her address.

“I’VE DONE A LOT of thinking in the past couple of days.”

They were having dinner at a somewhat dark restaurant off the I-10 freeway in Ahwatukee, a suburb, John had explained, in south Phoenix. This was the first bit of personal conversation he’d offered.

“I can imagine,” she told him, studying the dinner salad she’d ordered and had only picked at. Across from her in the maroon leather booth, he was finishing off a cup of potato soup. He’d dressed casually, in jeans and a beige pullover with slip-on casual leather shoes.

She’d never been out with a man with slip-on casual leather shoes.

At least in Phoenix, with all the Old West cowboy overtones, she didn’t feel so out of place in her boots. And her blue jeans, faded flower blouse and brown cardigan were clean.

He glanced over. “Would you like to wait until after dinner to talk?”

The drive had been spent on a horticulture lesson about desert cacti and other flowering plants—much more information than she’d already learned from the Internet.

“No, this is fine.” Anything not to prolong the evening.

Nodding, he set down his spoon. “It occurred to me that I need to tell you some things about myself so you can understand what I have to say.”

Caroline took a bite of lettuce and cucumber. The baby that had yet to make itself physically known in any way other

than through a little queasiness and two solid lines on a home pregnancy test, needed sustenance.

There were quite a few patrons in the restaurant, which, she'd been glad to note, had a varied but not too expensive menu. And the booths were far enough apart, private enough with pillars and high backs between them, to allow for intimate conversation.

Still, she would've been more comfortable in a fast-food hamburger joint.

"Other than determining that we were both unattached in December—and because of that, lonely going into the holidays—we never broached any information about our romantic lives."

Glancing up at him, Caroline nodded, uncomfortable with the direction he seemed to be taking. His dark eyes were open and sincere.

Would her baby's eyes be that brown? Jesse had green eyes like hers.

"I'm a widower."

"Oh." And when surprise didn't seem an appropriate response, she said, "I'm sorry." She paused, then added, "So am I. A widow, I mean." Her fork hung suspended in midair, clasped in fingers that were holding it so tightly the metal was leaving indentations in her skin.

Her widowhood certainly wasn't a secret. She just felt so vulnerable, talking about it.

Forearms resting on the table, he toyed with his fork. "How long's it been for you?"

“Six months.” And she hadn’t slept more than a couple of hours at a time since.

“Six years here.”

She wanted to ask him if it got any easier, but couldn’t get that intimate.

“Sometimes it feels like it’s only been six months,” he continued, staring down at the fork he still fingered.

The man’s lost look drew Caroline’s sympathy. “What happened?”

He raised his head and then lowered it again. “Car accident.”

“Was she alone?” Randy had been. And visions of him lying there hurt, frightened, needing her, haunted her daily.

He shook his head, dark brown hair falling over his forehead as his gaze met hers. “We were in a cab in New York, coming from a Broadway show.”

Oh, God. She’d never been to New York. Or to a play, for that matter, if you didn’t include the elementary-school variety. But she could imagine being on vacation, having fun, completely unsuspecting of the tragedy that would occur.

“She lived for a couple of hours,” he continued. The food was taking too long to get there. Caroline wanted the interruption more for him than for herself.

“I begged her to hold on. All the time we were in the ambulance, trying to maneuver through Manhattan traffic, I pleaded with her to breathe.”

Caroline had a feeling the woman would have done everything

in her power to honor this man's request.

"What was her name?"

"Meredith." His eyes grew vacant, and Caroline had a pretty good idea he'd fallen into what she'd come to know as the dark abyss. A place where lost lives and broken dreams waited to taunt those left behind.

"My husband's name was Randy."

He blinked, an expression of compassion and understanding replacing the emptiness. "Was he sick?"

She shook her head. Not unless you counted a lack of self-esteem and the resultant relationship with a bottle. "Tractor accident on our farm."

"How old was he?"

"Same as me. Thirty-four."

"Meredith was thirty-one. We were planning to have kids," he said, more to himself than to her. "She was an investment broker and wanted to build a clientele so she could work from home and be able to stay with the babies."

An investment broker. And Caroline had never finished high school.

"You sure don't expect to lose a spouse in your early thirties." The words sounded inane to her, but she didn't know what else to say.

"Here we go, folks. Sorry this took so long." The young man who'd taken their order appeared at their booth, carrying two plates of salmon and steamed vegetables. Caroline sat back,

napkin on her lap as he placed the food before her. Other than that night in Frankfort, she'd never eaten anywhere fancier than the diner in Grainville. And was scared to death that she'd forget some of the rules of etiquette she'd learned on the Internet so she could educate her son. There wasn't a lot of opportunity for practice with proper forks and bread plates on a farm like hers. She and Randy had never even owned a set of matching silverware.

She was, however, thankful to have had the interruption before John could ask the next obvious question—about her and Randy's plans for a family. She had a feeling John assumed she had no family, since she'd told him, in December, that she lived alone.

And to have a child old enough to leave home, she'd've had to be pregnant at sixteen.

John was quiet while he ate, other than to inquire politely about the suitability of her food. And to make sure she had everything she needed. Caroline felt relieved; not only was she spared the worry of where conversation might lead, but the food was so much more luxurious than anything she'd ever tasted before that she was completely engrossed in enjoying it.

She looked longingly at the desert menu as it was presented, but declined. She was stuffed.

"Shall we go?" He laid a couple of twenties on the table and stood, then gestured for her to pass in front of him. And suddenly, Caroline wanted to stay. At least in the restaurant there were other people around, the possibility of interruption.

BACK IN THE CAR she waited for him to say whatever he'd taken her to dinner to say. Obviously something about the baby. And she steeled herself to listen with an open mind. The child growing in her body was half his. It was a point she couldn't argue.

"This is a lovely car," she ventured when it appeared that they might be making the hour-long trip back to Shelter Valley in complete silence.

"Thanks."

"What kind is it?"

"A Cadillac."

That would explain why she'd never been in anything like it. The plush leather seats were contoured and adjustable in a variety of ways. And she didn't even try to decipher what all the buttons and lights and controls on the dash were for. But if she wasn't mistaken, that screen above the radio was one of those computerized map things she'd read about on a pop-up on the Internet last winter.

If she wasn't so afraid of looking like a fool, she might've asked him about it.

He kept up his end of the conversation after that, mostly telling her about life in Arizona. He talked about the summer heat. And the wildlife. Scorpions and black widow spiders. She didn't need to be afraid of scorpions, he said. While they were ugly, only the really small kind was lethal enough to make you sick—and then, only if you were already vulnerable. With all the others, their

sting hurt and could cause temporary numbness in the affected limb, but there was no lasting damage.

“Don’t worry,” she assured him, with a slight smile in the darkness. “You can’t live on a farm and be afraid of spiders. I learned to use a fly swatter long before I learned to read and write.”

He grinned over at her, then quickly returned his attention to the highway. “I’ll bet you’re pretty good with a rifle, too, huh?”

“Mmm-hmm.” When she had to be.

“I’ve never fired one.”

As far as she knew, he was the first man she’d ever met who’d never fired a gun.

“We had a bear on our property once,” she told him, more to direct the conversation away from things he might bring up than because she really wanted to share her past with him. She never knew if what she said would make her seem too strange to someone like him.

“Randy was in town getting seed and the bear came right up to the barn. I saw him out there getting close to my henhouse and I didn’t even think.” Without egg money she’d have had no groceries. “I just grabbed the gun and marched outside—as if that black bear was going to see me as some kind of threat and head back the way he’d come.”

She’d been young then. And still sure that life had happily-ever-after in store for her.

“What did you do?” His eyes were wide, revealed by the light

from the dash as he stole another glance.

“When I realized he wasn’t nearly as impressed by me as I’d expected him to be, I did the only thing I could do, cocked the gun and brought it to my shoulder.”

“You shot a bear?”

For a second there, hearing the incredulity in his voice, she wished she had.

“No, I aimed for the ground by his feet. And then on either side of him.”

“You scared him off.”

Well, yes, but... “It was stupid, really. He could just as easily have gotten angry and attacked.”

John shook his head, grinning, one hand on the wheel and the other resting casually over the armrest next to him. “Is there anything you’re afraid of, woman?” Somehow the admiration hadn’t disappeared from his tone.

Which was why she just shrugged and looked out into the night. She couldn’t bear to tell him that right now—with him, in Shelter Valley, at Montford—there was very little that didn’t scare her.

“HERE’S THE THING,” John said when he pulled up in front of her house.

Hand on the door handle, thankful that she’d made it through the evening without whatever horrible conversation she imagined he wanted, Caroline turned, every muscle tense and waiting.

“I loved my wife.”

She nodded. That much was obvious.

“Too much, probably.”

She turned away from the door handle, facing the car’s interior. “How can you love someone too much?”

He’d shut off the engine, leaving them in darkness except for the light coming from the streetlamp half a block away and the dim glow from the front window of Mrs. Howard’s house.

“I can’t love anyone else.”

Ironically, with those words, Caroline relaxed. “You’re trying to warn me not to get any crazy ideas.”

His head cocked slightly to the side, John shrugged. “It wasn’t so much a warning as an explanation. I don’t want you to think it’s you....”

“John.” She almost laid her hand on his arm, and restrained herself just in time. Grainville familiarities might not be recognized here. “You have nothing to worry about from me. I meant it when I said I wanted nothing from you. Nothing. I married once, for a lifetime. And found out that fate had other ideas in mind. There was nothing I could do—it was out of my hands. I can’t go through that again.”

“You warning me off?” he asked, with a wry grin.

“Just explaining.”

Leaning back against the corner of the door, he was quiet for a moment. “I’m not afraid of the commitment,” he said. “Not afraid of loving again. I just can’t get beyond her.”

“Have you tried?”

“I was engaged to the women’s softball coach at Montford until a week before I came to Kentucky.”

No wonder he’d seemed as emotionally raw as she’d been, so needy and yet willing to settle for nothing but escape.

“What happened?”

“I couldn’t let go of Meredith.”

“Do you have to?” she asked, frowning. Randy would always be part of her, no matter what. They’d spent nineteen years together.

“I...talk to her.”

She talked to Randy, too, but hadn’t thought the habit would last for years—just until she got used to living alone. “About what?”

“Everything,” he said, his voice soft. “I shot a hole-in-one over Thanksgiving, playing in a tournament with some of Shelter Valley’s best golfers. The only person I even considered telling was Meredith. Not Lauren.”

For one absurd second, Caroline was jealous of a dead woman.

# CHAPTER FOUR

PHYLLIS LANGFORD SHEFFIELD COULDN'T stop herself from taking one last backward glance as she accompanied her closest friend, Tory Sanders, down the walk of Tory's small home. Their neighborhood was perfectly safe, featuring quiet stucco houses with desert landscaping in the yards.

"Let's just do this block," she said, her feet moving in place as she geared up for the jog Tory had planned for them.

Tory's soft blue eyes glinted with an unusual confidence as she, too, glanced back at the house. "There are only eight houses on this street," she said, grinning. "You gotta establish a rhythm and get into the groove if you're going to tolerate jogging." She'd taken both of them shopping the previous day for top-of-the-line running shoes, leggings and soft cotton zip-up jackets. Phyllis's was black. Tory's was pink, which complemented her short dark hair and expertly lined eyes.

Bouncing some more, Phyllis nodded. "A groove. Okay..." She didn't move from her spot.

"They're going to be fine," Tory said gently, with the strange mixture of neediness and confidence that had first drawn Phyllis to the younger sister of her murdered best friend. "Alex is great with all the kids. You know that."

Alex. The eleven-year-old adopted daughter of Tory's husband, Ben. The little girl had been abused by her biological

father and mother and come to live with Ben, her stepfather, at about the same time Tory—also an abused child and then abused wife—had found refuge in Shelter Valley. If all went well, Tory would soon be adopting Alex. “I know,” Phyllis said. She was ready to head up the street. Really. As soon as her feet felt warm. “But she’s never been left alone with my two,” she said, on the off chance Tory hadn’t already heard Phyllis’s worries on that score. The jogging was Tory’s idea—to help Phyllis keep off the weight she’d had trouble losing after having her twins two and a half years before.

“But she has been alone with Chrissie,” Tory reminded her. Chrissie—Phyllis Christine—was the four-year-old daughter Tory and Ben had together. “Calvin and Clarissa won’t be a problem for her,” she added. “They’re just like their mother, too analytical for their own good sometimes, but practically perfect in every way. They’ll have Alex reading to them the entire time we’re gone.”

“Unless Chrissie gets bored...” Tory’s daughter was at that age.

“As long as she’s sitting in her big sister’s lap, she’ll be completely content.” Tory started jogging slowly down the sidewalk. “Come on, we aren’t going to be away very long...”

“I HAD A LETTER from Brad.” Doing as she’d been told, Phyllis concentrated on the rhythm of her breathing in conjunction with the sound of her feet hitting the pavement. So far, jogging still felt like an endurance contest. Only Tory—the

sister she'd never had—could've managed to get her to do this.

“Why would your jerk of an ex-husband be writing to you after all this time?” Tory, not even a little out of breath, glanced over. “When did it come?”

Phyllis moved aside to avoid a parked car as the two women jogged side by side along the road. “Yesterday.”

“What did he want?”

“He made a pie-in-the-sky investment when we were married—had to do with satellites.” She paused to breathe. “During the divorce...he got his broker to claim a potential value for it that far exceeded its worth at the time.” More breath. In and out. She had to think about the rhythm of her feet against the pavement. That was here and now. “The judge allowed the value to stand.... Brad magnanimously gave that investment to me in exchange for our more liquid assets.”

It smarted even to talk about those days.

“And in an effort to keep the peace, you let him get away with it.”

By now, Tory knew all the sordid details of Phyllis's marriage to her egotistical, unfaithful and completely selfish first husband.

“I was fighting for my self-esteem. Money paled in comparison.”

“And part of you hoped that if you were generous and cooperative, he'd suddenly realize that your intelligence wasn't a threat to him and he'd find you desirable again.”

“Which only goes to show that I wasn't nearly as smart as he

thought I was,” Phyllis said, slowing as they approached a corner with a stoplight. The blue sky above, glistening with sunshine that gave a cheery brightness to everything around them, reminded Phyllis that none of it mattered anymore. She was a different woman than the one who’d gained weight after her husband’s numerous affairs and the emotional torment he’d caused her. Married to a man she adored, working in a job she loved, mothering the two most precious children ever and jogging with the sweetest friend a woman could want in sixty-degree weather on the second Wednesday in January, she bore absolutely no resemblance to that other Phyllis at all.

Except that occasionally, like now, she still felt the sting.

“So why was he writing to you?”

She’d known Tory would get back to that.

“The worthless investment suddenly become a windfall?”

“As a matter of fact—” Phyllis jogged across the deserted street beside Tory “—it did. Apparently I’m sitting on a quarter of a million dollars, minus taxes.”

Tory stopped in the middle of the street. “A quarter of a million dollars?”

“Before taxes.” Phyllis met her friend’s incredulous stare before grabbing her arm and pulling her to the opposite corner.

“And why do I get the feeling that Brad wasn’t writing out of the goodness of his heart to tell you about this?”

“Maybe because you know what he’s like,” Phyllis said with a humorless chuckle.

“He wants part of it,” Tory guessed, walking now as they approached her road again.

“He wants all of it. The original investment was his, and his name’s still on some of the documents. I didn’t think it was worth the couple of hundred dollars it would cost in legal fees to have it changed.”

“What does Matt say about all this?”

“I haven’t told him yet....”

JOHN HAD DECIDED to stay away from her. On the golf course early Wednesday morning with Will Parsons and Matt Sheffield, he’d spent the entire front nine feeling guilty and given up his usual first-place ranking for last. The back nine had gone better. In the guilt department at least. When the baby was born, he’d do his part. Until then, he had nothing to contribute. He certainly didn’t owe Caroline Prater anything.

He’d come in last on the back nine, as well.

She picked up her cell on the first ring. And agreed to take a walk in the desert with him before dinner. He hadn’t even tried to talk her into sharing another meal. Finishing up early at the office on Wednesday afternoon, knowing he’d be working late that night, John stopped at home only long enough to put on his jeans and walking shoes. Then he picked her up at Mrs. Howard’s place before she could change her mind.

“Are you sure it’s safe out here?” she asked when he stopped the Cadillac on a dirt path Will had shown him. As a kid, Will had roamed this desert as though it were a ball field in the middle

of town. It hadn't taken John an hour to fall prey to its wonder.

"Safe how?" he asked, looking over at the woman who was still such a stranger to him. And had his baby growing inside her. "As in, are we going to get mugged, or robbed by a gold-panning squatter, or taken captive by an Indian warrior?"

"Indian warrior?" Caroline asked with an arched brow. "I was talking about the nonhuman variety of danger." Her boots barely made a sound as she trod slowly down the path that led to a rocky ledge. It overlooked a surprisingly green ravine up ahead.

Careful to keep enough distance between them so he wouldn't be inhaling the fresh lilac scent of her hair—he supposed it was the kind of shampoo she used—John shoved his hands into his jeans pockets and shrugged. "Yeah, the desert can be dangerous, but not if you're careful."

She slowed, glanced over her shoulder at him. "So those javelina I read about on the Internet, are they around here? Or only up in the mountains?"

"They're here," John said, focusing on both sides of the path—playing a game of name that plant. Cholla. Prickly pear. Palo verde. It was either that or look at her nicely rounded butt moving back and forth in those threadbare jeans. "But javelinas usually stay out of sight. Mostly you want to watch for rattlesnakes. As long as you don't step on one, they'll leave you alone. And you never, ever, want to be out here without water. Something as simple as a sprained ankle could leave you out in the desert for hours or days."

Her step picked up again. “I’m guessing you’ve got water in that pack thing you’re carrying?”

“Yep.” The leather pack had been a Christmas gift from Becca and Will two years before. “A bottle for each of us. And a first-aid kit, too. I go with the theory that if I have one, I won’t need it.”

“Good theory.”

John enjoyed the silence that fell as they continued their walk. Maybe on the way back he’d point out some of the different varieties of Arizona desert plants they were passing. For now, he was feeling more peaceful than he had in days.

As long as he didn’t think about that body ahead of him—and the life it was hiding. Then he felt the need to unbutton his long-sleeved corduroy shirt and let in some air.

They reached the rock Will had shown him that first day and sat, not quite touching, facing the ravine.

“Did you know that saguaro are only found here in Arizona, Mexico and a few places in New Mexico?” she asked, staring out. He had known that, but wasn’t familiar with many of the other facts she regaled him with during the next ten minutes. And he’d spent the past couple of years making a point of picking up information on one new plant a month.

“How do you know all this stuff?” John finally asked.

She shrugged, her ponytail sliding up and down her back with the movement. “The Internet.”

He should’ve guessed. She’d found a college that way, too. And Caroline seemed like the kind of person who’d make it her

business to find out everything there was to know about whatever she was doing.

Including having a baby?

“We have to talk about it, you know,” he said, glancing at his watch. They couldn’t keep meeting like this—casually chatting, getting to know each other. They had to get on with business. It was the only reason he’d called her.

There was no marked difference in her, just a changed energy in the air around them. She said nothing.

So, fine. Probably easier like this. Just state his facts, come up with a plan that was agreeable to both of them and go their separate ways.

“Have you chosen a doctor yet?”

Head turned away from him, she appeared to be taking in the desert beyond the rocky hill that descended down to green bush and wild grass below them.

“Really,” she said, her voice small, “you don’t have to do this.”

“Do what?” he asked, although he knew.

“Be involved.”

“I’m as responsible for this predicament as you are.” The words weren’t news to him; he just hadn’t confronted them head-on until that point. “There is no way I can go on with my life as usual while yours is being turned upside down.”

“It’s not a predicament.”

He didn’t know what he’d expected her to say. But it hadn’t been that. They had real issues to discuss here.

“Sorry.”

She turned, her green eyes narrowed and filled with a fire he hadn't seen there before. “We're talking about a person here, a child's life. My child's life. He or she is not and will never be a predicament to me.”

“Okay...”

“Just because I didn't choose to have a baby—or choose the father, for that matter—does not mean this pregnancy is any less valid than one I'd planned and hoped for. Because the life that results will be just as valid.”

He had the most incredible urge to pull her toward him, kiss her forehead, rub her back. He sat on his hands. “True.” The temperature was only sixty-three degrees, but in the sun, John was starting to sweat. The breeze coming over the ravine was a relief. With the sudden tightness in his chest, he was finding it a little hard to breathe.

He waited to see if she had anything more to say. And then, when it appeared she didn't, he told her, “All the more reason for me to be involved.”

He heard her sigh. And felt it, too. “Look.” She turned on the rock until she was facing him. “You're right. Part of the reason I came here was so you could be involved in this baby's life if you chose. He deserves a father just like everyone else. Deserves to know his biological father if you're interested in having him know you.” She wasn't even stopping for air. “So, after he's born, if you want to be involved, we'll set up whatever visitations you

need. But until then, this is just about me and the job my body has to do.”

“I disagree.” Shut up! his mind screamed. She’d just given him exactly the out he needed. And wanted. “There’ll be costs. And hardships as you find it more difficult to do certain things. For instance, what if you have to take your computer in for repair? Once you get further along, you won’t be allowed to lift heavy things.”

He was winging it. And afraid that was exactly how it sounded. Why the hell had this suddenly become so important? Just because she’d told him no?

He’d never been a man who had a problem with women in authority.

“Don’t believe everything you hear, Strickland,” she said, her tone reminding him of the friendly woman he’d known so briefly that weekend between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Very different from the self-conscious though still capable Caroline she’d been since arriving in Shelter Valley. “Kentucky women come from strong stock. Goodness, if they had to slow down the whole time they were pregnant, their families and farms would be in trouble. A small farm doesn’t run itself, you know.”

An iguana—a desert lizard—scooted by an inch from John’s shoe. Caroline watched it go.

“They’re kind of cute,” she said as it scurried away. “I read that they’re good to have around your yard at home because they eat crickets.”

“And other bugs,” John agreed. He didn’t want to talk about desert plants or wildlife anymore.

“Listen, Caroline,” he said, not even sure what she’d be listening to. Compelled by an uneasy feeling inside, he continued anyway. “As you say, that baby you’re carrying is as real as any other child conceived. He’s also my flesh and blood, and I’m not the type of man who can turn away from that responsibility. I don’t even want to.” He was surprised to find that much was true. “I’d like to be around to hear that first heartbeat. Or at least some of the heartbeats. I want to hear what the doctor has to say about his size and growth and overall health. I want to see the ultrasound that might tell us if he’s a boy or a girl.”

God, he couldn’t breathe. And he didn’t know how in hell he was going to make any of this happen. Or follow through on it. They were discussing a new life. And his world revolved around the memory of a dead woman.

“Okay.”

He blinked. Stared at her. And then down into the ravine. He loved the browns and golds of the desert. But sometimes that green just looked so good. Cool and peaceful and...breathing.

“Really?”

She nodded. “You’re his father. I have no right to deny you access to his life. As long as you understand that except where it’s absolutely necessary, you have no role in my life.”

That was that. Much easier than he’d expected.

Then why did he feel so...out of his league? Why did he feel

he wanted to start running and not stop until he collapsed on the ground?

Meredith should be here. Spending the next months with him. Learning it all with him.

But she wasn't. The pain of that was almost unbearable. As he'd known it would be. When he'd lost Meredith, he'd vowed never to have children. She'd been too much a part of that dream.

And now here he was, having a child with a woman he barely knew.

He should resent Caroline.

But he didn't.

"CAN I ASK YOU something?"

Caroline glanced over at him, her auburn hair glinting in the light from the setting sun. "I guess."

John didn't know how it had happened, but they'd been there for over an hour. Sometimes talking. A lot of the time lost in their own thoughts. There was so much to discuss, so many decisions to make. But he didn't really feel like doing these things. And, perhaps, neither did she.

He pulled out the bottles of water, opened one and handed it to her before taking a long swig from his own.

"Why did you react so strongly when I referred to the pregnancy as a predicament?"

She took a small sip of water. Recapped the bottle. Held it with both hands on the rock between her knees. He wasn't used to spending time with women who didn't wear makeup and was

surprised by how much he liked the freshness of her natural beauty when she turned toward him.

“Have you ever looked in the mirror and wondered where you belonged?”

“No, I don’t think so,” John said slowly, watching her.

“Or considered the idea that your life was worth less than the lives of those around you?”

“No.” He’d had the usual teenage insecurities, of course. But his parents had always encouraged him to believe that the world was his to do with what he could. He’d been dreaming big his whole life.

Until the dream came crashing down.

“I have,” she said.

And although he didn’t want to know, he had to ask. “Why?”

She wasn’t going to tell him. He’d overstepped the boundaries she’d set less than an hour before. Her chin was set, her eyes showing very little of the emotion that he suspected must be roiling around inside her.

And then her mouth softened, her eyes focusing on the distance, perhaps a farther distance than the vista spread before them.

“For starters, I was an only child,” she began. “On a farm out in the country in Kentucky. That in itself is very isolating. And no matter what I did, I never fit in. Not at home with my folks. And not at school, either. I was different from everyone else. Saw the world differently. When it came time to make decisions, my

opinions were almost always opposite to my parents'. Things that mattered to me didn't seem to concern them, and a lot of the time, the reverse was true."

Caroline pulled her feet up on the rock, the worn, rounded toes of her brown leather boots hanging over the edge. Arms wrapped around her knees, she shifted back slightly. John wondered what she was thinking.

"I had this insatiable need to know. Not what other people in town were doing, or who was marrying whom, but why the sun rose and how. And where air came from. I wanted to know who was in national office and I cared about every major decision out of Washington." Her grin was a little sad. "My poor parents. They were worried about having enough fertilizer for the field and finding ways to make the equipment last another year while I went on about global warming. I'm sure I drove them crazy."

Mesmerized, John didn't move. He didn't want to do anything that might remind her he was still there, make her aware that she was opening up to him after just telling him he could play no part in her personal life. He didn't want to lose this glimpse of her.

When he'd first met Caroline Prater he'd found her an interesting enigma. And—not that he allowed himself to dwell on that night—she'd been a pretty decent lover, as well. Now he was just plain intrigued. He'd never known anyone with so many facets. All of them different. And all of them sparkling in their own way.

"Anyhow, one day when I was about seven, I yelled at my

mother in a fit of frustration, telling her I couldn't possibly be her kid because she didn't care that a popular hamburger chain—I'd only eaten out twice in my life and both times it had been there—was being accused of stealing characters from my favorite television show, H.R. Pufnstuf."

A quick grin accompanied her words before her focus turned once again to the desert. "You can imagine how surprised I was—and how little I suddenly cared about the company's ad campaign—when my mother yelled back that I wasn't her child. I was adopted."

Shit. What a way to tell a seven-year-old kid something as earth-shattering as that. John didn't know what he could possibly say that would make any difference. So he said nothing.

"I'd already been considering that I'd been planted in Grainville by aliens." She laid her cheek on top of her knee. "From that point on, I quit fighting. I'd already been rejected by one set of parents. What would happen if the second set decided I was too much trouble?"

John, not detecting even a note of self-pity in her tone, wondered for a split second what it would've been like if he'd met her at a different time. Say fifteen years before, when they were both starting out.

He had a feeling he'd have liked her. A lot.

"I spent the next ten years of my life feeling like I didn't belong anywhere. In a town as small as Grainville, where everyone belongs to everyone else, feeling that way wasn't easy."

He wondered what had happened to her at seventeen to change that but didn't ask.

She stood up, brushed herself off, gave a shaky laugh. "Sorry, I didn't mean to go on like that," she said, heading back the way they'd come. "Put it down to overprotectiveness. I just don't want any child of mine feeling that way. Not if I can help it."

Propelled by something he didn't dare analyze, John caught up to her, grabbing her hand only long enough to pull her to a stop. She turned, facing him. "I may not have chosen these circumstances," he said, his eyes locked with hers. "But that baby will always know I love him and want him in my life."

Tears pooled in her eyes before she blinked them away, nodded and began walking again.

"NOT TO KEEP HARPING on it, but I'd really like to know what you're planning to do about medical care," John said as they sped down the highway toward Shelter Valley. Caroline had said that Bea Howard served dinner at five-thirty sharp and they'd stayed longer in the desert than he'd intended.

"I've called the clinic in Shelter Valley. The obstetrician there can take me."

"Do you have insurance?" She didn't answer immediately and he continued. "Because under my insurance, the baby will be covered completely, but the pregnancy won't. I'm prepared to handle that with cash."

"That won't be necessary."

"Caroline," John said, taking his eyes from the road for just a

second and glimpsing the bland look on her face, “we’ve already established that I’m going to carry at least half the burden over the next seven or so months. Obviously we can’t divvy up the physical challenges, so I’ll have to do my share on a more, shall we say, detached level. Expenses would fall nicely into that category.”

“Okay.”

Another glance showed him that her expression hadn’t changed. More than ever, he wanted to know what went on behind that unrevealing look. He suspected it was the result of a lifetime spent hiding her curiosities and opinions.

In any event, there was nothing for him to do about it.

“So, when’s the first appointment?”

“I haven’t made it yet.”

“I’d like to be there.”

And at the instant shake of her head, he quickly added, “Not for the examination part.” He didn’t want to embarrass her. “Just to sit in on the talk with the doctor afterward.”

She hesitated too long. “Okay.”

“You’ll let me know as soon as you have an appointment?” he pushed, not sure whether she’d acquiesced or was merely placating him.

“I’m hoping to get in sometime during the next week, before school starts.”

Okay, then, she’d meant it. Good. They were getting somewhere. “I can go any day but tomorrow.”

“Fine.”

“A large group of us are going to Phoenix tomorrow,” he explained when it occurred to him that she might think he was putting her off for a golf date or an appointment at work. “One of our young women is a witness in a court case and Shelter Valley plans to be there in full support.”

“Ellen Moore’s rape case,” she said so softly he almost didn’t hear her. “I’m glad you’re all going.”

Having just come off the ramp from the freeway, John kept his foot on the brake and stared. “How did you know about that?”

“It was in the papers,” she said. “There was a lot of coverage, probably because someone rich and powerful is involved. Anyway, I’ve been following the story on the Internet and knew it was set for trial.”

And she remembered the date? Impressive. John’s heart was pumping a little faster than normal as he pulled into town. He couldn’t afford to feel anything for this woman. Especially considering the responsibilities they were going to be sharing for the next eighteen years. Raising a child would be hard enough without personal tension between them.

But damn, it wasn’t fair that a woman as intelligent and pretty and downright interesting as Caroline Prater—a woman almost thirty-five years of age—was still so desperate for a place to belong that she was developing bonds with people she’d never even met.

## CHAPTER FIVE

SHELTER VALLEY WAS probably quieter on that second Thursday in January than any of the other days Caroline had been there. But as she walked downtown midafternoon, learning her way around, window-shopping for things she might never be able to afford, she certainly felt as though the town was drained of life. She didn't need to turn her head to catch a glimpse of her sister or any of the other people she knew only from grainy newspaper photos. The town's mayor, Becca Parsons, and her husband, Will, who was the president of Montford University. Or Cassie Montford, the vet who'd been in the news with her innovative pet-therapy program. Caroline had followed the story avidly, as Phyllis had collaborated with Cassie in the therapy portion of the program.

There was no point in thinking the dark-haired woman on the corner was Bonnie Nielson, owner of the local day care, who'd made various Arizona newspapers because she'd developed a nationally known program for children and seniors together.

Today Caroline didn't have any chance of running into Beth Richards, wife of the local sheriff, Greg. She'd read an article about Beth when, as a fugitive, she'd turned state's evidence in Texas on a cult she'd inadvertently been part of with her ex-husband. Nor was she going to see Martha Marks or her new husband, preacher David Cole Marks. Ellen's mother and the

minister who'd helped track down her rapist would undoubtedly be sitting on either side of her in that courtroom in Phoenix.

With a hand on her still-flat stomach, Caroline smiled at an older woman who was entering into Weber's Department Store and decided she should head home. If the online version of the Phoenix newspaper was going to report Ellen's trial—and she suspected it would, since it involved some of Phoenix's most powerful men and the breakup of a large prostitution ring—the link would probably be up before her fellow townspeople returned home.

SHE HAD TO REFRESH her browser a couple of times, but before dinner that evening, and after her weekly call to her mother from the cell phone that didn't charge extra for long-distance, Caroline was watching a video of the first day of jury selection online. Of course the clip was only a couple of minutes long. But it was enough to give a sense of being involved in something that meant so much to the people she was hoping would someday accept her as one of their own. The accompanying news story was fairly detailed, painting a courtroom picture that was both heartbreaking and inspiring.

Later that evening, she turned to her journal.

Thursday, January 13, 2005

I wish I could've been there today! I saw all the Shelter Valley people outside the courthouse. Apparently the news reporter thought the town's collective support noteworthy. It was just a glimpse and yet it affected me so deeply I can't quite get away

from the feeling. They were like one huge supportive family. In the clip I managed to see, Matt Sheffield, my sister's husband, was holding Randi and Zack Foster's son, Billy. Randi is Will Parsons' youngest sister. I recently saw the little boy in a photo in the Shelter Valley paper. He'd been in his uncle Will's arms at a university function over Christmas or I wouldn't have known him. Outside the courthouse, Becca Parsons was standing with Ellen and her family. Ben Sanders's adopted daughter, Alex, stood close beside her stepmother, Tory, who was with Phyllis.

I couldn't see Phyllis well—it was a side shot of her—but just getting confirmation that she's really here made my stomach jump. It does somersaults every time I think about actually seeing her, speaking to her. Sometimes I think I can't possibly wait until next week when school starts. And sometimes I think I won't dare go to school for fear of meeting her. What if I act like a country hick and she can't stand me? What if she somehow recognizes me and is livid that I've come here, disrupting her life? I've sure read enough about birth families to know that's a very common response. Ohhh. One step at a time. And today's step is to occupy the next few hours until bedtime.

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