



MILLS & BOON

## **Vintage Cherish**

# **Faith, Hope and Family**

**GINA WILKINS**

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**Faith, Hope and Family**

«HarperCollins»

## **WILKINS G.**

Faith, Hope and Family / G. WILKINS — «HarperCollins»,

**HOPELESSLY IN LOVE** Youthful, soul-shattering mistakes? Deborah McCloud had made more than her share. She'd believed in her father, only to discover her trust had been cruelly misplaced. And her heart? She'd misplaced that, too, by falling hopelessly in love with Dylan Smith, a man too sexy and too smart for her comfort. Wanting, needing, Dylan was more than she could bear, so she'd left. Seven years ago. And she'd been running ever since. But now, threats against her family had brought her home to face the people she'd hurt, the mistakes she'd made...and the one man who could rekindle the passion she'd sworn to leave behind.

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## **A flash of blue lights in her rearview mirror made Deborah curse.**

Officer Dylan Smith.

“Evening, Ms. McCloud. Did you rob a bank?” Dylan’s voice was deeper than the youthful echo that still too frequently haunted her dreams.

“I just felt like taking a drive.”

“At midnight?”

“Is that against the law?”

“No. But doing sixty-five in a forty-five-mile-an-hour zone is. But, you know I’m not going to ticket you.”

“You’d ticket any other speeder. I expect the same treatment.”

His laugh would have warmed some cold spot deep inside her heart if she hadn’t steeled herself against it. “I don’t think I’ve ever had a speeder actually demand a citation from me before.”

“Then I’m free to go?”

He dropped his arm to his side, sighed and stepped back from the car. His voice was suddenly weary. “I’ve never tried to stop you from leaving.”

Dear Reader,

Not only does Special Edition bring you the joys of life, love and family—but we also capitalize on our authors’ many talents in storytelling. In our spotlight, Christine Rimmer’s exciting new miniseries, **VIKING BRIDES**, is the epitome of innovative reading. The first book, *The Reluctant Princess*, details the transformation of an everyday woman to glorious royal—with a Viking lover to match! Christine tells us, “For several years, I’ve dreamed of creating a modern-day country where the ways of the legendary Norsemen would still hold sway. I imagined what fun it would be to match up the most macho of men, the Vikings, with contemporary American heroines. Oh, the culture clash—oh, the lovely potential for lots of romantic fireworks! This dream became **VIKING BRIDES**.” Don’t miss this fabulous series!

Our Readers’ Ring selection is Judy Duarte’s *Almost Perfect*, a darling tale of how good friends fall in love as they join forces to raise two orphaned kids. This one will get you talking! Next, Gina Wilkins delights us with *Faith, Hope and Family*, in which a tormented heroine returns to save her family and faces the man she’s always loved. You’ll love Elizabeth Harbison’s *Midnight Cravings*, in which a sassy publicist and a small-town police chief fall hard for each other and give in to a sizzling attraction.

*The Unexpected Wedding Guest*, by Patricia McLinn, brings together an unlikely couple who share an unexpected kiss. Newcomer to Special Edition Kate Welsh is no stranger to fresh plot twists, in *Substitute Daddy*, in which a heroine carries her deceased twin’s baby and has feelings for the last man on earth she should love—her snooty brother-in-law.

As you can see, we have a story for every reader’s taste. Stay tuned next month for six more top picks from Special Edition!

Sincerely,

Karen Taylor Richman

Senior Editor

**Faith, Hope and Family**  
**Gina Wilkins**



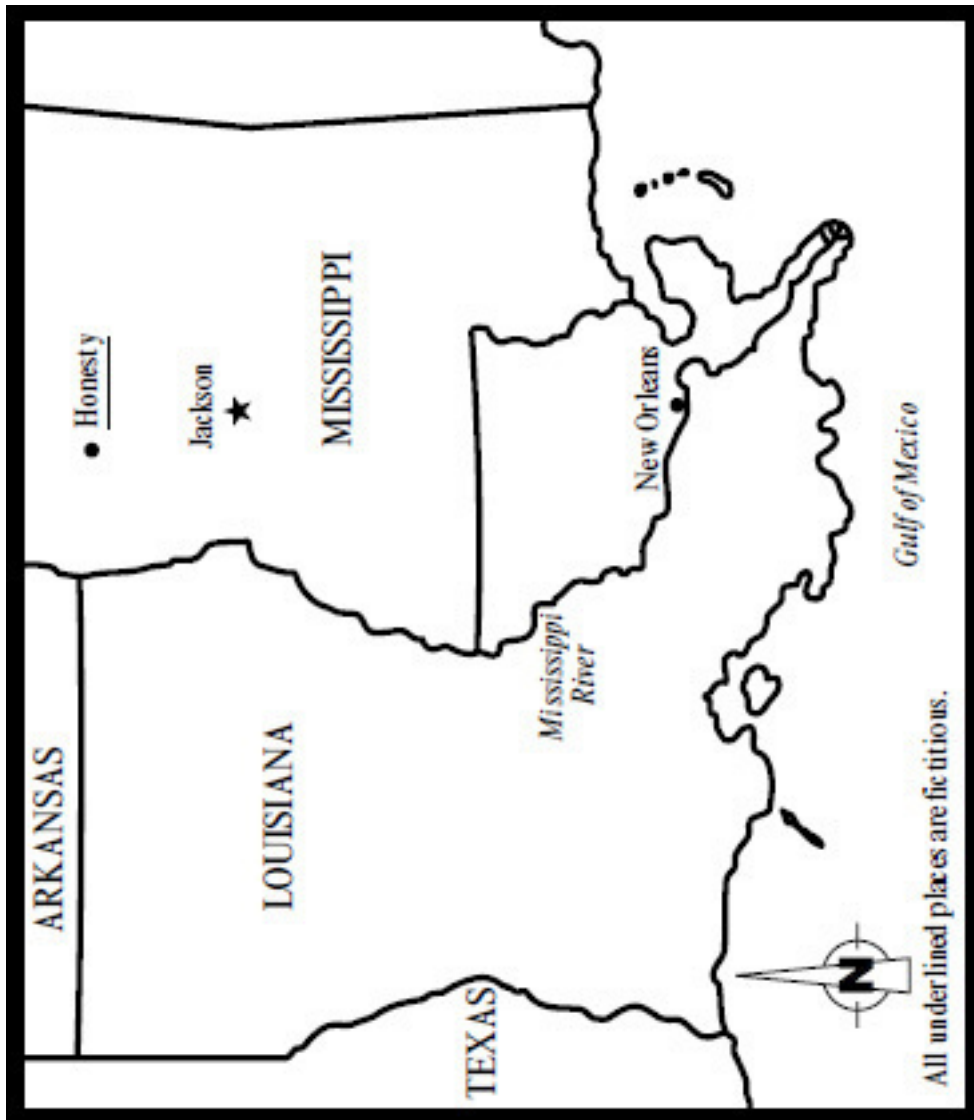
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For my mom, everybody's Nana.

## GINA WILKINS

is a bestselling and award-winning author who has written more than sixty-five books for Harlequin and Silhouette. She credits her successful career in romance to her long, happy marriage and her three “extraordinary” children.

A lifelong resident of central Arkansas, Ms. Wilkins sold her first book to Harlequin in 1987 and has been writing full-time ever since. She has appeared on the Waldenbooks, B. Dalton and USA TODAY bestseller lists. She is a three-time recipient of the Maggie Award for Excellence, sponsored by Georgia Romance Writers, and has won several awards from the reviewers of Romantic Times.



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## Chapter One

The Honesty city limits sign was just visible within the range of Deborah McCloud's headlights. She was tempted to keep driving, leaving the town where she had grown up behind her. Honesty, Mississippi, wasn't her home anymore; she had escaped nine years ago when she'd left for college, and she hadn't been back for more than a few days at a time during the past seven years. It was only because her mother and two older brothers still lived here that she returned at all.

Mostly her mother, she acknowledged. She and her brothers had drifted apart in the past few years.

It might have been a Freudian impulse that made her press harder on the accelerator as she moved closer to the edge of town. Probably a barely suppressed desire to escape the unhappy memories here, though she tried not to dwell on them during her infrequent visits with her mother. She supposed it was her brother's wedding that afternoon that had brought the memories so close to the surface tonight, preventing her from sleeping.

A flash of blue lights in her rearview mirror made her hiss a curse between her teeth. Terrific, she thought, pulling over at the side of the deserted road. The only thing that would make this episode worse was if the officer who had pulled her over was Dylan Smith. Surely, fate wouldn't be that cruel.

She should have known better.

Resting one hand on the top of her car, Dylan studied her through the open driver's-door window. Even though he was silhouetted by the yellowish street-lamps above him, she had no trouble picturing his roughly handsome face, nor his bitingly intense steel-gray eyes. The dark-brown hair he had once worn rebel-long was now almost militarily short, befitting his career on the right side of the law.

When he spoke, his voice was deeper than the youthful echo that still too frequently haunted her dreams, but it held the familiar undercurrent of mocking humor. "Evening, Ms. McCloud. Did you rob a bank? Knock over a liquor store? You seem to be in a big hurry to get out of town."

Knowing her face was illuminated by the same light that shadowed his, she kept her expression impassive. "I'm not leaving town. I just felt like taking a drive."

"At midnight?"

"Yes. Is that against the law?"

If her challenging tone annoyed him, he didn't let it show. "No. But doing sixty-five in a forty-five-mile-an-hour zone is."

"So write me a ticket." She extracted her driver's license from her wallet and held it out to him. "If you run this, you'll see that I have no outstanding warrants."

He made no move to take the license. "You know I'm not going to ticket you."

"You'd ticket any other speeder. I expect the same treatment."

Leaving his hands where they were, he asked, "How was your brother's wedding?"

The abrupt change of subject made her blink. She lowered her outstretched hand to her lap. "It was fine. No problems."

"Gideon and Adrienne make a great couple."

"Yes, they do." Keeping her voice totally disinterested, she said, "I heard that Adrienne insisted on inviting you. How come you didn't show up?"

"It's not like you to ask stupid questions."

His curt reply made her temper flare again. "Then I'm sorry I asked."

He sighed. "I didn't want any unpleasantness to cast a shadow over the wedding. I knew you wouldn't want me there. And, despite my new friendship with Adrienne, Gideon and I still barely speak. For their sake, and for your mother's, I didn't want to risk any problems."

“I really couldn’t care less if you were there or not. And my mother would have been as gracious to you as she was to any of the other guests.”

He obviously didn’t buy her implication that he no longer had the power to stir any emotions, even negative ones, in her, but he didn’t challenge her on that. “I always admired your mother, you know. A real class act. The way she’s being so kind to her exhusband’s orphaned little girl—well, that just confirms what I always thought about her.”

Deborah had no intention of discussing her family scandals with him. “I’m sure my mother would be pleased that you think so highly of her.”

He made a sound that might have been a laugh. “I’m sure your mother couldn’t care less what I think of her.”

She tapped the steering wheel again. “Are you going to write me a ticket or not?”

This time his laugh was a bit more natural. The one that had always warmed some cold little spot deep inside her heart—and would have done so again if she hadn’t steeled herself against it. “I don’t think I’ve ever had a speeder actually demand a citation from me before.”

She scowled. “Well?”

“No ticket. I’ll just advise you to slow down for the remainder of your drive.”

“Then I’m free to go?”

He dropped his arm to his side and stepped back from the car. His voice was suddenly weary when he replied, “I’ve never tried to stop you from leaving, Deborah.”

Not trusting herself to speak, she put the car in gear and drove away, well aware that he remained where he was until she was out of his sight.

Deborah was up early the next morning, having managed only a few hours of sleep after returning from her midnight drive. Following the scents of coffee and freshly baked sticky buns, she wandered into the kitchen where her mother stood at the counter slicing fruit. Impeccable as always, Lenore McCloud was already dressed in a cream blouse and a tailored camel skirt. Her once-dark hair was now liberally streaked with gray. It was sleekly styled, not a strand out of place.

Conscious of her own tumbled, dark-blond hair, baggy T-shirt, plaid dorm pants and bare feet, Deborah cleared her throat. “I feel like I’ve walked into one of those old TV sitcoms. You’re even wearing pearls.”

Lenore reached up automatically to touch one of her earrings and then the gleaming strand at her throat. “I have a civic committee meeting this morning at ten. And the pearls match the outfit.”

“Of course they do. You always match.”

Lenore glanced at Deborah’s outfit, but chose not to comment. “You were out rather late last night, weren’t you?”

Deborah hadn’t realized her mother had heard her leave. She should have known better. Pouring herself a cup of coffee, she replied casually, “I couldn’t sleep. Decided to drive around for a while.”

“Is there anything in particular on your mind? Something you would like to talk about?”

Carrying the coffee to the table in the cheery, bay-shaped breakfast nook, Deborah shook her head. “I guess I was still wired from the wedding.”

Lenore joined her at the table, which was already set for breakfast for two. She set a plate of sticky buns and a bowl of fruit in the center, then fetched a cup of coffee for herself. “I’m so glad everything went perfectly yesterday. It was a lovely wedding, wasn’t it?”

“Lovely.” Deborah helped herself to a sticky bun, ignoring the fruit for the moment.

“Gideon looked happier than I’ve ever seen him.”

“He did look surprisingly content, didn’t he? Who would have believed he, of all people, would get involved in a whirlwind courtship and be married so quickly? What’s it been, two whole months since he and Adrienne met face-to-face for the first time?”

Lenore smiled mistily. “It’s nice to see both my boys so happy with their new brides.”

Deborah plucked a pecan from the top of her bun, then popped it into her mouth. “Nathan’s always happy.”

“Well, not always, perhaps.”

“C’mon, Mom, you know he’s the sunniest-natured of your offspring. You long ago labeled me the temperamental one and Gideon the moody one. Nathan has always been the happy-go-lucky, optimistic older brother whose personal mission is to make sure the rest of us are safe and content.”

“You and Gideon did tend to be more...challenging than Nathan,” Lenore admitted. “But that doesn’t mean I’m more partial to him—or to any of you. I love my children equally.”

“I know,” Deborah conceded. “And I’m glad you and Nathan were able to settle your differences. I know it was hurting you both when you were estranged.”

Lenore smiled a bit wryly. “I could never stay angry with Nathan for long. No one could.”

“Except me, of course,” Deborah murmured into her coffee cup.

“Except you,” Lenore agreed evenly, her smile deepening a bit.

“Still, you’re sure you haven’t gone overboard with this Isabelle thing? The way she tagged around behind you at the wedding yesterday, calling you ‘Nanna,’ treating you like her grandmother—that can’t be a comfortable situation for you.”

Lenore pulled herself straighter in her chair, her green eyes snapping with what might have been annoyance. “That’s nonsense. I’m perfectly comfortable with the way things are. I know you’ve spent very little time around her, but Isabelle is an extraordinary four-year-old. She’s bright, funny and well-behaved. And, since Nathan and Caitlin will be raising her with their own children, should they have any, she will probably always see me as a grandmother. Why would I mind that?”

Deborah could think of a half dozen reasons why—starting with the fact that Isabelle was the product of an extramarital affair between her father, former gubernatorial candidate Stuart McCloud, and a young campaign worker only a couple of years older than Deborah. The affair had become public only months before the election, putting an end to Stuart’s campaign—and to his thirty-year marriage to Lenore, who had been both humiliated and devastated by the scandal. Still, Lenore had held her head high with characteristic dignity and poise.

A senior in an out-of-state college at the time, Deborah had never again spoken to her father after he left his family to marry his young mistress. Nathan-the-peacemaker had been the only one of the siblings to maintain a relationship with their father, though it had been a distant one since Stuart and Kimberly had moved to California to begin their new life together. Nathan was the only one who had visited Stuart there, where he had fallen hard for his little half sister.

When Stuart and Kimberly had died in a tourist accident in Mexico just over a year ago, Nathan had been named executor of the orphaned toddler’s inheritance. And when arrangements for her care in California had fallen through, Nathan had brought her into his home, had himself appointed her guardian and announced his intention to raise her himself. With his new wife’s help, of course.

Lenore hadn’t accepted that development easily. At first, she had felt hurt and betrayed by Nathan’s actions, refusing to have anything to do with the child. But when it had become apparent that Nathan’s choice had been made and that she would push him away permanently if she refused to acknowledge the child who was now such an important part of his life, she had gracefully relented. Announcing that she would fill the role of surrogate grandmother for the child, she had once again earned the sympathy and support of her neighbors, who practically considered the generous, tireless community volunteer a saint.

There were times when Deborah wondered if her mother carried this sainthood thing too far. She was certain she couldn’t have been so gracious in betrayal. In fact, she still harbored some resentment that Nathan had been willing to sacrifice his relationship with Lenore, Gideon and herself in favor of their father’s late-life child. Even understanding his rationale—that Isabelle needed him more than the others did—didn’t completely heal the wound. But then, she’d never claimed to be as noble as her mother, she reminded herself.

A real class act. Deborah could suddenly hear the echo of Dylan's voice when he'd spoken of Lenore only hours earlier. And she frowned, because she had been trying hard to put that awkward little interlude out of her mind.

Because she could tell that Lenore was becoming increasingly defensive about her decision to include Isabelle in her life, Deborah decided to change the subject. She would not allow her father's actions to cause another wedge between herself and her mother more than a year after his death. "I'm sure you know what's best for you," she murmured.

"What's best for me and for my family," Lenore concurred firmly. "And I won't let anyone else's opinion of my actions change my mind."

Deborah wondered if someone else had recently criticized Lenore's generosity toward her late ex-husband's child. Were there some who thought the local paragon had been a bit too saintly this time? If so, their opinions obviously made no difference to Lenore. Deborah decided to keep her own opinions to herself from now on, at least where Isabelle was concerned.

"I'm so glad you're staying a while this time." Lenore's smile was uncharacteristically misty for a moment, catching Deborah by surprise with the swift change of mood and subject. "It's been so long since you were home for more than a long weekend."

Thinking of her midnight run for the city limits, Deborah shifted guiltily in her seat. "It's nice to be home," she said, trying to infuse her voice with sincerity.

"Have you decided yet about your next job?"

Deborah shrugged. "I'm deliberating between offers in Atlanta and Dallas. I've enjoyed living in Tampa for the past couple of years, but it feels like time to move on."

Lenore shook her head. "You've lived in three different states since you obtained your degree less than five years ago. When are you going to settle down?"

"Hey, I'm single, unattached and in demand. Might as well try new experiences while I can, right?"

"I suppose so." Lenore looked doubtful. "But it does seem that you would want to start a family soon. You'll be twenty-seven in just ten days, you know."

"Yes, mother. I'm aware of my birth date and exactly how old I will be."

Her indulgent tone made Lenore smile a bit sheepishly. "Sorry. I suppose I have weddings and grandchildren on my mind these days."

"No wonder, with both Nathan and Gideon being married so recently. But you'll just have to be satisfied with those two weddings for a while. I'm in no hurry to complicate my life anytime soon."

"I hope my divorce from your father hasn't soured you on the prospect of marriage. Not every marriage ends so painfully. And even though mine did, I have no regrets. Your father and I had many happy years together, and I was blessed with three wonderful children. That more than makes up for any heartaches I might have suffered along the way."

Since her parents' divorce had been messy, humiliating and entirely too public, Deborah didn't know if she could ever reach the level of acceptance about it that Lenore had obtained. But then, she had never claimed to have her mother's seemingly endless supply of patience, generosity, tolerance and forgiveness. Lenore wasn't regarded as a saint in these parts without reason.

Because Deborah didn't want to talk about those unhappy memories now, she abruptly changed the subject. "I'd like another cup of coffee. Do you want me to refill yours while I'm at it?"

"Just a half a cup, please—"

Before Deborah could even make it to the coffeemaker, the telephone rang. Both Deborah and Lenore looked at it in surprise. It seemed awfully early on this Saturday morning for anyone to be calling. Lenore moved to answer it.

Carrying both cups of coffee back to the table, Deborah opened the newspaper that had been sitting beside her plate and perused the headlines, making no effort to overhear her mother's end of

the conversation. She had just turned to the comics page and was smiling at Garfield's shenanigans when Lenore rejoined her.

Deborah knew with one glance at her mother's face that the call had been bad news.

Her smile vanished as she set her coffee cup down with a thump. "What is it? What's wrong?"

For some reason, she had a terrible fear that something had happened to Gideon and Adrienne on their honeymoon. Irrational, of course, since Lenore looked sad, but entirely too calm for such a tragedy, but it was the first thought that popped into Deborah's mind. After all, her father had died while on a belated honeymoon with his second wife, though she was annoyed with herself for remembering that fact at that particular moment.

Lenore sank into her chair and reached for her coffee. "Caitlin's mother passed away during the night."

Deborah was immediately relieved that her brothers were unharmed. Still, she was genuinely sympathetic for her sister-in-law when she said, "I'm so sorry to hear that."

Lenore sighed, her eyes sad. "It's a blessing, I suppose. The poor dear hasn't even recognized her daughter for more than a year."

"Are Caitlin and Nathan going to Jackson to make the arrangements?"

"Yes, they're leaving later this morning. They'll be gone for two or three days while they organize the funeral and take care of other final arrangements. With this being a Saturday, there's not much they can do until business hours Monday morning. Staying in a hotel there will save them from having to be on the road a couple of hours a day, and Caitlin said she would rather be there with her mother until after the funeral on Monday. It will also put them in town to meet with the bank and the nursing-home administrator to settle all the bills and close out the trust funds Caitlin had set up for her mother's care. Isabelle will be staying here with us, by the way. Caitlin said that would be much more helpful to her than having us attend the funeral service."

Deborah set her coffee cup down with a thump. "They're bringing Isabelle here?"

"Of course. You wouldn't expect them to take a four-year-old to a funeral home, would you?"

What Deborah hadn't expected was to spend the next few days in the same house with her young half sister. It was awkward enough staying here, anyway, but at least when it was just her and her mother, she could concentrate on the happy memories of her childhood and deliberately refuse to think about the painful dissolution of her family.

That wouldn't be possible when she was sitting across the breakfast table from the embodied evidence of her father's betrayal. As often as she had reminded herself that Isabelle was a permanent member of her family, and that the child couldn't be blamed for her parents' actions, it was still hard to be completely objective.

"No," she said a bit stiffly. "Of course they couldn't take Isabelle with them. But what about the housekeeper? Mrs. Tuckerman?"

"She isn't a live-in housekeeper. She's there during daytime hours. And besides, I volunteered to keep Isabelle. It will only be for a few days," Lenore reminded her. "They'll probably be back by Monday evening. And Isabelle really is no trouble at all. She's so behaved."

Deborah shrugged. "I'm sure it will be fine."

Especially, she added silently, since she intended to keep a polite, but definite, distance between herself and the child. Lenore would be the baby-sitter. Unlike the rest of the family—even Gideon, surprisingly enough—Deborah had no desire to form a close relationship with Isabelle. She simply wasn't comfortable with children, she told herself—particularly this one.

She had just finished her coffee when the doorbell rang. Lenore hurried to answer it, leaving Deborah to follow somewhat reluctantly. Caitlin, Deborah noted with a searching look at her sister-in-law's face, was sad, but composed, having resigned herself to this inevitability when her mother had suffered a massive stroke nearly two years ago. Nathan was a bit more subdued than usual, but his smile was still warm when he looked down at the blue-eyed and blond cherub clinging to his hand.

Deborah had been told several times that four-year-old Isabelle was the image of herself at the same age. She'd never known exactly how to respond to the observation, though she acknowledged the family resemblance. Dark-haired, green-eyed Gideon was the only one of Stuart McCloud's four offspring who hadn't inherited their father's bright blue eyes and golden hair. Despite common acceptance that dark hair and eyes tended to be dominant, Deborah had never been surprised that Stuart's genes had been as forceful and assertive as his personality. Nor did it seem odd to her that Gideon had been the one who was different even from conception.

She stepped toward Caitlin when Lenore moved away to speak to Isabelle. "I'm very sorry about your mother."

Caitlin squeezed Deborah's hand. "Thank you. I said goodbye to my mother a long time ago, of course, but I'll still miss my weekly visits with her at the nursing home, even if I doubt she ever knew I was there."

"Maybe she was aware you were there, but just couldn't let you know."

"Maybe some part of her did know me. It was that possibility that kept me going back every week."

Nathan slipped an arm around his wife's shoulders. "We'll be back in town in a few days," he told Deborah. "I hope we'll be able to spend a little time together before you take off again."

Family was extremely important to Nathan. Deborah knew that if it were up to him, he would keep everyone nearby where he could personally make sure they were all safe and happy. He would never fully understand Deborah's need to keep moving, content to live almost anywhere except the town where they had grown up.

Fifteen minutes later, Nathan and Caitlin were on their way. Thinking she would spend most of the day in the study with some correspondence and paperwork she needed to deal with, leaving Lenore and Isabelle to entertain each other, Deborah turned toward her mother. Lenore was checking her watch.

"I'll need to leave in ten minutes or I'll be late for my meeting," she said before Deborah could speak. "Isabelle, dear, I'll be out for a couple of hours, but you'll be fine here with Deborah."

Deborah cleared her throat somewhat loudly. "Um, Mother—"

"There's no need for you to worry about cooking lunch," Lenore rushed on, seemingly oblivious to the silent signals her daughter was trying to send her. "I'll pick up something on the way home."

"But, Mother—"

"I really must go," Lenore said firmly, her expression making it clear that she had received Deborah's signals but wasn't letting them deter her from her plans. "I'm the chair of this committee, and this is a very important meeting. Since you're here, anyway, there's really no reason you can't keep an eye on your sister for a couple of hours."

All too aware that Isabelle was watching the exchange with wide eyes and a somber expression, Deborah forced a faint smile. "Okay, sure," she conceded. "We'll be fine here during your meeting, won't we, Isabelle?"

The child nodded. "I'll be good, Nanna," she promised.

Lenore lightly patted the little girl's head. "I know you will, dear. You always are." And then she pointed a finger at Deborah. "You be good, too."

Isabelle giggled.

Deborah gave another stiff smile. "I'll certainly try."

It seemed very quiet in Lenore's house after her whirlwind departure. Deborah glanced at the little girl gazing expectantly back at her and wondered what on earth she was supposed to do now.

How had this happened? She'd come here to attend her brother's wedding and then spend a few days with her mother. She had certainly never planned on this!

"So, um, what do you usually do on Saturdays?" she asked.

Isabelle shrugged. “Different things. We shop or go to movies or to the playground. Sometimes we go to the dog store.”

“The, um, dog store?”

Isabelle nodded, golden curls bobbing. “To buy things for Fluffy-Spike, our dog. He’s a bichon. Mrs. T. is going to feed him until Nate and Caitlin get back home.”

Deborah knew who Mrs. T. was—the indispensable Fayrene Tuckerman, who served as housekeeper, cook and daytime nanny in Nathan’s busy household. But... “Did you say Fluffy-Spike?”

Isabelle giggled again. “I wanted to name him Fluffy and Nate kept calling him Spike because he thought it was a funny name for a little white dog, so now we call him Fluffy-Spike. That’s funny, isn’t it?”

It was the sort of name one would expect for a dog belonging to Nathan, Deborah thought with a shake of her head. Her impulsive and often irrepressible eldest brother had rarely been accused of being predictable. He’d taken his little sister into his home as casually and impetuously as he had the recently adopted dog.

Isabelle had always called her older brother Nate. Lenore had told Deborah that there had been some discussion prior to Nathan’s wedding of Isabelle calling Caitlin and Nathan Mom and Dad, since they would be raising her as their own, but that hadn’t felt right to any of them. They had finally decided there was no reason Isabelle shouldn’t call her brother and sister-in-law by their first names, though she was expected to obey them with the same respect she would have given her own parents.

It would be a casual, laughter-filled household, Deborah predicted. And yet there would be order, thanks to the briskly efficient housekeeper and to Caitlin, who was much more structured and organized than Nathan. Still, Deborah had been rather surprised by how well Nathan had adjusted to parenthood. He definitely indulged Isabelle, but stopped short of outright spoiling her. Deborah had heard him speak firmly to his little sister on a couple of rare occasions when she had needed correcting.

Deborah had no such confidence in her own child-care skills. She didn’t have a clue what to do with the kid for the rest of the morning, for example.

Gossip traveled quickly through Honesty, and Dylan heard most of it courtesy of his aunt Myra, wife of his uncle, Owen Smith, the town’s police chief. Myra could hardly wait to phone Dylan with the news that Nathan and Caitlin McCloud had been called out of town, leaving Lenore and Deborah to watch little Isabelle. Rumor had it that Deborah was baby-sitting that day while Lenore went about her usual busy Saturday schedule.

“I’m surprised Deborah agreed,” Myra added. “She never forgave her father, you know, and most folks said she was pretty mad at her brother for bringing that little girl back here.”

Dylan had no intention of discussing Deborah or her family with his aunt, who was well aware of the history between them. “Was there anything else you needed from me? Because I go back on duty in an hour and I—”

“No, that was all.” Myra sounded disappointed that he hadn’t risen to her gossip bait. “I just thought you would want to know what’s going on with Deborah.”

“It’s really none of my business. I lost interest in the McClouds a long time ago, Aunt Myra.”

It was a bald-faced lie, of course, he mused as he replaced the receiver in its cradle a few moments later. Though he’d made a massive effort to get over her, Deborah was the one McCloud who still interested him very much.

Not that he intended to do anything about it. Only a fool would deliberately stick his hand into the fire a second time.

## Chapter Two

“...And my teacher’s name is Ms. Montgomery, and I like her because she’s nice. My best friends this week are Tiffany and Benjamin. Benjamin got lost in the woods at Cooper’s Park for a long time, but Officer Smith found him. Danny made fun of Benjamin for getting lost and made him cry. I don’t like Danny and Bryson because they’re mean to me. They said my daddy was a bad man, but Nate and Gideon told me not to pay any attention to them.”

Her fingers clenched around her coffee mug, Deborah gazed at the child on the other side of the kitchen table with somewhat stunned fascination. Isabelle had spent the last fifteen minutes eating an entire orange without pausing once in a seemingly endless monologue about her life in Honesty. Deborah had a hard time following everything Isabelle said—even though she had long since figured out that the only response required was an occasional nod or murmured “mm-hmm”—but that last comment grabbed her attention.

“Who said what about your father?”

Licking a drop of orange juice from her lips, Isabelle answered easily, “Danny and Bryson, mostly Danny. He doesn’t say it much anymore because Miss Thelma said he had to miss playtime every time he talks about my daddy. Gideon told Miss Thelma to make Danny stop saying bad things about my daddy,” she added.

“Um, Gideon did that?” Deborah hadn’t realized Gideon had ever gotten involved at Isabelle’s school. After all, Nathan was officially Isabelle’s guardian.

Isabelle nodded. “It was when Nate and Caitlin were gone on their honeymoon and Nanna’s sister got hurt so I had to stay with Gideon. I told him Danny said mean things about my daddy and he made me cry, and Gideon got really mad and he went to my school and talked to Miss Thelma and now Danny leaves me alone. Mostly.”

Deborah tried to picture the confrontation between her tactless, blunt-spoken brother and the equally forceful and intimidating owner of Miss Thelma’s Preschool. It must have been quite a showdown, but she wasn’t surprised that Gideon had accomplished his goal.

Realizing that Isabelle was studying her gravely from across the table, she asked, “What is it?”

“Gideon said my daddy wasn’t really a bad man, but some people got mad at him when he married my mommy and moved to California.”

Deborah frowned at her coffee cup, wondering what the child expected her to say. Obviously, Gideon had been trying to soothe Isabelle’s feelings about her late father and he seemed to have done so with more sensitivity than Deborah would have expected from him. After all, Gideon had been estranged from their father for several years before Stuart’s ultimate betrayal of the family. Like Deborah, he’d had no contact with Stuart during the three years before Stuart and his second wife died.

As for herself, Deborah had never talked to anyone about what her father had done to the family or her feelings about his death and she had no intention of starting now, with Isabelle. “You can always believe Gideon,” she said instead. “He says exactly what he thinks.”

“I know.” Isabelle wiped her sticky hands on a paper napkin. “I saw some pictures of you with my daddy when you were little. Nanna showed them to me. She said I looked just like you when you were little. I liked the picture of you sitting on Daddy’s shoulders. You were laughing and you had a red balloon. You know that one?”

The muscles in Deborah’s face felt stiff when she nodded and replied somewhat curtly, “Yes, I know the one you mean.”

She could picture the photograph as clearly as if it were sitting in front of her—herself at five or six, blond hair in pigtails, her expression pure joy as she rode her handsome, golden-haired father’s

wide, solid shoulders. He had been a god to her then, and she his little princess. Workaholic that he'd been, those leisurely family fun days had been rare and she had treasured every brief moment.

He had spent so little time with his first family, his days filled with business and the demands of his active political involvement. Yet he hadn't been too busy to start an affair with a young campaign volunteer even during his run for the governor's office, and Deborah had heard that he'd been a devoted husband and father to his second family. Rumor had it that the tragic vacation in Mexico had been the first time he and his second wife had spent any time away from their then three-year-old daughter.

Was it any wonder Deborah hadn't been enthused about having Isabelle become an integral part of her life? She didn't blame the child for their father's sins, but she couldn't help being reminded of them every time she saw a reflection of her own childhood innocence in the little girl's uncomfortably familiar face.

She glanced at the kitchen clock, wondering how much longer it would be before Lenore returned home. She couldn't take much more of this salt-in-old-wounds conversation with Isabelle. "Aren't there any TV cartoons you like on Saturday mornings?" she asked, seizing on the first distraction that popped into her head.

Isabelle shrugged. "We're usually too busy on Saturdays to watch TV."

"Oh. Well, since we're not particularly busy today, why don't you go see what's on? Mother should be home soon, and maybe she'll have something planned for you this afternoon."

"Okay." Isabelle stood obligingly. "You want to come watch TV with me?"

"No, thanks. I have some things to do. Just, uh, don't watch anything inappropriate."

When Isabelle gave her a puzzled look, Deborah added, "Watch kid shows, okay? Cartoons or 'Sesame Street' or something like that."

As if she knew what kid shows were on TV these days, she thought as Isabelle left the room. None of her friends had children. Isabelle was the only child Deborah actually knew personally and theirs could hardly be described as a close relationship.

She stood to set her coffee cup in the dishwasher and throw away the peel from Isabelle's orange. She hoped her mother would be home soon.

Fate had not been very kind lately about granting Deborah's wishes. Lenore was detained by a crisis in her club that kept her busy for hours, leaving Deborah responsible for Isabelle for the entire afternoon.

Faced with trying to entertain the child herself for several hours or to let someone else do the entertaining, Deborah opted for the latter. "Why don't we eat a quick sandwich for lunch and then catch the Saturday matinee at the movie theater?" she suggested.

She wouldn't have to try to carry on a conversation with a four-year-old in a movie theater. Even if the film was completely inane, it seemed preferable to an entire afternoon of being studied by Isabelle's curious blue eyes. A couple of hours in a quiet, dark theater seemed very appealing to her just then; she could use the time to consider her options for her future.

It had been a very long time since she had attended a children's movie matinee.

A handful of popcorn hit her in the side of the head before the film even started. What seemed to be a full battalion of ear-splittingly noisy preadolescents dashed up and down the aisles, squealing and spilling sodas and snacks. Someone's cell phone played the "William Tell Overture" in lieu of a ring, and a couple of babies wailed. Deborah shook her head in disbelief, wondering who'd bring either to a movie theater.

Seemingly accustomed to the chaos, Isabelle sat quietly in her seat beside Deborah, sipping orange soda and delicately munching her popcorn. Okay, Deborah thought, so the child was as well-behaved as Lenore boasted. That didn't mean Deborah wanted to spend any more afternoons baby-sitting.

The audience settled down—though only slightly—when the lights dimmed and the feature began. Just as Deborah resigned herself to watching animated animals singing and dancing for the next couple of hours, a few stragglers entered the theater, taking the empty seats in front of Deborah and Isabelle. The woman directly in front of Deborah was of average size, but the one who planted herself in front of Isabelle was very large and wore her hair in a high-teased bouffant that would have been stylish several decades earlier. Isabelle might as well have been staring at a blank wall.

“I can’t see,” she complained to Deborah, straining upward in her seat.

The rest of the theater was full; apparently, this was the premier of a highly anticipated family feature. “Switch seats with me,” Deborah suggested in a stage whisper. “Maybe you can see better here.”

The swap was accomplished easily enough, but it didn’t make a difference. “I still can’t see,” Isabelle informed her, and this time her tone edged close to a whine. “Can I sit on your lap? Please? Nate lets me when I can’t see.”

The large woman with the big hair threw them a stern look over her shoulder, accompanied by a hiss that let them know she wanted them to be quiet. Deborah bit her lip to hold in a remark that would have accomplished nothing but ill will.

“Stand up,” she instructed Isabelle quietly. “We’ll sit in that chair, since the view is less obstructed there.”

She didn’t bother to whisper the latter words. She was forced to find her small satisfactions where she could, she told herself as she returned to her former seat and helped Isabelle climb onto her knees.

“That’s better,” Isabelle whispered. “Thank you.”

“Glad to oblige,” Deborah muttered. And prepared herself for an uncomfortable couple of hours rather than the peaceful interlude she had envisioned at the start of this outing.

Dylan figured that everyone deserved a small vice or two. His was ice cream. His favorite flavor was butter pecan, but he occasionally indulged a craving for rocky road or strawberry. Most folks who knew him well were aware that he could often be found at the popular ice-cream parlor next to the mall Cineplex when he was on a break from duty.

The mall was predictably crowded on this nice Saturday afternoon in late May. Dylan was lucky to claim a small table in one corner of the ice-cream parlor just as a group of giggly teenagers abandoned it.

He had lived in this area for most of his life and had a highly visible job, so he knew quite a few of the other patrons. He greeted them with nods and waves before diving into his treat—a double scoop of butter pecan.

As he spooned a second bite of ice cream into his mouth, he thought of the only lawbreaker he had apprehended the night before. Deborah McCloud. He hadn’t been prepared for that late-night encounter or for the flood of memories of other, more intimate midnight meetings between them.

Those memories had been haunting him ever since. It had been seven years, damn it. They’d been little more than kids when they broke up; he’d been barely twenty-three and Deborah had just turned twenty. You’d think he’d have put it behind him by now. God knew he had tried.

Yet all it took was one brief encounter with her to have him wanting her again.

He might have come a long way in the past seven years in a lot of respects, but when it came to Deborah McCloud, he was still an idiot.

A girlish shriek somewhere behind him drew his attention away from his ice cream. He turned just in time to catch the little blond rocket who launched herself into his arms.

“Hi, Officer Smith,” she said, hugging him fiercely. “Where have you been?”

He chuckled as he returned the hug, then set the little girl on her feet in front of him. “Princess Isabelle. Aren’t you looking pretty today in your royal purple?”

She patted her hair and preened a bit, showing off the purple knit T-shirt dress she wore with white socks and sneakers. “It’s new,” she confided.

“Very nice. But where’s your tiara?”

She giggled. “I left it at home today.”

“Ah. Traveling incognito this afternoon?”

“In...cog...?” She frowned in confusion. She was very bright for four, but that was a new word for her.

“Incognito,” he repeated clearly. “Sort of means that you aren’t calling attention to yourself.”

“Oh.” She smiled again. “I’m in-cob-neat-o.”

“Close enough.” He’d assumed she was there with Lenore McCloud, since he knew her guardians were out of town. Looking away from the child’s beaming face, he was caught by surprise to find Deborah scowling at him over her little half sister’s golden curls. “Oh. Hello.”

Deborah looked a bit frazzled, he decided, trying to study her objectively. Her dark-blond shoulder-length hair was tousled, and there was a popcorn kernel stuck in a strand at the back. What might have been the beginnings of a tension headache had carved little V-shaped lines between her intriguingly winged dark brows.

It looked as though some dark liquid had splattered one leg of the jeans she wore with a thin, dark, scoop-necked sweater. When she moved to one side of Isabelle, he thought she dragged one foot a little, as though her leg had gone to sleep and was just tingling painfully back to life.

She was still the most beautiful woman he had ever known.

Isabelle gazed upward. “Deborah, do you know Officer Smith?”

“Yes. I wasn’t aware that you knew him so well.”

“He’s one of my best grown-up friends,” Isabelle replied happily. “Adrienne likes him, too, and so does Caitlin. And Gideon and Nate are being nice to him now because I told them to.”

“I see.”

It was obvious to Dylan that Deborah didn’t at all see how he had suddenly become so friendly with her brothers, with whom he had a long history of animosity. Actually, friendly was a bit too warm a word to describe his new truce with her brothers, but he liked both her sisters-in-law. As a matter of fact, he and Gideon’s literary-agent bride, Adrienne, had recently signed a business contract together, something he had no intention of mentioning just then.

As far as Dylan knew, Deborah hadn’t been told that Dylan and her newest sister-in-law were now professional associates. Deborah didn’t even know he had any aspirations other than being a small-town cop, working for his uncle, the police chief. He’d just as soon leave it that way for now.

“Deborah took me to the movie,” Isabelle said, clinging to Dylan’s knee. “A lady with big hair sat in front of me and I couldn’t see, so I had to sit in Deborah’s lap the whole time, and there was a baby who kept crying, and the boy beside us jumped up to cheer when the good guys won and he spilled his soda on Deborah’s leg. It was fun.”

Dylan knew better than to laugh, but it was a close call as he eyed Deborah’s expression. He sincerely doubted that she would have described the experience as fun. “It was very nice of your sister to bring you to the theater,” he said to Isabelle.

“Yes. And she’s going to buy ice-cream cones because I told her Nate always buys ice cream when we come to the movies.”

“Yes, well, we’d better let Officer Smith finish his own ice cream before it melts,” Deborah said, avoiding Dylan’s eyes.

Dylan hadn’t realized quite how much Isabelle resembled Deborah until a very familiar, very stubborn look crossed the little girl’s face. “I want to talk to him.”

“We need to get home soon,” Deborah countered. “Mother will want to see you when she gets home from her meeting.”

“I’m staying with my nanna because Caitlin’s mommy went to heaven, like my mommy and daddy did,” Isabelle informed Dylan.

He spoke gently. “Yes, I heard.”

“Will you come visit me at Nanna’s house?”

Not a good idea, he thought with a glance at Deborah’s forbidding expression. “I’m pretty busy with work right now, Princess Isabelle. But I’ll visit you soon.”

Her lower lip protruded a bit. “Deborah, tell Officer Smith he can come visit us. Maybe he could have dinner with us?”

What might have been consternation darkened Deborah’s blue eyes. “Oh, I…”

Letting her off the hook, Dylan focused on Isabelle when he said, “I have to work tonight, Isabelle. But I promise I’ll see you soon, okay?”

Isabelle didn’t appear at all satisfied, but she finally nodded her head. “Okay.”

Looking relieved now, Deborah reached down to take her little sister’s hand. “Let’s order our ice cream before the line gets too long.”

“Bye, Officer Smith.”

“Bye, princess. Nice to see you, as always, Deborah,” he added dryly.

“Good afternoon, Officer,” she returned, her voice chilly enough to refreeze his melting ice cream.

What kind of fool, he wondered as they moved away, carried a seven-year-old torch for a woman who could hardly stand to look at him?

A chance glimpse at the decorative wall mirror across the room gave him his answer.

He was that kind of fool.

Going to the movie had seemed like such a good idea at the time, Deborah mused as she combed her tangled hair, scowling at the popcorn kernel that fell to the floor. How could she have known what an ordeal it would become?

How could she have possibly predicted that they would run into Dylan?

Isabelle hadn’t stopped chattering about him since they’d left the ice-cream parlor an hour ago. What a nice man he was. How kind he had been to Adrienne and Isabelle when they’d been involved in a minor traffic accident a couple of months ago. How strong he had been to carry Adrienne all the way to his patrol car when she hurt her ankle. How funny he was when he teased Isabelle and called her princess.

Apparently, Deborah wasn’t the only McCloud woman to have succumbed to Dylan’s lazy charms. It had been all she could do to prevent herself from warning Isabelle not to give her heart to the man; he would only turn around and break it. Shatter it into so many pieces that she would never be able to find all the parts.

The relationship between Deborah and Dylan had been too passionate, too complex and too volatile for her, as young and as sheltered as she’d been. At times, she had felt smothered, at others overwhelmed by the intensity of their feelings. Because of those factors, it had ended devastatingly—and perhaps inevitably, considering the differences between them. What few parts of Deborah’s heart had been left intact after her breakup with Dylan had crumbled beneath the weight of her father’s betrayal such a short time later.

“Deborah?” Lenore appeared in the open bedroom door, her smile both weary and apologetic. “I’m home. I’m sorry I’ve been gone so long.”

Because Lenore looked so tired, Deborah didn’t have the heart to complain about being left in charge of Isabelle. “That’s okay. We managed.”

“Yes, Isabelle told me you took her to a movie. That was nice of you.”

Deborah shrugged and set the comb on the cherry dresser in her bedroom. “I didn’t know how else to entertain her. She seemed to enjoy the outing.”

“Yes, she was just telling me all about it. She had a lovely time. Um...she mentioned that you saw Dylan Smith at the ice-cream parlor.”

Deborah scowled. “Yes. We saw him. Why on earth has Nathan let her get so attached to that... to Dylan?”

“I believe it all began while Nathan and Caitlin were on their honeymoon, when Isabelle was staying with Gideon and Adrienne. Dylan helped Adrienne when she was injured in a car accident, and the friendship grew from there. Adrienne seems to have grown almost as fond of Dylan as Isabelle—in a purely platonic way, of course,” she added unnecessarily.

“I’m still surprised that Gideon doesn’t object to his wife being buddies with one of his oldest enemies.”

“Obviously, Adrienne is free to choose her own friends. And, actually, I think Gideon and Dylan are getting along a little better these days, which is a good thing, since they’ll probably be interacting on occasion because of Adrienne. I wouldn’t call Gideon and Dylan friends, exactly....”

“I would certainly hope not,” Deborah muttered, appalled by the very idea.

“...but Gideon has become mature enough to put the past behind him. Gideon has probably realized how silly it is to carry a grudge for so long just because he and Dylan had a few confrontations in their schooldays. And Nathan was simply being the overprotective big brother when he objected to you being so intensely involved with Dylan at such a young and vulnerable age. But that all happened so long ago. I don’t know why you can’t let it go, as well—unless, of course, you still have feelings for—”

“I don’t,” Deborah snapped to prevent her mother from even finishing that sentence. “As I have told you plenty of times, the only feeling I have for Dylan Smith is extreme dislike.”

“Well, I like him!” Deborah hadn’t seen Isabelle appear in the doorway behind Lenore, but the angry outburst certainly got her attention. Isabelle was glaring at her, her little fists on her hips. “Officer Smith is my friend, and you should be nice to him like Nate and Gideon are.”

“Isabelle.” Lenore spoke quite firmly, a tone Deborah remembered very well from her own childhood. “We don’t raise our voices like that. It isn’t polite.”

“And, besides,” Deborah added when Isabelle subsided into a pout, “I was perfectly civil to your friend at the ice-cream parlor.”

Almost nobly polite, in her own opinion. It hadn’t been easy to resist the impulse to snipe at him, but she hadn’t wanted to upset Isabelle. But she would be darned if she would answer to a four-year-old.

“Go wash your hands, Isabelle,” Lenore instructed. “We’ll be having dinner soon.”

“That child is in danger of becoming spoiled,” Deborah muttered when Isabelle shuffled away. “It seems that everyone in this family indulges her. Even Dylan.”

Princess Isabelle, indeed.

“We are going to have to be careful,” Lenore agreed. “She’s had a rough time in her short life, being orphaned so young and moved around so many times. I suppose we try to overcompensate for that. I’m sure she’s a bit unsettled today because Nathan and Caitlin have been called away, changing her routine again. Routines are important to four-year-olds, you know. And she really is very fond of Dylan.”

“Fine. That’s between her and Nathan, I suppose. But don’t expect me to start cozying up to him just because the rest of the family doesn’t want to hurt the kid’s feelings.”

Lenore took a step nearer to lay a hand against her daughter’s cheek in a gesture that was as familiar as the no-nonsense tone she had used with Isabelle earlier. “You’ve never told me the details of your breakup with Dylan, but I know how badly it hurt you. And then your father broke your heart when he left us for Kimberly. He broke mine, too, you know.”

Deborah swallowed a hard knot in her throat. “I don’t—”

“You don’t want to talk about it. I know. You never do. But I need to say one more thing. Better than anyone else in the family, I understand how hard it is for you to accept Isabelle into this household. Into our lives. I know what you see when you look at her. Don’t you think I sometimes see it, too? I only agreed to accept her into our family when I realized that refusing to do so would place an insurmountable wall between Nathan and myself, something I simply couldn’t allow. His kind heart wouldn’t allow him to abandon his orphaned little sister when she had no one else to turn to, even if it cost him the rest of his family.”

“Okay, Nathan’s a saint....”

“Hardly,” Lenore murmured with a smile. “But he’s my son, and I love him. So I accepted the child he will raise as his own. And, in doing so, I found my life immeasurably enriched. As hard as it may be for you—or for others—to understand, I’ve grown to love Isabelle very much. The joy and laughter and affection she brought with her replaced the anger and bitterness and hurt that I had lived with for so long. And it isn’t just me. Nathan and Caitlin adore her, and even Gideon has learned to express his feelings more easily. It’s impossible not to smile when Isabelle is around. We haven’t forgotten how she was conceived, but we’ve put it behind us. And, in doing so, I think we’ve learned to forgive Stuart—to different degrees, of course.”

Blind instinct had Deborah moving back, away from her mother’s tender touch. Away from the unexpressed request she simply couldn’t fulfill. She would certainly never be cruel to Isabelle—to any child, for that matter—but she couldn’t promise to accept the little girl the way the rest of the family had. Not if it meant forgiving what Deborah still considered to be unforgivable.

“I think I’d like to take a quick shower before dinner,” she said. “I still have sticky cola all over my leg from the movie theater.”

Lenore sighed, but didn’t push, since she knew it would serve no purpose except to make Deborah more defensive. “All right. Dinner will be ready in half an hour.”

Half an hour wasn’t very long to repair a major crack in an emotional wall, Deborah mused as her mother left the room. But she could do it.

She’d done so plenty of times before.

## Chapter Three

Lenore called Deborah to the telephone later that evening. Before Deborah could ask, Lenore added, “It’s Lindsey Newman.”

Deborah lifted her eyebrows in surprise. She couldn’t imagine why a woman she hadn’t seen in years would be calling her at her mother’s house. “Did she say what she wants?”

“No, she just asked if you were available to speak to her. You can take it in the den, if you like. I’ll be in the kitchen, making a cake for tomorrow’s church potluck.”

Deborah had been sitting in the den since dinner with her face buried in a thick book, leaving Lenore to help Isabelle with her bath, then read her stories and tuck her into bed. They’d all been perfectly courteous during dinner, Isabelle having returned to her sunny mood. Everyone had been very careful not to mention Dylan’s name, but Deborah had been ready for time to herself by the end of the meal.

She picked up the phone to find out why her peaceful solitude had been interrupted. “Hello?”

“Deborah, hi. It’s Lindsey Newman.”

“Lindsey. It’s been a long time.” There was a question implied in the statement, a polite prompting for the reason for the call.

“I know. Except for seeing each other at the weddings, we’ve hardly had a chance to speak in the past few years. Seems like when you’re in town, I’m always gone. Anyway, I know you’re wondering why I called.”

“Well, as a matter of fact...”

“I wanted to ask if you’re free for lunch tomorrow. Or if not lunch, maybe dinner?”

Frowning in genuine bewilderment now, Deborah answered slowly. “Actually, I am free for lunch. My mother’s got some sort of potluck thing at her church that I wasn’t planning to attend.”

“Great!” Lindsey’s voice practically bubbled with satisfaction. “So can you meet me? How about pizza? It’s been ages since I’ve had pizza.”

“I suppose I can. Is there any particular reason we’re meeting for lunch tomorrow or is it just for the pleasure of my company?”

Lindsey laughed. “Actually, there is a reason. But if you don’t mind, I’d like to wait until tomorrow to discuss it with you.”

“Okay, sure.” Though still confused, Deborah was perfectly willing to meet Lindsey for lunch. They didn’t know each other very well, Lindsey having been a couple of years ahead of Deborah in school, but Deborah had always liked the bubbly redhead. She was sure their lunch would be much more entertaining than the church potluck her mother had been trying to talk her into attending.

She was still curious when she entered the designated pizzeria at one o’clock the next afternoon. They had chosen the time in hopes of avoiding the noon rush, but the place was still crowded. She was glad Lindsey had arrived early enough to have a table waiting when Deborah walked in.

Wearing a hot-pink jersey T-shirt with a hot-pink-and-orange flippy chiffon skirt, Lindsey stood to greet her. The colors should have been awful with her mop of red curls, but somehow it all worked, making Lindsey look bright and fresh and cheerful. In contrast, Deborah felt almost subdued in the red polo shirt she had paired with a short, straight khaki skirt.

“It’s really good to see you,” Lindsey said with a warm smile, her eyes sparkling with characteristic enthusiasm. “You look great, by the way. Love the hair.”

“Thanks. You look good, too.”

They took their seats at opposite sides of the booth, then chatted about inconsequential topics until they’d placed their orders and received their food. Lindsey was a close friend of Caitlin’s and had been the maid of honor in her wedding, so she and Deborah had no trouble making conversation, though they had spent little time together in the past.

“I always thought Caitlin and Nathan would make a good couple,” Lindsey said as she lifted a slice of Canadian-bacon-and-mushroom pizza. “Ever since he hired her as his partner in the law firm, there was always something special between them. Of course, when he took in your little sister, I wondered if Caitlin was prepared for a ready-made family, but it seems to be working out just fine.”

“Yes, the three of them seem very close.”

“I don’t know if I would have the nerve to start out a new marriage with a three-year-old to raise. I’ve sort of made it a policy not to date guys with kids. Too many complications.”

“Exactly the way I feel about it,” Deborah agreed, reaching for her soda.

Lindsey sighed. “Not that I ever have time to date, as much as I travel for my job. Which, by the way, brings me to what I wanted to discuss with you.”

Deborah lifted an eyebrow. She knew that Lindsey was a sales rep for a local company; she believed they manufactured fishing lures or some such sports-related merchandise. She couldn’t imagine what that had to do with her. “Oh?”

“Yeah. Rumor has it you’re between jobs right now.”

“In a way. I recently completed a contract in Tampa, and now I’m considering some other offers. But I really wouldn’t be interested in selling fishing lures.”

Lindsey laughed and shook her head. “I’m not suggesting you should. Actually, I’m considering opening a business here in Honesty, and I wondered if you would be interested in becoming a partner.”

Deborah set her plastic tumbler down to study the other woman in surprise. “Really? What sort of business?”

“It would be a franchise store. A company based in Chicago is manufacturing a line of modular office furnishings—some of the coolest stuff I’ve seen on the market. I’m not sure if you’re aware that my degree was in interior design. A long way from fishing lures, I know, but it’s something I’ve always been interested in. I sort of stumbled into the sales job when I needed to pay off college loans. It’s been so profitable, I’ve been slow to give it up, but now I’m ready to be self-employed and cut out some of the travel. Selling this furniture intrigues me, and since I know office design is your area...”

Deborah was technically considered an efficiency design consultant, her specialty being the maximization of office work space and effective traffic-pattern management. She didn’t select colors or fabrics or furnishings as much as she arranged for the best use of limited space, and her services had been in increasing demand among growing businesses that weren’t yet ready to expand into larger spaces.

She liked her job. Never too long in one place, no getting attached to people and then having to say goodbye. She much preferred dealing with blueprints and cutouts than trying to understand the complex workings of other peoples’ minds.

“I know you’ve been freelancing, and I’m sure you like it that way,” Lindsey rushed on when Deborah didn’t immediately speak. “But, think about it. Wouldn’t it be nice to expand the services you can offer? To provide modern furnishings that work well with your space-usage expertise? A partner to share the workload? To bounce ideas off?”

Deborah had certainly considered similar projects before. She had interned with several interior-design firms during college and had received offers during the past couple of years while she’d worked as a freelancer, primarily on word-of-mouth referrals. She hadn’t been getting rich, but she’d been living comfortably. Mostly, she’d been completely self-sufficient, dependent on no one, answerable only to herself, all of which had seemed very important to her since she’d left college.

“Surely you’ve noticed that this area is doing quite well business-wise?” Lindsey added, her pitch obviously well-rehearsed. “It’s one of the fastest-growing areas in the state. Minority-owned businesses alone have increased by almost forty percent since nineteen—”

“Lindsey.” Deborah decided it was time to interrupt before the other woman pulled out a PowerPoint presentation. “Why me?”

“Because you fit so well into the business plan I envision,” Lindsey replied promptly. “I’ve followed reports of your career with both interest and envy. When Caitlin mentioned that you just finished a job and were considering new offers, it seemed the perfect time to approach you with mine.”

“This has really caught me out of the blue.”

“I realize that. And I hope you understand that I’m certainly not expecting an immediate answer. Take all the time you like to think about it; I’ve got to make a short sales trip early this week, anyway.”

“To be honest, I hadn’t planned to move back to this area. There’s an advantage to quiet anonymity, you know.”

Lindsey smiled in commiseration. “Don’t I know it. Nearly everyone around here has known me all my life, and they feel that gives them the right to comment on my personal business whenever they like.”

“Exactly. And it isn’t as if my family hasn’t had its share of public problems,” Deborah added in a mutter.

“I know. There will always be gossip, I suppose, but Nathan and Gideon seem to have risen above it very well. Nathan and Caitlin’s law firm is thriving, and Gideon’s really starting to hit it big with his writing. And your mother is certainly a highly respected member of the community.”

That understatement made Deborah grimace. “Yes, well, I’m not sure I want to take a place here among them. I rather like being completely on my own.”

“I’ve been on my own for a while, too—even though I still live in the town where I grew up. Sometimes it gets sort of . . . I don’t know . . . lonely.” Lindsey’s somber expression lasted only a moment, and then she replaced it with her usual cheery smile. “But there are certainly advantages to it, as well. So take all the time you need to think about my offer. But promise me you will think about it.”

“I’ll think about it,” Deborah replied. Why not? Thinking certainly didn’t involve obligation.

The brightness of Lindsey’s smile increased by several watts. “Thanks. I’ve brought along a file full of catalogues and figures and projections—you’ll find I’ve been doing my homework.”

“Apparently so.”

A tall, broad-shouldered man with fussily styled, thinning light-brown hair, sun-narrowed blue eyes and a shark’s smile paused beside their table. “Well, hey, Deborah. Looking good. Haven’t seen you around in a while.”

Deborah gave him a sidelong glance. “Let’s keep it that way a while longer, shall we?”

Lindsey giggled.

Kirk Sawyer, former pro football player turned pitchman for his father’s automobile dealership, scowled. “You always were a snotty bitch.”

“And I’ve gotten even better at it since you used to annoy the hell out of me in school. Don’t hang around and make me demonstrate it.”

He snorted and turned to stalk away. His arrogant footsteps weren’t quite steady; Kirk was rapidly becoming the town drunk, even though he still thought of himself as the local hero.

It hadn’t been ruined knees alone that had destroyed Kirk’s athletic career, though he would never admit that his problems had run much deeper. His daddy took good care of him, Deborah thought with a shake of her head. It was because of Bill Sawyer’s pleas that Nathan had reluctantly defended Kirk in several DUI cases, until he’d finally had enough and refused to serve as Kirk’s lawyer.

“Way to go, Deborah,” Lindsey murmured. “That guy gives me the creeps. He made a heavy pass at me at a club one night. Thought I was going to have to pull out the pepper spray, but Dylan Smith was there to help me out.”

“Of course he was.” Former bad boy Dylan had somehow become the new local hero, Deborah thought, bemused by the reversals of fortune.

“Enough business. Let’s rehash your brother’s wedding.”

Smiling at the abrupt change of subject, Deborah asked, “Which brother? They’ve both had weddings this year.”

“The latest. Gideon. Everyone was so surprised when he suddenly up and married his New York agent. Word is they’re going to split their time between Honesty and New York—mostly Honesty, since everyone knows how much Gideon hates having lots of people around.”

“Yes, that’s their plan.”

“Adrienne seems confident she can handle her clients’ business from here, for the most part. She told Caitlin she’s going to cut back to just a select few. Gideon, of course, and a couple of other long-time clients. And now Dylan. That was certainly a shock.”

A half-eaten slice of pizza fell from Deborah’s suddenly nerveless fingers, landing with a splat on her plate. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“Dylan Smith. You haven’t heard yet? Dylan hasn’t said much about it, but you know how word gets around. Yolanda Krump found out that Adrienne has agreed to represent Dylan for a novel he has written. Yolanda’s sister works at the post office, you know. She’s the one who let the news slip. Yolanda is irate, of course, because Adrienne declined to represent that rambling so-called work of autobiographical fiction Yolanda’s been babbling about for ages.”

“Dylan’s written a book.” It was the only part of Lindsey’s explanation Deborah could focus on just then. “And Adrienne’s representing him.”

“Kicker, isn’t it? Especially since everyone knows he and Gideon have never exactly gotten along. And now Gideon’s wife is his agent and Dylan’s. One of those small-world things.” Lindsey took a sip of her cola, then suddenly tilted her head. “You and Dylan were once an item, weren’t you?”

“A long time ago,” Deborah muttered, well aware that Lindsey already knew. “Back when we were just kids.”

“So did you know then that he had aspirations of being a writer?”

“No.”

“Ironic, isn’t it, that he and Gideon have so much in common, really? Both good-looking guys, close to the same age, both writers.”

“Lindsey.”

“Mm?”

“If you want me even to consider a business partnership with you, you have to promise one thing.”

“Which is?”

“We don’t talk about Dylan Smith.”

“Oh.” Lindsey’s expression turned speculative. “Sore subject?”

“You could say that.”

“So, um, Dylan who?”

Deborah nodded in satisfaction. “Exactly.”

Deborah was fuming when she stormed into her mother’s house. During the drive back, she had tried very hard to concentrate on Lindsey’s business offer, but her thoughts kept circling back to the same infuriating point.

“Mother!”

Lenore appeared in the living-room doorway with an expression that conveyed both curiosity and displeasure. “Honestly, Deborah, there’s no need to shout. How was your lunch with Lindsey?”

“Did you know Dylan Smith has written a book? And that Adrienne is going to represent him?”

Lenore frowned. “I suppose Lindsey told you that. I wonder where she heard it.”

“You didn’t answer me. Did you know?”

After only a momentary pause, Lenore nodded. “I knew. I thought it was still a secret in town. I should have known better. I wonder how Lindsey found out.”

“What I would rather know is how—and when—you found out.”

“I bet it came from the post office. Dylan had to mail several things to Adrienne’s New York office, and you know what a bunch of gossips those folks are who’ve been working in our post office for the past thirty years. Especially Yolanda Krump’s sister Twyla. She probably told Yolanda, who spread it all over town.”

Deborah’s hands drew into fists at her hips. “Would you please answer my question? How long have you known about Dylan’s writing?”

“Not very long. Gideon told me. Adrienne seems confident that she’s going to be able to sell Dylan’s work, so it will become common knowledge eventually. Gideon figured he might as well tell me about it before the gossip broke—though it seems he barely beat it.”

“How could Adrienne do this to us? And why did Gideon let her? Surely he told her our family hasn’t exactly been friendly with Dylan.”

“Honestly, Deborah, I can’t believe what I’m hearing from you.” Lenore shook her head in disapproval. “To think that you, of all people, would suggest that a husband has a right to interfere in his wife’s business decisions or to forbid her from making a decision. Just as Adrienne has a right to have Dylan for a friend, she certainly has every right to represent him if she considers him a potentially valuable client.”

With a wince, Deborah cleared her throat. “That wasn’t what I was saying...exactly.”

“Then what, exactly, did you mean when you asked why Gideon allowed Adrienne to accept Dylan as a client?”

Deborah gave a gusty sigh and shoved a hand through her hair. Because there was no way to clarify her outburst without making it worse, she asked, instead, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’d been asked to keep it confidential for the time being. I don’t spread secrets or gossip.”

“You could have told me,” Deborah said quietly. “Especially me. You shouldn’t have let me find out like this.”

Her mother’s expression changed from annoyed to regretful. “I’m sorry, Deborah. I didn’t realize it would matter quite this much to you.”

Deborah drew her shoulders straight and lifted her chin. “It doesn’t matter that much,” she lied. “I just don’t like hearing family business from outsiders.”

“I can understand that. But you really shouldn’t let it worry you, dear. Adrienne certainly won’t be bringing her clients home for dinner. You won’t have to deal with Dylan any more than you have for the past few years. After all, he didn’t even attend Gideon and Adrienne’s wedding.”

Regretting now that she had allowed her emotional control to slip, Deborah masked her feelings behind an impassive expression and a shrug. “Where’s Isabelle?” she asked, firmly changing the subject.

“She’s in the kitchen making a collage with magazine cutouts and scraps of fabric, rickrack and buttons. It’s a terrible mess, of course, but she seems to be enjoying herself.”

“I’m sure she is. I think I’ll go catch up on my e-mail.”

“I’ll call you when dinner is ready.”

“Thanks.” Suddenly eager to be alone—even if it meant she was a terrible houseguest—Deborah turned and left the room.

She should have spent the afternoon thinking about Lindsey’s unanticipated business proposition—and she did, a bit. She thought especially about how accepting the offer would mean spending more time in Honesty, most likely increasing the amount of time she would spend around Isabelle and the number of occasions on which she would encounter Dylan.

A writer. She growled beneath her breath and plopped down heavily on the side of her bed. She had just gotten accustomed to thinking of the former teenage bad boy as a respectable officer of the law. And now this?

As irrational as she knew she was being, she couldn’t help suspecting that he had done this just to get under her skin. And probably Gideon’s, as well. After all, Gideon had been published

for several years, his thrillers having built a loyal and enthusiastic following. It had been through his writing that Gideon had met Adrienne, his agent of two years. When she'd visited him here in Honesty for business purposes a few months ago, their first face-to-face meeting, they'd fallen in love almost immediately.

Now Gideon and Adrienne were away on their honeymoon and Deborah had discovered that Dylan was also one of Adrienne's clients. What was she to make of that?

Nothing, she told herself. It was none of her business. If Gideon was okay with having Dylan Smith as part of his wife's life, Deborah had no reason to get involved. Except for the inevitable small-town encounter, Dylan was completely out of her life now.

Exactly the way they both wanted things to remain.

Isabelle attended preschool the next day, and Lenore had her usual busy calendar, so Deborah was alone in the house for several hours, something she assured her mother she didn't mind at all. She spent the morning studying the thick file of materials Lindsey had provided about the furniture franchise. She had finally succeeded in putting Dylan out of her mind, for the most part, and she was able to concentrate on business, except for three annoying incidents when the phone rang, but no one was on the other end of the line. Telemarketers, she assumed, hanging up irritably after the third non-call. She shared Gideon's extreme dislike for the pesky profession.

She had to admit that Lindsey's proposition was intriguing. She spent a long time leafing through catalogs of furnishings, and she liked what she saw. The furniture was of as high a quality as Lindsey had claimed, combining versatility with clean, modern styling. She could envision these pieces fitting very well into her clients' decor and daily usage.

Sales wasn't Deborah's area, but Lindsey was apparently good at it. With Lindsey's sales expertise and Deborah's design experience, she could see how they could build a successful business.

She just hadn't convinced herself she was interested in making that sort of long-term commitment. Nor in working with a partner. As much as she liked Lindsey, how was she to know Lindsey could be depended on for the long run?

Deborah had learned from experience that it wasn't always wise to put her faith in others, no matter how likeable or trustworthy they might initially appear to be.

Finally, driven from her room by hunger, she wandered toward the kitchen for a late lunch. She was a bit surprised to find her mother standing beside the kitchen counter, her back to the doorway Deborah had stepped through.

"Hi, Mother. I didn't realize you were back."

Lenore gasped, jumped and whirled around.

"Sorry," Deborah said, holding up both hands in apology. "I didn't mean to—what's wrong?"

Lenore's face was unnaturally pale, and her mouth was drawn into a tight line. She clutched a single sheet of paper in her unsteady right hand. "You startled me. I didn't hear you come in."

Deborah wasn't buying it. "What are you holding?"

"I, um—" Lenore looked down and Deborah would have sworn her mother's face lost even more color. "It's nothing."

She didn't accept that, either. Because every fiercely protective filial instinct she possessed had just kicked into overdrive, she held out her hand, speaking in the no-nonsense voice she had learned from Lenore. "Let me see."

"It's just some small-minded busybody's attempt to throw her—or his—weight around. Someone who gets a sick sense of power by intimidating other people."

"Let me see," Deborah repeated patiently.

Sighing, Lenore held out the paper. "It's trash, of course. Nothing at all to worry about. I shouldn't have even given it a second thought, much less let it upset me."

Deborah scanned the terse paragraphs with a hard knot of anger forming in her chest. "When did you get this?"

“It was in today’s mail. No return address, just an Honesty postmark, dated Saturday.”

“And this is the first time you’ve gotten anything like this?”

When Lenore didn’t immediately respond, Deborah looked up with narrowed eyes. “Mother?”

“It’s not the first,” Lenore admitted reluctantly. “But it’s the most unpleasant.”

“How many?”

“Three—maybe four. I don’t know. I threw them away.”

“Has there been anything else? Phone calls? Any other personal contact?”

“No. Just the letters. I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about.”

“You’re probably right.” But she agreed only to ease the lines around her mother’s mouth.

Deborah was furious and, no matter what she’d just said, she was worried.

As much as she hated it, there was only one person she could think of to turn to for advice.

Dylan’s mobile home was old but in good repair, and he kept it relatively neat, for a bachelor. It sat on three partially wooded acres that backed up to a small fishing lake just outside of town, giving him a nice view of the water from the wooden deck he’d built across the back of the trailer. He’d bought the place two years ago with vague plans of building a house here someday. When he was ready.

He had the money to build now, if he wanted. But, as he told all those who asked what he was waiting for, he wasn’t ready. There never seemed to be any urgency to build a house just for himself, and he hadn’t met anyone in the past few years he wanted to ask to share it with him. His dogs were company enough for now.

It was the barking of the dogs that let him know he had company Monday afternoon. Glancing at the clock, he saw that it was just after two, an unusual time for anyone to come calling. Putting away the lunch dishes he’d just finished washing, he wiped his hands on a dishtowel, tossed it on a counter and headed for the front door just as someone knocked.

If there was one person he would not have expected to find on his top step, it was Deborah McCloud.

Seeing her at his door, her blue eyes meeting his with the direct challenge with which she had always faced him, her dark-blond hair tossing in the spring breeze, it suddenly occurred to him exactly what he’d been waiting for all this time.

## Chapter Four

In Dylan's job, it was necessary for him to hide his emotions when he was caught off-guard. It took him a bit longer than usual to conceal his reaction to finding Deborah McCloud at his door.

His brief delay in greeting her caused her to speak impatiently. "Has the sight of my face turned you to stone or are you just trying to tick me off?"

Confident now that she could read nothing but lazy amusement in his expression, he leaned against the door frame. "I was trying to imagine what could have brought you to my home. I've got to admit, no credible explanation is coming to me."

"Just let me make it clear that this visit has nothing to do with anything that happened in the past. Between you and me, I mean. I'm here strictly because I need to ask your advice in your capacity as a police officer."

That drained the humor out of him. "Come in."

Though she held her head high when she walked past him, the stiffness in her shoulders told him she would rather be just about anywhere else but here. The fact that she was here was what had him concerned. Something must be seriously wrong for her to come to him for help.

She crossed straight to the glass doors at the back of his living room, looking past the small wooden deck to the glittering lake beyond. "Nice view."

"Thanks. That's why I bought the place."

She turned then to glance around the room, and he saw his home through her eyes. Clean, yes, but a bit shabby—few decorations, fewer luxuries. He just hadn't bothered. It was certainly not what the daughter of a prominent businessman and a dedicated socialite was accustomed to. The difference in their social status had always been an issue between them, more on his part than hers, he had to admit.

But she wasn't here about the past, he reminded himself.

"You want a soda or something? Coffee, maybe?"

"No." And then she made herself add, "Thank you."

"At least have a seat."

After hesitating only a moment, she perched on the edge of a nubby green armchair—a hand-me-down from his aunt Myra. Dylan settled on the green plaid sofa. "Tell me what happened."

"Someone has been threatening my mother."

That brought him sharply upright. "What the hell?"

Digging in the soft leather bag she'd brought in with her, she pulled out a sheet of paper. "This came in today's mail. She said she's received a few others prior to this one, but she threw them away."

He scanned the unsigned letter rapidly. "Were the other letters identical to this one?"

"She said this one was more unpleasant, to use her word."

"So you believe the sender's outrage is escalating."

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