

BRENDA
NOVAK



A BABY OF
HER OWN

Cherish

Brenda Novak

A Baby of Her Own

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Novak B.

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What Delaney wants... ..is a baby. A baby of her own. At thirty, she longs to break away from the constraints of her life. Longs to reach out for her heart's desire. She'd prefer marriage as well, but there's no man in Dundee, Idaho, she's interested in marrying. Then one winter night she and her best friend, Rebecca, go to Boise with the intent of finding a man for Delaney. She meets a handsome stranger named Conner, a man who might be able to provide her with the solution she needs... and the baby she wants! Afterward she thinks she must have been out of her mind. But it's too late. Because she's pregnant. And because the stranger isn't a stranger anymore. Conner Armstrong is now living on a ranch just outside Dundee.

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“You’re pregnant, aren’t you?”

All her fears concerning what would happen if Conner learned about the baby seemed to float at the forefront of Delaney’s mind. The possible custody battles, the difficulty of sharing a child, her worry that he might not be the best influence, considering what she’d heard about his reputation...

She didn’t want to do anything that would risk the security of her baby’s future. But the truth was the truth. She couldn’t get around it anymore. She’d cheated him, and her sense of justice demanded she admit it.

“Yes,” she said.

He gulped air into his lungs as though she’d slugged him, then jammed his hands into his pockets and whirled toward the door. Delaney thought he was going to walk out on her without another word, but after two steps he turned back. “You did it on purpose,” he said. “You meant to get pregnant. That’s what you had in mind from the very beginning.”

The loathing in his voice hurt even more than Delaney had imagined it would. “Yes.”

“And what the hell do you hope to gain from it?”

“Nothing. I just want the baby. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

“Yeah, right,” he said, and strode out. Then silence fell. But the peace was gone.

Dear Reader,

When I set out to write *A Baby of Her Own*, I planned to play with the “what if” concept of having my heroine do something most of us would never do, something that could change her whole life, something she might easily regret beyond any other action. I was interested in the emotions she’d face and how she’d deal with the consequences.

But as I got to know Delaney, the heroine, and Rebecca, her best friend, their opposite natures intrigued me. I found they had quite a bit to say about choices and maturation, friendship and unconditional love. Rebecca is probably one of the most imperfect “good” characters I’ve ever worked with—a real loose cannon—yet I love her as much as Delaney and would gladly claim either as my best friend, if I had the chance. I hope that by the time you finish this story, you’ll feel the same. And I hope that you’ll watch for Rebecca’s story, coming from *Superromance* in 2003. (Watch for my Harlequin single title, too! *Taking the Heat* will appear on your bookseller’s shelves in February 2003.)

I love to hear from readers. Please feel free to visit me online at www.brendanovak.com or send me a note—P.O. Box 3781, Citrus Heights, CA 95611.

Here’s wishing you the unconditional love we all crave!

Brenda Novak

A Baby of Her Own

Brenda Novak



To my second-oldest daughter, Megan, for her strength of spirit, her leadership ability and her constancy. Meg, you're a light to everyone who knows you, someone capable of great things because at twelve years old you've already learned the power of self-discipline. I can always depend on you to choose the right and stay the course, and that has been an incredible blessing. If you forget everything else I've ever taught you, remember this: my love is everlasting.

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CHAPTER ONE

“ARTIFICIAL INSEMINATION. Of course! That’s the answer.”

Delaney Lawson almost choked on her drink. Swallowing hard, she sent a quick glance around the redneck bar that was the center of Dundee, Idaho’s weekend entertainment to see who might have overheard, then lowered her voice. “I hope you’re talking about breeding horses, Beck.”

Rebecca Wells, her friend and housemate, didn’t look the least bit abashed. “You know I’m not talking about horses. I’m talking about you,” she responded, fiddling with her new short haircut. “Because of what you said last night.”

Delaney grimaced. “Forget about last night. Buddy had just told me that the two of you are getting married, that you’re going to be leaving the state in five months. And it was my thirtieth birthday. I had a right to be depressed.”

“I was planning to tell you after your birthday.”

“Oh, well, what are big, dumb guys for?”

“I can think of several uses for Buddy. But you weren’t upset about my engagement or your birthday. You were depressed because you can’t find anyone to love, and Aunt Millie and everyone else in this godforsaken town is asking when you’re going to get married. And because—more than anything—you want a baby.”

“I was depressed because you’re marrying a man you met on the Internet, a guy you’ve seen only once, and I’m turning thirty without the prospect of a family in sight. It’s all those things,” Delaney insisted. “Besides, Valentine’s Day is in a couple of weeks, which doesn’t help.”

Someone started the jukebox and Rebecca looked away. Delaney knew she didn’t like displays of emotion. Rebecca expressed herself with sarcasm and laughter, not words like I love you and I’m going to miss you. But Delaney understood how deeply she cared, and returned those feelings. They’d been part of each other’s lives for twenty-four years.

“I’ll come back and visit every chance I get, you know that,” Rebecca said after a long silence.

“I know,” Delaney told her. “I’ll be okay. I mean, we’re adults. We have lives to lead. I just hope Buddy turns out to be everything you think he is.”

“Buddy will drive me crazy, like he did yesterday when he let the cat out of the bag early—but we fit, you know?”

Delaney nodded, even though she wasn’t sure she agreed. Physically they were opposites—Buddy short, round and dark; Rebecca tall, thin and dishwater blond when her hair wasn’t colored something more trendy—but it was the differences in their personalities that worried Delaney. From what she could gather, Buddy seemed nice, but he was also quiet, steady and ploddingly predictable. She couldn’t see her volatile friend settling for a couch potato. Or maybe that was exactly what Rebecca needed. Maybe Buddy’s easygoing nature would temper Rebecca’s high spirits and they’d reach some common ground and live happily ever after. Delaney certainly hoped it would end that way.

“You’ll find someone,” Rebecca said, but her words rang hollow to Delaney, who was running out of patience. She’d wanted to get married for several years now and she felt as if she couldn’t wait another day.

“Maybe.”

“There’s still plenty of time to have kids,” Rebecca cajoled.

“Not if the next ten years go like the last. As much as I love the people around here, I don’t really belong to any of them. But you probably can’t understand what it’s like to feel so detached. You grew up in a family with three older sisters—”

“Who I want to choke most the time,” she interrupted, stirring her gin and tonic with one long fingernail.

“Still, you’re connected. You’re blood. You get together for holidays and stuff that wouldn’t be the same if any of you weren’t there. My mother died shortly after we moved here. I don’t know who my father is—even my mother didn’t know that. And I was raised by Dundee’s own Mother Teresa. Aunt Millie would’ve taken in and loved any child.” She sighed wearily. “I’ve been wanting a family of my own since forever, but it looks like I’m going to die an old maid.”

Rebecca licked her wet finger and leaned back to light a cigarette. “Then, do something about it,” she said on a long exhalation. “Get artificially inseminated.”

“Not so loud,” Delaney whispered. “We live in a small town, for heaven’s sake. This isn’t New York or L.A. And we grew up here. Everyone knows us. I don’t want word getting out that I’m considering something so...radical. It could embarrass Aunt Millie and Uncle Ralph, make them regret they ever took me in.”

“I knew it!” Rebecca clapped her hands, although she did it carefully so she wouldn’t crush her cigarette.

“What?” Delaney asked, exasperated.

“That you’ve been thinking about having a baby on your own!”

“And how did you know that?”

“I’ve seen you stare at the parenting magazines we pass in the grocery store. I’ve seen how you admire every child you come across.”

“Maybe I have been thinking about it,” she said. “But I don’t believe that doing things the artificial way will work.”

“Why not?” Rebecca squinted at her through the thin stream of smoke curling toward the ceiling.

“First of all, it’s expensive and my insurance won’t cover it. Librarians in a town of fifteen hundred people only make so much. And now that you’re going to be moving out, my house payment will double. Aunt Millie needs a few things, too, like another coat of paint on her place. Second, I wouldn’t even know where to find the right doctor. We only have a general practitioner around here, and I’m sure it would take some sort of specialist. Finally, I probably wouldn’t qualify. Don’t you have to be married? Or at least infertile?”

Delaney cast another furtive glance at the Honky Tonk’s fellow patrons. The divorced Mary Thornton, who’d been captain of the cheer squad in high school, sat with her crowd in the corner, but the place hadn’t filled up yet. Elton John was singing “Rocket Man” on the jukebox. He competed with the clack of balls coming from the direction of the pool tables, a television droning in the corner and Rusty Schultz at the bar, loudly detailing his frustration with a car engine he was trying to rebuild. “In any case,” she finished, sitting back to avoid Rebecca’s secondhand smoke. “I’m sure they don’t give sperm away to just any woman who happens to want it.”

“They might not, but I know a lot of men who would.” A devilish smile curled Rebecca’s lips as she tapped the end of her cigarette on a small tin ashtray. “Why not get yourself laid and be done with it?”

“Rebecca!”

Her friend held up the hand with the cigarette, fake red nails gleaming even in the dim light. “Come on, what about all those assertiveness training classes you’ve been taking online? You’re always telling me your instructor says to take charge of your life, decide what you want and make it happen.”

“I don’t think my instructor had something like this in mind.”

“Well, it applies, and getting pregnant wouldn’t be that difficult. First of all, a willing partner would be free,” she said, ticking the points off on her fingers as Delaney had just done. “So you can afford the mortgage and still get Aunt Millie’s house painted this spring. Second, you wouldn’t have as much trouble finding a donor as you would the right doctor. Can you imagine approaching Dr. Hatcher for a recommendation?” She took a long drag on her cigarette, then set it aside to smolder. “And three, if you’re picking up some guy at a bar, it’s better if you’re not married.”

Delaney tried to appear scandalized, but immediately gave up the charade. This was Rebecca; knowing her was the closest she'd ever come to having a sister. And as low as Delaney thought tricking a man would be, she was actually getting desperate enough to consider it. "It just seems so...dishonest. Almost like stealing."

"It's not stealing if he gives you what you want," Rebecca said, reclaiming her cigarette.

"Maybe, but I keep coming back to—"

"Your morals. I know." Rebecca angled her head so she wouldn't exhale in Delaney's face. "You've always had a few too many."

Delaney propped her chin in her hand and stared glumly at the glassy-eyed elk head hanging on the opposite wall. "I've had a lot of people to answer to. And not only Aunt Millie and Uncle Ralph. What about old Mrs. Shipley? She taught me everything I know about the library, groomed me to take her place. And Mr. Isaacs on the city council put in a good word for me last review, which helped me get a raise. Mrs. Minike volunteers countless hours at the library—"

"And you've hired her daughter to help out part-time."

"Shelving books for minimum wage." She rolled her eyes. "I'm just saying it isn't easy feeling obligated to a whole town. And with gossips being what they are—"

"Don't worry about gossip. I don't."

"Much to your parents' mortification, I might add. Your father is mayor of this town. I'm sure he'd appreciate a little more discretion."

Rebecca shrugged. "He's been in office so long, it would take a crowbar to get him out. No one even bothers to run against him anymore. Besides, ever since I took off with that motorcycle gang, the old ladies in this town sort of lost interest in me. Now when people mention my name, the most they get is a halfhearted response like, 'Oh, yeah? What's that Wells girl up to now? She always was a handful.' I guess I've already provided my share of the town's entertainment. They're eager for someone else to relieve the tedium, and I think it's your turn."

"My turn?" Delaney asked wryly.

"Yeah, the only controversial thing about you is your strange name. That raised a few eyebrows when you first came to town. I still remember old Mrs. Hitchcock shaking her head and wanting to know what your mama could've been thinking. But you moved here when you were six, so we've had twenty-four years to get used to it, and it's time for something new. I mean, look at you. You were a quiet, obedient child. You always got good grades. When we were teenagers, you won the baking contest at the county fair four years running, and you placed in the barrel racing, too. And now everyone stops by the house on Sundays to buy your pies, and when they walk away they say, 'That Delaney's just about the sweetest thing. I wonder when she's gonna get married.' Only there's no one here to marry."

"Most people would say there's always Josh Hill," Delaney said. "Or his brother."

Rebecca stubbed out her cigarette. "You know how I feel about Josh Hill."

"He's not that bad. I don't understand why you hate him so much."

"I know him better than you do. Anyway, he's seeing Mary Thornton, and his brother's met someone from out of town. The Hill brothers aren't exactly available. Which leaves Billy Joe or Bobby West or Perry Paris."

Delaney made a face. "Marrying one of them would be like marrying my brother."

"Exactly the reason I'm marrying someone who lives in Nebraska." She folded her arms and leaned back. "That and the fact that he doesn't know me very well. But my point is this—you can continue to let the town hem you into being perfect and proper and lonely your whole life. Or you can exchange one night of naughtiness for a baby. It's up to you."

"Isn't that simply changing passive behavior for aggressive behavior? My goal is assertive behavior. Assertive behavior promotes 'win-win' solutions," Delaney said, parroting her online coach.

“What’s a donor got to lose? I think most men would see hooking up with you as a win-win situation.”

Delaney took another sip of her margarita, savoring the salty taste and letting the ice melt in her mouth before swallowing. Every assertiveness assessment she’d ever taken had shown her as far too passive. She lived to please others, feared losing their esteem if she acted out or made a mistake. Maybe Rebecca was right. Maybe, instead of taking what life gave her, she should take what she wanted from life.

She smiled, thinking that sounded very assertive. Her coach would be proud. “I’d get to choose the father, see what he looks like. That beats the artificial method.”

“And getting pregnant the natural way is infinitely more fun than lying on your back in a sterile room where the only man within twenty yards is wearing a mask and surgical gloves, right? It’s been a long time since you were with a man. Don’t you miss it?”

Delaney quickly nodded. “Oh, yeah. Of course I do,” she said, but what she missed was having someone to love. Someone who’d love her, too. The physical aspect was nice—frosting on the cake, so to speak—but it meant nothing without love.

“When’s the last time you made love?” Rebecca asked.

“There was...you know, that one boy I told you about before,” Delaney said, trying not to fidget. “The one who came to stay with Mrs. Telfer the summer we turned seventeen.”

“Booker Robinson? He was a little bastard, wasn’t he? His parents sent him to the country to learn about hard work and manners because he was getting into too much trouble in the city, and he turned this town on its ear in less than a month.” She smiled wistfully as though she had rather liked Booker and didn’t think him a bastard at all. “That was the first time you were with a boy, but it wasn’t the last, was it?”

“Um, of course not. There was...um, Tim Downey, you know, on prom night.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“That’s it?”

“Isn’t that enough?” Delaney asked.

“That’s pretty pathetic for a thirty-year-old.”

Not for the daughter of a woman who rambled from town to town and changed men almost as often as she bought shoes. Maybe Delaney had gone to the opposite extreme, but at least she wasn’t like her mother. “I’ve been saving myself.”

“For spinsterhood. Great.” Rebecca finished her gin and tonic, ordered another one, and had the grace to wait until Maxine, the bar’s only waitress, headed back to the kitchen before adding, “Now I know why an illegitimate baby coming from you is going to scandalize the whole town.”

Something in Delaney’s face must have revealed her alarm at this idea because Rebecca added, “But they’ll get used to it.”

Delaney started wringing her hands. “You think so?”

“Sure. Look at how Millie and Ralph took you in and everyone in town’s adored you from day one. They’ll gossip and fuss and be amazed but, bottom line, they’ll secretly thank you for the juicy controversy and eagerly await the baby.”

The people of Dundee had been good to her. Delaney didn’t want to repay them by setting a bad example for the town’s youth, but Rebecca made getting pregnant sound so simple. One night in exchange for a baby. Delaney’s own baby. Someone to care for, someone to love. Someone to teach and to guide. Surely Dundee could forgive her one small indiscretion.

She moved closer. “If I do this, and happen to find...you know, someone who’s right, how do I know he won’t have AIDS or some other STD?”

Rebecca laughed. “Out here? In Idaho?”

“AIDS is everywhere,” Delaney said defensively.

“Well, your chances of getting an STD out here are pretty slim compared to most other places,” Rebecca said. “But I guess there’s no guarantee. The whole plan depends on a certain element of spontaneity, so you can’t exactly drag your target down to some clinic, right? All you can do is ask if he’s been tested and see whether you trust the answer.”

The smell of onion rings lingered in the wake of Maxine, who smiled as she bustled past them with platters of food for Johnny Coker and his new wife, a few tables away. “Your drink’s coming right up,” she told Rebecca.

“No problem.”

“What if he only practices safe sex?” Delaney asked when she thought Maxine was once again at a safe distance. “What good will a one-night stand do me if he uses a condom?”

“Probably more good than you think.”

Delaney scowled at the sarcasm in her friend’s voice. “Be serious.”

“I am serious. When the time comes, you just tell the guy that you’re on the pill, then get him so excited he forgets about everything else.”

Right. She just had to get him excited, that was all. A complete stranger! “I’ve always considered myself a better person than to do something like this,” she said so she wouldn’t have to focus on the mental picture of what it might take to get a man worked up to the point of total forgetfulness.

“You are a good person. This isn’t going to hurt anyone, Laney. It’s just a one-night stand—something that happens all the time with millions of people. You’ll go on your merry way, and he’ll go on his. No big deal.”

“What if I don’t get pregnant?”

“Then you might want to consider artificial insemination or simply wait and hope for the right person. But if you time it correctly, chances are good that it’ll work out.”

Delaney rubbed her lip. “It’s just one night. No big deal...”

“That’s what I said. People do it all the time.”

“It’s not hurting anybody.”

“What he doesn’t know can’t hurt him. It’s not like you’re ever going to go after him for child support or anything. And you’d take great care of the baby, right?”

The baby. Her baby. A longing so powerful she could hardly speak clamped down on Delaney’s insides. “Of course I would.”

“Then, that’s what matters. So there’s no problem.”

“Right.” Delaney stared at her glass, thinking maybe she’d drunk too much because this whole thing was actually starting to seem plausible. But she wasn’t even finished her first margarita. “So who do I—you know?” she asked.

“Anyone with the right equipment,” Rebecca responded. “Look around you. This place is filled with guys. Dexter’s right over there. He’s been trying to get lucky since the eighth grade.”

“Dexter’s been trying to get lucky since before that,” Maxine announced, catching the tail end of the conversation as she appeared with Rebecca’s drink. “I remember him sneaking into the girls’ rest room at school and looking under the stalls at me when I was only in the fifth grade.”

“Yeah, Dex has always been a little pervert,” Rebecca agreed. She paid for her drink, and Maxine hurried off to collect her next order.

Delaney rolled her eyes. “Dex, Becky? That’s the best you can do? He’s dumber than a doornail—not the kind of genes I want to pass on to my baby. Besides, no one from around here is even a possibility. How much of a secret will it be if I sleep with Dex and then wind up pregnant?”

Rebecca frowned. “Maybe you should sleep with several guys in the next few weeks, just to create some confusion.”

“No way!”

"I'm kidding," her friend said, laughing her deep smoker's laugh. "I think this is going to be hard enough for you to do the first time. Do-gooders typically don't lie well, and, let's face it, you don't have a lot of experience with the seducing end of it, either."

"Which is all the more reason we'll have to go out of town. Somewhere far away."

"How far?"

"California, at least. Isn't California the sex capital of the world?"

"That'll be expensive. What's wrong with Boise?"

"It's only a two-hour drive from here!"

"Exactly. It would save us plane fare, and it'd be just as good as going halfway across the country. Big-city valley people aren't interested in small up-country towns like ours. What are the odds of running into Joe Schmoe Donor from Boise out here in Dundee?"

Joe Schmoe Donor? Delaney liked the sound of that. Joe Schmoe created a generic, anonymous image, and donor carried with it the connotation of something freely given. She was only looking for a donor. Maybe she could do this, after all.

"We don't get Boise people up here very often," she mused.

"My point exactly. Boise is plenty far away. And even if you do run into your man later, here or anywhere else, he'll be none the wiser."

"He might suspect if I'm pregnant at the time."

"Why would he? Why would he assume he's the only one you've slept with? Heck, for all he knows you might've gotten married."

"O-ka-ay," Delaney said, drawing the word out and feeling more eager to trust Rebecca on this than she probably should. "I'll buy that."

"Good. So, are we going to do it?"

A gust of cold air and a few flakes of snow blew into the Honky Tonk along with Billy Joe and Bobby West. Although they were brothers, they didn't look much alike. Bobby was wiry and thin; Billy Joe was almost as big as a house. Like Rebecca, Delaney had known them since grade school. She'd grown up with the men in this town and doubted she'd suddenly find herself wildly attracted to one of them. If she waited for love to strike, she could spend the next fifty years alone.

"Okay," she said at last, straightening her spine. "We're going to do it."

"We are?" Rebecca's brows shot up.

"Definitely."

Her friend looked skeptical. "I don't believe you."

"Why? I can break the rules when I want to." Delaney nervously tucked her shoulder-length brown hair behind her ears. "I've just never wanted to before."

"Then, let's go." Rebecca stood, gathered her cigarettes and lighter and slung her purse over her shoulder.

"Tonight?" Delaney squeaked, terror seizing her heart and nearly sending her into cardiac arrest.

"Why not?"

"You haven't finished your drink."

"Considering our agenda, I think I'd better leave the rest, don't you?"

She started toward the door, but Delaney called her back. "Wait! I'm—I—I just need a couple of days to get used to the idea," she managed to say. "And...and...you talked about timing."

Rebecca propped one hand on her hip. "The timing is good. I know because we've been on the same cycle for the past few months."

"But—"

"That's what I thought," she said with an exaggerated sigh. Piling her things on the table, she scraped her chair across the wooden floor and sat down again.

"What?" Delaney demanded.

"You're not going to go through with this. It's just a dream."

“I’ll do it!”

“No, you won’t. We grew up two houses from each other. I’ve known you since I was seven, and you’ve never done anything wrong in your life. You’re like...you’re like Abraham Lincoln. Didn’t he walk some ungodly distance to return a penny? The store clerk probably thought he was an idiot.”

“I wouldn’t walk very far to return a penny. I’d just leave an extra one the next time I was in.”

Rebecca smacked the tabletop. “Ugh! See what I mean?”

The jukebox was playing one of Garth Brooks’s older hits as Billy Joe and Bobby West ambled over. Standing at the table dressed entirely in denim and wearing a pair of silly good ’ol boy grins, they tipped their black felt cowboy hats when Delaney and Rebecca looked up, then dragged over two chairs from the next table.

“Howdy, ladies.”

Delaney couldn’t help it; she frowned when they sat down. She could spend the rest of her life throwing darts and playing pool with Billy Joe and Bobby, or she could go to Boise and do something about getting what she wanted most.

Summoning all her courage, she stood. “We were just leaving, boys.”

They blinked at her in surprise—and so did Rebecca.

“Aw, come on,” Billy Joe said. “We just got here.”

“Are we going where I think we’re going?” Rebecca asked uncertainly.

Delaney nodded, then prayed she wouldn’t lose her nerve. One night. It would only take one man and one night, she told herself.

But there was another small problem. Delaney had stretched the truth a bit when it came to her sexual experience. When Booker Robinson had tried to get down her pants, she’d slugged him—probably the only aggressive act of her life. He’d been embarrassed about the black eye and had tried to take revenge by bragging that he’d gotten more than he had. Delaney hadn’t bothered to contradict him. It helped her seem less different from the other girls at school, less alone. And on prom night, Tim Downey had gotten so drunk he’d passed out before he so much as kissed her good-night. She’d had to drive him home.

In fact, Delaney was still very much a virgin.

CHAPTER TWO

CONNER ARMSTRONG KNEW what fun was. He'd spent a good portion of his thirty-one years trying to destroy himself with good old-fashioned reckless living, but he doubted he was going to find any excitement here. That, of course, was why the old man had sent him to Boise. Clive Armstrong was trying to teach him a lesson, trying to force the illegitimate son of his adopted daughter to straighten up at last—and Conner figured the only way his grandfather thought he'd be successful was to remove all temptation.

He glanced around the small hotel bar, which was nearly empty, and frowned, figuring it just might work.

Hell, who was he kidding? It had to work. Conner had run out of second chances, and although he'd never admit it to Clive or anyone else, he secretly embraced the challenge his grandfather had placed before him. He was ready to grow up, deal with the past, move on. He'd been ready for some time, but old habits died hard.

A work-roughened man with big hands and a whiskery jaw came in through the street entrance. Shaking off the snow clinging to his hat and clothes, he settled at the bar next to Conner, then nodded. "You new in town?"

He was wearing a dirty pair of Wranglers, a red flannel shirt over long johns, and no coat. Because of his ruddy appearance and seeming indifference to the cold, Conner took him for a local.

"What gave me away?" Conner asked.

His new friend ordered a beer and pushed his cowboy hat back on his head. "You look like a city fella."

Shrewd dark eyes flicked over Conner's turtleneck sweater, his jeans, faded but clean, and his pristine leather hiking boots. "You come up to go skiing?"

"No." Conner considered telling him what he'd really come to Idaho to do, then decided against it. He hardly looked the type, and didn't want to get laughed out of town on his first night.

"Where ya from?"

"Napa Valley wine country."

"Where?"

For a moment, Conner had forgotten that he'd been relegated to the American equivalent of Siberia. "California," he said.

"That explains it."

"What?"

"You look like a Californian. Must be the tan."

Conner didn't have California to thank for the tan; he had his old UC Berkeley buddies, who'd just accompanied him to the Caribbean. But he wasn't too grateful, because he probably had his affiliation with those same people to thank for the lifestyle that had brought him to this point.

The cowboy downed half his beer, then wiped his foam mustache on his sleeve. "How long're you staying?"

"That depends on how long I last."

He chuckled. "Don't let the snow scare ya away."

Conner wasn't worried about the weather, miserable though it was. His family—his mother's adopted family—owned a three-million-dollar condo in Tahoe, so he'd been exposed to cold and snow, at least on occasion. It was the boredom he feared in Idaho, the lack of contact with the real world. From what he remembered, there weren't many people where he was going. In Dundee most folks were ranchers. They went to bed early, got up early, worked hard and rolled up the sidewalks on Sundays. How was he going to fit in there? How was he going to succeed?

His uncles, of course, were hoping, betting, he wouldn't.

“What do you do?” Conner asked to keep the conversation going.

The man told the bartender to bring him some chips and salsa. “I’ve done just about everything,” he said. “Right now, I work for the county driving a plow.”

Snow removal. That sounded exciting. Maybe he’d underestimated this place, Conner thought sarcastically.

“What about you?” his friend asked.

“I’m a dissolute heir to a great fortune,” Conner told him, making himself into the joke he thought he was, even though he doubted he’d ever inherit a dime. His multimillionaire grandfather had no reason to give him anything—not when he had three sons and several legitimate grandchildren.

“A disso—what?” the man asked.

“A bum,” Conner supplied.

The other man shrugged. “Least you’re honest.”

That was the one thing Conner had always been—painfully honest. But he didn’t see it as a virtue. If only he could hide from the truth as well as his mother did, pretend the past had never occurred...

But he couldn’t dwell on Vivian or Clive or anyone else. Idaho was a test to see if he really was the no-good, lazy individual his uncles claimed him to be. Could he beat his genetic legacy? Compete with the great Armstrongs? Only time would tell.

His cowboy friend started on the basket of chips, and Conner ordered another beer. He was almost finished with it and thinking about heading up to his room to see if hotels in Boise had Pay-Per-View, when the street door behind him opened again.

“Let’s go somewhere else,” a woman murmured. “There’s hardly anyone here.”

“It’s getting late and it’s storming. There’s not going to be a big crowd anywhere,” another female voice replied, this one more clearly. “Besides, hotel bars might not be the busiest in town, but you won’t have to go anywhere to rent a room if you happen to get lucky.”

Get lucky? Conner turned to see a tall redhead with a petite brunette. The redhead was saying something about the clientele of a hotel being transient and how perfect that was, but her words fell off the moment she noticed him.

“Omigod, there he is!” she cried.

Conner stiffened in surprise, wondering if the redhead thought she knew him from somewhere. Not very likely, he decided. He would have remembered her. This woman wasn’t exactly the type to get lost in a crowd. Nearly six feet tall and bone-thin, she was dressed in a floor-length, fake leopard-skin coat, wore bright red lipstick, nail polish and high heels and had dyed her hair to match. She was mildly attractive despite all the fashion handicaps, but she certainly didn’t look like anything he’d expected to find in Idaho.

She immediately started prying off the brunette’s coat. Though the brunette obviously didn’t want to relinquish it, she finally let go, probably hoping to save herself the humiliation of an all-out brawl.

At that point, Conner turned away. The redhead was sending him overtly interested looks, and he didn’t want to be singled out by a woman who reminded him so much of Cruella De Vil. He had only one night in Boise, which made it pretty pointless to socialize. And he’d long since grown bored with easy women.

“I think someone’s got her eye on you,” his neighbor said with a chortle.

Conner shook his head and lifted his glass. “I’m not interested,” he said, but then he caught a good look at the brunette in the mirror behind the bar and wasn’t so sure. She had wide blue eyes, creamy white skin, a slightly upturned nose and a full bottom lip. Except for her eyes, which were striking because they were so light against the contrast of her dark hair, she wasn’t stunningly attractive. But there was something about her that was wholesome, almost sweet, and it certainly had nothing to do with her dress.

Conner sucked air through his teeth in a silent whistle as he let his eyes wander lower. Dresses like that should be outlawed, he decided, noting that she'd already turned every male head in the place, including the cowboy's. Black, short and clingy, the skimpy number she had on left little to the imagination, and this woman definitely had the figure to pull it off. Conner couldn't help admiring her firm, trim shape and some of her softer curves—until he met her eyes in the mirror. Then she looked at him like a rabbit caught in his headlights, blushed and tried to reclaim her coat.

The redhead would have none of it. They moved across the room, where Conner could no longer hear what was being said, but some sort of argument ensued. The redhead rolled her eyes, and the way she kept glancing at him suggested he played some part in the conversation.

A prickling at the back of his neck told him it was time to go. He'd had his wild days. He'd put them behind him and was ready to find something more meaningful in life. But the distress on the brunette's face kept him in his seat. Most women who wore such revealing clothes wanted male attention. This one seemed completely out of her element.

Letting curiosity get the better of him, Conner decided to stick around for a few more minutes. He even ordered another beer. He could usually trust his instincts, and his instincts told him the excitement level in Idaho was about to spike.

DELANEY HAD NEVER BEEN more embarrassed. She wanted to cover the scandalous dress she'd borrowed from Rebecca's sister, drag Rebecca outside and head straight home, snowstorm or not. But now that they'd come this far, Rebecca wasn't about to let her off the hook.

"Why are we sitting way the hell over here?" she demanded when Delaney led them to a far corner table.

"Because I need a moment to collect myself."

"Collect yourself? Why? We just got here."

"I want to sit back and check out the scene, all right? Can I have some say over what happens tonight?"

"I guess." Rebecca conceded this small victory to Delaney by finally taking a seat, but that didn't stop her from looking over her shoulder every few seconds at the guy they'd spotted when they first came in.

"Would you quit being so obvious?" Delaney muttered. There were only twelve or fourteen other people in the whole place, mostly along the perimeter, but Delaney felt as if they were all staring at her. "You're drawing too much attention!"

"I'm not drawing attention. That dress is drawing attention. I'm just making sure our man doesn't go anywhere while you 'collect' yourself. He's so hot. He looks just like Hugh Jackman, don't you think? I love the way his hair curls above his collar."

The guy at the bar did look like Hugh Jackman. He had coffee-colored eyes and hair, with short sideburns. Plus high cheekbones, a narrow nose and square jaw. His body type seemed similar, too—all muscle and no fat. But that was half the problem. Why did Rebecca have to choose someone so intimidating?

"If you think he's so cute, you sleep with him," Delaney grumbled.

"I'm not the one who wants a baby," Rebecca reminded her. "At least, I'm not in any hurry."

Because Rebecca wasn't the one who'd been taken in but not legally adopted, who was going to be alone, who'd always been alone. "Well, I'm not ready for this," Delaney said. "We should've waited until tomorrow night or next week or—"

"Or never? You would've chickened out. I know you. You would've started thinking about how unfair it is not to be completely up front about your intentions and—"

"Because it is unfair."

"Except that it won't cost the guy you sleep with anything to make you the happiest woman on earth." Rebecca checked over her shoulder again. "Now, go talk to him."

Delaney's stomach plummeted to her knees. "Just like that?"

"Why not? What are you waiting for?"

A personality transplant. This just wasn't her. She'd never come on to a guy before. Which was probably why she'd die a virgin if she didn't make some changes soon, she told herself. Rebecca had managed to find a husband and was going to get married. Maybe she should take Rebecca's advice on this. But why did her friend have to choose a guy who looked like he could be Hugh Jackman's twin brother?

"He's at the bar," she told Rebecca. "A guy who sits at the bar is interested in serious drinking, not socializing. We'd better find someone else." But when Delaney surveyed the lounge, she realized how hopeless that would be. Of the fourteen or so patrons, more than half were women. The men consisted of an elderly gentleman, a barrel-chested, bearded guy somewhere in his forties, two nerdy computer types who had their hair greased down and gave Delaney the creeps, and a redneck cowboy sitting next to the Hugh Jackman look-alike.

Rebecca cocked an eyebrow at her. "If there's someone here you'd rather sleep with, go for it. But it looks to me like Hugh's our most eligible donor. He's only drinking a beer. That's hardly 'serious drinking.' And he seems friendly enough. He sort of smiled when we came in."

"Sort of smiled? He ducked his head and turned away the second you zeroed in on him."

"Well, he definitely smiled at us in the mirror afterward."

Delaney didn't remember a smile. She remembered his eyes, though. They'd followed her, appraised her boldly.

"Go," Rebecca prodded. "The worst that can happen is he tells you he's married. Then you politely excuse yourself and we try someone else."

"I'm never going to get over this experience," Delaney moaned. "I just know it."

"Do you want a baby or not?"

She did. And she wanted to be pregnant before Rebecca left, so she'd have something positive to look forward to.

Taking a deep breath, she stood and forced herself to approach the bar. Better to get this over and done with, right?

She saw his gaze flick over her in the mirror, guessed he'd been expecting her—and felt like a complete fool. Especially since the guy sitting next to him was watching her far more eagerly, and she knew she wouldn't sleep with him if he was the last man on earth.

Relax. Pretend you're someone else, someone chic and bold and—she gulped—easy.

"Hi," she said, sliding onto the empty stool next to him. She'd been planning to order a drink to make her approach a little less obvious, but her timing wasn't good. The bartender had turned around and was busy fiddling with the television in the corner.

She glanced forlornly at his back, then braved a smile at the man she hoped would father her child.

He studied her for several seconds before responding. "Hi," he said, but he didn't return her smile or swivel toward her or do anything else to encourage her. It stung Delaney's pride enough to make her sit up and pretend confidence in what she was doing.

"You live around here?" she asked, keeping her focus strictly on him because the man in the red flannel shirt kept leaning forward to entice her with a battered grin. He might as well have been holding a sign that read "Take me," but Delaney simply wasn't interested. She'd do the artificial thing first.

"No, I'm just in town for the night," the younger man said. "What about you?"

Now that she was so close, she could tell his eyes weren't entirely brown. Gold flecks made them appear almost amber, and there was something inside them that seemed more worldly wise than Delaney would have expected for a man who seemed to be about her own age. After only a few seconds in his company, he reminded her much less of Hugh Jackman. He didn't possess the

same relaxed smile or laid-back attitude. This man came across as intense, shrewd, even unforgiving, which added significantly to Delaney's anxiety.

I don't have to worry about his ability to forgive. I'm never going to see him again.

His eyes fell to the cleavage revealed by her dress, and she instinctively moved to cover herself. Rebecca had insisted she go without underwear—there wasn't any way to hide the lines and straps beneath the stretchy fabric—but the lack of her most basic apparel made her feel completely exposed. Leaning forward, she folded her arms on the bar and hid her chest behind them, just as Rebecca came to her rescue by engaging the leering cowboy and drawing him away to their table.

"I live a couple of hours from here," she responded automatically, then wanted to kick herself for being so truthful. The less he knew about her the better.

"Oh, really? Where?" Unless it was her imagination, his voice revealed a spark of interest.

"Jerome," she lied, picking a town on the opposite side of Boise.

"Oh."

The spark died, and an awkward silence followed, during which Delaney curled her fingers into her palms and thought of all the ways she planned to torture Rebecca for pushing her into this. She was going to tell Buddy that Rebecca had a snoring problem. She was going to hold Rebecca to her promise to quit smoking, starting immediately. She was going to unscrew the lid on their salt shaker and—and what? Delaney couldn't think of anything terrible enough, not while she was feeling like such a fool, but she knew Rebecca deserved whatever she came up with. If not for her, Delaney would be safe at home dreaming about a baby...and doing absolutely nothing to make it a reality.

That thought sobered her enough to keep her where she was. One night, one man, remember? No big deal.

"What can I get for you?" the bartender asked, finally making his way over.

Delaney ordered a club soda and opened her purse to get her money, but the man surprised her by paying for it. "What are you and your friend doing in town?" he asked, once her drink had been delivered.

Delaney took a sip and focused on his hands, which circled his beer glass. They were big, strong hands. And he wasn't wearing a wedding ring. "Uh, it's a business trip," she said.

"And you're looking for something to relieve the boredom, is that it?"

Evidently he wasn't much for small talk. But Delaney didn't mind. Being direct could save a lot of time. Besides, if she had her guess, his type would be selfish and quick in the bedroom, which suited her just fine. She didn't want to enjoy the experience. That would make what she was doing seem even worse than it already was.

"I suppose so," she said, wishing her heart would quit jumping around in her chest. "You game?"

He took a drink of his beer. "What's your name?"

Delaney thought about using a false name, then decided against it. She didn't want the added worry of having to remember it, and as long as they remained on a first-name basis, she couldn't see any harm in telling him the truth. "Delaney."

"Delaney's some name. And that's some dress."

The way he said it, she couldn't be sure it was a compliment. He wasn't easy to read, but she was sort of grateful for that. His lackluster response made the initial contact difficult, but if she could just get him into a room, she wouldn't have a lot to worry about. He was too aloof to connect with her on a personal level. And he definitely seemed the type to take a brief encounter in stride. Rebecca might have been judging him on different criteria, but she was right—he was perfect for their purposes.

"And your name is..."

"Conner."

He didn't offer a last name, either, and Delaney took that as a sign that they were thinking along the same lines. "So, Conner," she said. "Do you want to..." She couldn't complete the question, but she figured he'd understand what she meant.

He raised his brows and looked over his shoulder. Rebecca was sitting with the cowboy, having a drink and talking while watching them surreptitiously. "Are you sure you know what you want?"

"What do you mean? Doesn't this dress say it all?"

"It says a lot," he admitted, "but the way your hands are shaking says even more."

"I've never done this before."

"Then, why are you starting now?"

Delaney hadn't expected such frank questions. All she'd hoped to do was catch a man's eye and dazzle him to the point that he'd give her what she wanted. Obviously Conner didn't dazzle easily.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Fair enough, but I've got to get up early. I think I'll pass," he said.

He stood, and she knew that in a moment, he'd leave and her best chance of making her plan work would disappear with him.

Swallowing hard, she caught his arm. "Okay, would you want to be a virgin at thirty?"

SO THAT WAS DELANEY'S STORY. Conner had known something was up. All the warning bells in his head had been going off. But now that he understood her agenda, he could definitely see her point. He wouldn't want to be a virgin, not with one-third of his life already over.

Hesitating, Conner stared down at the hand that held him, then at the honest appeal in the woman's face. He didn't want to be tempted, but he was. He'd been tempted since he'd seen her in the mirror, because of her eyes, not her dress. But he knew he was only setting himself up for more self-defeating behavior. One-night stands didn't do anything for him. He always woke in the morning feeling empty inside, as though he was missing something important. And yet here he was, hovering at the brink of taking the uninitiated Delaney to his room and giving her exactly what she was looking for, probably more than once.

"Don't you have a boyfriend?" he asked.

She gave him an "I'm not that low" look. "Do you think I'd approach a complete stranger if I did?"

Conner shrugged. "Some people get off on it."

"That's not my style."

Judging by the way she kept hiding behind her arms and chewing her lip, Conner believed her. She was far too nervous to be enjoying this. "You know it would be better to wait for someone who means something to you, don't you?"

"I'm thirty. I'm not sixteen," she said with just the right amount of pique to convince him he didn't need to coddle her.

"I realize that. I just don't want you to have any regrets later."

"Like I said, I'm thirty. I'm old enough to know what I want and to worry about my own regrets. I won't bother you with them."

"And if I still say no?"

"Then, I'll find someone else."

There he had it. She'd do it anyway. And hanging out at bars, shopping for a guy to relieve her of her virginity, was dangerous. If Delaney wasn't careful, she could wind up with someone who liked things rough. Or she could contract a communicable disease. At least Conner knew she'd be safe with him. He liked women, he treated them kindly and he was clean. He could do her this one favor, couldn't he?

He smiled at his thoughts, and she smiled shyly back. "What are we going to do with your friend?" he asked.

"Don't worry about Rebecca. She's engaged to be married. She'll just get a room by herself."

"You should know, I've never been with a virgin," he said, still half hoping to discourage her, "so if there are any special tricks for making it more comfortable the first time, I don't know them."

She couldn't quite meet his eyes. "I'm not asking for any special treatment. Whatever you normally do will be fine. I just want to, you know, get it over with."

Get it over with? No wonder Delaney was still a virgin. She was acting like she was about to go in for surgery, which, perversely enough, made Conner that much more eager to show her how good sex could be.

He glanced over to make sure the bartender was out of earshot. "Do you have protection?" he asked. Condoms weren't something he'd packed. Neither were they something he'd expected to need, at least not on his first night.

"You don't have to worry about that."

"You've already taken care of it?"

She nodded. "Unless I need to worry about protecting myself from—"

"You're not going to get anything from me."

Delaney seemed relieved. To her credit, his physical health had apparently been a big concern.

"That's great," she said. "So, are we good to go?"

She was back to the "get it over with" attitude, which wasn't natural. She was too attractive to continue equating sex with having bamboo shoots shoved beneath her nails.

Maybe by morning, she'd have a different take on physical intimacy. Conner sure hoped so. "I'm in room 431," he said. "Tell your girlfriend goodbye and meet me there."

CHAPTER THREE

ROOM 431. For a minute, Delaney sat at the bar and stared at the doorway through which Conner had disappeared. She might have stayed there all night if not for Rebecca, who came up from behind to see what had happened.

“So?” she asked. “How’d it go?”

Delaney wasn’t sure what to say. The cowboy Rebecca had drawn away was still at the table, but the bartender hovered close in case Rebecca intended to order a drink and Delaney didn’t really want him or anyone else to know what she was about to do. She still couldn’t believe it herself.

Taking Delaney by the elbow, Rebecca tried to steer her away from the bar, but Delaney wasn’t ready to go anywhere yet. “Give me a shot of tequila,” she told the bartender.

He seemed a little surprised that someone who’d just ordered soda water would suddenly go for the strong stuff, but he got her the drink, and she downed it in one gulp.

“I take it that’s a yes,” Rebecca said, pounding her on the back when she coughed and sputtered. “Or a very strong no.”

“It’s a yes,” Delaney managed to say, when her eyes stopped watering. She hated tequila, but she needed something to calm her down so her legs would be capable of carrying her to room 431. “Give me one more,” she told the bartender.

“Whoa, slow down, Laney. You don’t want to pass out before you get there,” Rebecca said, when Delaney swallowed the second shot as fast as the first.

“I’m done,” Delaney croaked. Her eyes were watering all over again but the alcohol was doing a slow burn in her stomach, and she felt heartened already. Grabbing her purse, she slid off the stool. “What are you going to do while I’m...while I’m...busy?” she asked.

Rebecca frowned at the cowboy waiting for her at the table. “I’m going to lose Lover-boy there and get a room. I’ll leave you a key with my room number at the front desk.”

“Okay. I’ll be in room 431. With Conner,” Delaney added. Then she squared her shoulders and started for the door, her eyes on the elevators beyond, but Rebecca called her back.

“Will you be all right, Laney? You’re whiter than a sheet.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“The hard part’s over, you know. You’ve just gotta—”

Delaney raised a hand. “I really don’t want a pep talk at the moment. Not for this.” She frowned. “I keep expecting to wake up and realize I’ve been dreaming.”

“You’ll thank me later.”

“If it works.”

“Just play your cards right, and it will.”

Play her cards right? She was a virgin. She didn’t know how to play this game at all. But she hadn’t taken those assertiveness classes for nothing.

The lobby was empty except for a night clerk standing behind the check-in counter. He was clicking away on a computer and didn’t look up as Delaney passed, despite the echo of her heels on the marble floor. She was glad; she didn’t want to have to smile and nod and pretend she wasn’t going to a stranger’s room.

She kept her mind carefully blank as she rode the elevator and navigated the long narrow corridors of the fourth floor, but all her fears came flooding back when she finally stood in front of room 431.

This is it. Tomorrow I might be pregnant or I might be sorry.

With a deep breath to steady her nerves, she told herself to take a risk for once. This could bring her a baby. A baby! And Conner would never miss what he was giving her. He’d never even know.

On the other hand, there’d be no going back....

She was still hovering in indecision when a bellman came around the corner.

“You having trouble getting into your room, ma’am?”

“No, thanks. I’m fine.”

“Okay. Have a good night.” He passed, pulling an empty luggage cart, and turned toward the elevators, but Conner must have heard their exchange because he opened his door.

“I thought that might be you. I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t hear your knock.”

Delaney didn’t mention that she hadn’t knocked, that she might never have knocked. She was too busy trying not to stare. Conner had taken a shower. He stood before her wearing nothing but a pair of faded blue jeans that had obviously been donned quickly—the top button was undone. His hair was combed but still wet, and she could tell he’d shaved, but it was his chest that made her mouth go dry. Broad and sculptured, with just a sprinkling of hair that narrowed into a thin line intersecting his navel, it looked like something she might’ve seen in a fitness magazine. Steam rolled out of the bathroom behind him, adding a bit of atmosphere, and Delaney could smell dampness and the scent of his shampoo.

“Smells good,” she said before she could think.

He smiled, and this time it wasn’t the social smile she’d seen fleetingly downstairs. It was sexy and sweet and nearly made her heart stop.

“I’ve been traveling all day, and I wanted to shave,” he said.

That was nice of him. Nicer than she would’ve expected.

“Are you coming in?” he asked.

She glanced toward the elevator. A simple no could still end this. But Conner reached out to her, and she let him draw her inside.

The Bellemont was probably the nicest hotel in Boise. It was certainly more expensive than any Delaney had stayed in, but then she’d only stayed in one. When she was nine, Aunt Millie and some of the ladies from the Rotary Club had taken her to Disneyland. They’d rented a cheap motel because no one had much money, but there’d been a swimming pool and it had seemed like a castle to Delaney.

She circled the room, noting the striped wallpaper and crown molding, the king-size bed, the mahogany desk with rolling chair, the entertainment center that housed the television and snack bar, two nightstands with big brass lamps and an overstuffed chair next to a table on which lay a menu for room service. Picking up the menu, she leafed through it, as Conner folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the wall to watch her.

“You hungry?” he asked.

She looked up at him, then hurriedly away because he made such a spectacular sight with his powerful-looking shoulders and arms. “No. I’ve...I’ve never had room service before. I was just wondering what it’s like.”

“It’s generally not the best food in the world, but it’s convenient,” he said. His voice was amiable, kind, but there was curiosity in his eyes and he seemed to be taking in little things about her that she didn’t even know she was giving away.

“Yeah, I’ll bet.” She gazed down the list of omelettes and pancakes, sandwiches and pasta entrées. “Looks like they have quite a selection. It’s expensive, though, huh?”

“I take it you haven’t traveled much.”

“My mother moved around a lot, but we didn’t stay in the kinds of places that have room service. Once we landed in Idaho, she was getting sick, so we stayed put. I’ve been to Disneyland, though.” She smiled at the memory, which was one of the best of her life. “I’ve always wanted to go back,” she admitted. Then, to counter the wistfulness of her words, she added, “I mean, when I have kids of my own.”

She set the menu down. “Speaking of kids, do you want children someday?” She held her breath, thinking that his answer to this question would decide whether she stayed or quickly excused herself.

He shrugged, still leaning against the wall. “Maybe someday, but I’m certainly in no hurry. I have a lot to do before I’d be ready for something as monumental as that.”

She nodded and some of the guilt twisting through her eased. See? He didn’t want children right now. From the sound of it, he didn’t want children for a long, long time. She wouldn’t be denying him anything. And she had no guarantee that tonight would produce a baby, anyway. It would put an end to her virginity, however, and now that she was this close, that was reason enough to remain. Thirty years of celibacy was enough.

“Would you like a glass of wine?” he asked.

Delaney shook her head. She didn’t dare drink more, even though the tequila didn’t seem to be having any effect. “No, thanks. I think we should, you know, get started.”

He frowned. “Are you in some sort of hurry?”

She wanted to face the obstacle before her head-on, endure what was about to happen and put it behind her, but she couldn’t say that, and she couldn’t think of anything she could claim was pressing—not at midnight. “No, not really.”

“Then, why don’t you sit down and tell me a little about yourself first?”

“There’s really nothing to tell,” she said. The room suddenly seemed incredibly small, and she didn’t know what else to do with herself so she perched on the edge of the bed.

“What happened to your mother? You said she was sick. I hope she got well.” He casually shoved away from the wall and came to sit beside her, loosely folding his hands between his spread knees as they talked.

“No, she died when I was seven.”

“I’m sorry.”

Delaney followed his lead and clasped her hands in her lap, although the whiteness of her knuckles indicated that her grip was far tighter than his. The scent of soap on Conner’s skin and of his aftershave was strangely provocative, and she could easily imagine how good it would feel if he took her in his arms—only she didn’t want it to be that good. It had to be impersonal, unpleasurable, simply the means to an end. “It’s okay. It happened a long time ago.”

“What about the rest of your family? Do they live in Jerome, too?”

Delaney knew he was trying to put her at ease, and she appreciated the effort. Having this man so close and so nearly naked was certainly unsettling, but she didn’t want to talk about her personal history. It wasn’t a pleasant topic. She’d been foisted on the community at large, and the people of Dundee had been kind enough to look after her, to care about her. Which made her feel like she had to make it up to them somehow. She’d spent the whole of her adult life trying to repay a debt she could never completely discharge, and didn’t want to be reminded of it now. Particularly since she felt she was betraying the same people she owed by doing something so far from what they’d expect of her, so far from what was right.

She opened her mouth to tell Conner she didn’t want to talk about herself. But the tequila was finally siphoning off the tension in her body and making her a little dizzy at the same time, so she lay back on the bed and pretended she’d had the childhood she’d always wanted. What did it matter what kind of picture she painted for Conner? Their paths were never going to cross again.

She told him a fantastic tale about the wonderful father who’d raised her and six other siblings, the sisters who’d married and had children but were still close, the younger brothers who were going to high school. She told him she grew up on a farm with fresh fruit and vegetables and long days spent playing in the barn. She even told him she milked cows in the morning before school.

“I thought you said your mother moved around a lot.”

“Oh, that was before,” she said quickly, cursing the tequila for making her so fuzzy-headed. “After she passed away, I went to live with my father and his wife.”

“I see. Sounds like, from that point on, you had the perfect childhood,” he said. He was now lying on his side next to her, his head propped on one hand as he gazed down at her. They were close

but not touching. He'd been listening—perhaps a little too carefully—and smiling and commenting, and surprisingly enough Delaney felt almost comfortable with him. She'd thought the tall tales she was spinning would push him away, keep him from glimpsing the real Delaney, but they'd done just the opposite because they'd revealed her most secret desires. She'd never revealed how badly she'd always wanted these things to Rebecca, nor certainly to anyone else. She occasionally dated in Dundee, but it was mostly group stuff—bowling league, softball league, weekends at the Honky Tonk. She generally preferred Billy Joe's company to that of most of her male friends. They always had a good time at the Honky Tonk, but he'd never made her stomach flutter, not like this.

“What about you?” she asked, trying to ignore the way Conner was looking at her, the fact that his gaze kept dropping to her lips as though he was waiting for the right moment to lean forward and kiss her. “What about your childhood?”

“Mine? Oh, it was perfect, too,” he said. She thought she heard a trace of sarcasm in his voice, but her confusion was deepening because he'd started trailing one finger down the side of her face and over her lips, which she instinctively parted.

“Are you okay with this, Delaney?”

Was she okay? His touch made shivers shoot through her entire body. But wait—wasn't there some reason she shouldn't be doing this?

One night, one baby. The thought floated through her mind, but its meaning had changed completely. At this point, that one night hardly seemed like much of a sacrifice....

“I'm okay,” she murmured.

“Good. Because I think this is going to be great. Better than I ever imagined,” he said, and then he kissed her. It was a perfect kiss, a long, slow “I'm not going anywhere” kind of kiss, and it nearly melted Delaney's bones. Her eyelids drifted shut as his tongue met hers, and she flattened her hands against the hard muscles of his chest. He no longer reminded her of any movie star. But something warned her not to think of him as Conner, because women fell in love with men over less than he was doing to her now. She'd assumed that he'd be quick, abrupt and selfish, but he was just the opposite. He was taking his time, touching her, caressing her, kissing her.

By the time she felt his hand on her leg, moving slowly up her inner thigh, her head was spinning. Her body instinctively arched toward him, but he didn't hurry his pace. He seemed intent on going by degrees, almost painful degrees that nearly consumed her with need.

“Conner,” she whispered, feeling as though she was hanging on to sanity by a very thin thread. She'd told herself not to use his name, to not even think it, but what could she do? It was printed across her closed eyelids like fireworks in the sky. She'd tried to distance herself by pretending he was Hugh Jackman, by telling herself that she was experiencing every woman's fantasy, nothing real, but it wasn't working. Even though she'd met him only an hour and a half earlier, Conner was Conner, and he was as real as a man could get.

“Let's do it now,” she whispered, her voice throaty, almost hoarse.

He said something against her mouth about not fighting him, about letting it happen naturally, and started lifting her dress. She helped him by wriggling out of it, then tossed it onto the floor, focused on removing his clothes, as well. He stopped her long enough to let his gaze sweep over what he'd revealed, and his smile of satisfaction made heady pleasure course through Delaney, obliterating the shyness she'd expected. Conner made her feel so incredibly sexy, so desirable and yet safe, accepted. She wasn't supposed to be enjoying this but, heaven help her, she was. She'd never enjoyed anything more. She knew she'd pay in guilt come morning, but that didn't seem to matter, at least not now. Such realities hovered somewhere beyond her immediate thoughts, out on the fringes of her consciousness, and were completely forgotten when Conner finished taking off his pants and covered her with his naked body. Then, after a brief flash of pain, Delaney felt what she'd never experienced before—a man joined with her—and it was a reverent, powerful moment. The orphan

was at last connected to another human being, physically and emotionally, and somehow she knew nothing would ever be the same again.

IT WAS CLOSE TO MORNING. Conner wasn't sure what had pulled him from sleep, but he certainly wasn't opposed to waking up, not with Delaney still in his bed and not when he felt so completely boneless, weightless and relaxed.

Delaney was lying on her side facing away from him, her breathing steady and even, and he was cradling her with his body, enjoying the feel of her backside pressed against him. He'd known when he invited her to his room that he wasn't doing it for the altruistic motives he'd kidded himself about in the bar, but he hadn't expected anything like the kind of emotionally charged hours they'd shared. Last night had not been a casual one-night stand. Conner wasn't sure if it was her innocence or her vulnerability or even something else, but Delaney had touched him deeply. She'd taken what they'd done far beyond the physical. And he had enough experience with women to know the difference.

Angling his head to see her face in the light that was just starting to creep through the crack in the draperies, Conner couldn't help smiling. He must have been blind not to think her absolutely stunning the moment she entered the bar last night. The more he stared at her, the more he liked what he saw. He loved the way her eyes closed and her lips parted when he caressed her, the dimple that flashed at him when she smiled, the swollen look of her mouth after he kissed her. And he liked a lot of other things—the sounds she made when he touched her, the tenderness she showed when they curled up together, the dreaminess in her voice when she talked about her family. Last night he'd been fully prepared to get up and head over to the Running Y Ranch and never see her again, but somewhere along the line, he'd changed his mind. Now he thought that letting her go too easily would be an unnecessary loss. Certainly he could find Jerome and take her out on occasion. Maybe she could even come up to Dundee once in a while. It would help pass the time until he returned to California.

He shifted to let the blood flow back into his arm, and Delaney started, then sat bolt upright, blinking and looking around. Reality seemed to descend on her when she caught sight of him. She grabbed the sheet and held it over her as though he'd just appeared and she hadn't made love with him all night.

"Morning," he said, reaching out to soothe her and gather her to him, but she dodged his hand and scooted to the far edge of the bed.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, raising himself into a sitting position.

She groaned and put a hand to her head. "I can't believe I did this," she said, but Conner could tell she wasn't talking to him. She eyed her dress lying on the floor, and then the sheet she was using to cover herself. Dropping the sheet, she streaked out of bed and scooped up her dress as she made a dash for the bathroom.

"Delaney?" he said, frowning in confusion. She'd been pretty jumpy when she first arrived last night, but she'd warmed up quickly enough, and the woman he'd made love to several times during the night hadn't been inhibited at all. Now she was blushing and covering herself as though he hadn't already seen her.

"I've got to leave," she muttered, as the sight of her delectable backside disappeared around the corner.

"Why? What's wrong?" he asked.

"This—everything!" she cried from inside the bathroom. She came out smoothing the skirt of her dress over her hips and dropped to the floor to find her shoes.

Conner felt a flicker of anger. Since she'd been a virgin, he could understand her having a certain amount of remorse, but he'd been careful to address that issue. And it wasn't as though he'd coerced her in any way. "I warned you about the regret," he said, wondering if he could have been clearer somehow.

"It's okay," she said. "It's not your fault."

“But I don’t want you to be sorry about what happened,” he told her. “It makes me feel as though I took advantage of you.”

“Don’t feel as though you—Don’t feel anything. It doesn’t matter. We’re never going to see each other again, anyway.”

That statement didn’t make him any happier than her previous one. “Actually, I was going to talk to you about that,” he said. “Will you slow down and give me a minute?”

She found one of her shoes and started forcing it onto her foot. “I can’t. I have to go now.”

“Where? I thought we’d order room service. Seemed like you were interested in that last night.”

“I can’t stay,” she said, coming up with her other shoe. “But I owe you a big apology. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry. Truly sorry.”

“What are you sorry for?” he demanded. “I may be alone in this, but I enjoyed last night.”

“I’m just sorry,” she repeated. “And I’m going to kill Rebecca.”

“Who’s Rebecca? Your friend?”

“Never mind.” She finally managed to get her other shoe on, grabbed her purse and started for the door but Conner jumped out of bed and intercepted her before she could leave.

“You’re really going? Just like that?”

She wouldn’t even look at him. She kept her eyes fastened on the door behind him. “I have to.”

“At least give me your number,” he said. “This is crazy.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not? I won’t be living far from here, and I’m willing to make the drive to Jerome. Come on, Delaney, I thought we had something here.” He smiled, hoping she’d relent and stay a little longer—he had a couple of hours before the foreman from the ranch was due to pick him up—but she didn’t. She remained stiff and unapproachable, and he knew she wouldn’t let him hold her now for anything, even though he wanted to do exactly that.

She hid her eyes with one hand as though she was feeling trapped and couldn’t decide what to do, but when she finally looked up at him, her expression softened. “All right. I’ll leave my number on the desk.”

He watched her cross to the pad and pen next to the room service menu, then searched for his jeans. He didn’t understand her sudden modesty, but he was willing to respect it if that made her more comfortable. Maybe if he was dressed, she’d calm down.

“Here it is,” she said. She ripped off the paper she’d been writing on, folded it in half and stuck it in the pocket of the shirt he’d draped over the back of the chair.

He finished buttoning his jeans and followed her to the door. “I’ll call you,” he said, trying to give her the space she obviously needed.

“Good, okay. I’ll talk to you later,” she said, then slipped out without even a goodbye handshake.

Conner frowned as the door clicked shut behind her, then cursed. What had happened between her falling asleep and waking up? He’d never had a woman turn around so quickly. He’d had them become clingy and possessive or almost sickeningly sweet in their bid for more time, more things, more promises, but Delaney was the first to sleep with him, dress and run right out of his life.

At least he had her number. He’d wait a few days and then give her a call, he decided. But when he pulled the folded paper out of his shirt pocket and opened it he felt like she’d just kicked him in the stomach.

Delaney hadn’t left her number. She’d written two small words: Thank you.

CHAPTER FOUR

DELANEY SHOVED THE DOOR out of Rebecca's grasp the moment she opened to her knock, and let it bang against the inside wall as she stormed through. "I can't believe I let you talk me into that!" she said. "What on earth was I thinking?"

"That a one-night stand is cheaper than artificial insemination?"

"Don't start with that stuff again," Delaney warned. "I was being an idiot."

"You were being assertive."

"I was being aggressive! I was lying and manipulating others to get what I want. That's not the same as being assertive, Beck."

Her friend looked a little sheepish. "Was it that bad?"

Delaney pivoted at the end of the bed and began to pace. "It was worse than bad. It was terrible."

"Terrible?" Rebecca echoed, tightening her bathrobe. "Don't tell me he was into whips and chains or something."

"No."

"Was he a selfish pig?" she said sympathetically.

Delaney shook her head. "He wasn't kinky or selfish. He was fabulous, a fantasy come to life. But that's the problem."

Rebecca's brows drew together in obvious confusion as she shoved her tangled hair out of her eyes. "Let me get this straight," she said. "He was good to you, and you think that's a problem?"

"It is a problem!" Delaney cried, rounding on her. "I feel like a horrible person, a lecher, a loser. He trusted me, and I betrayed him. I was lying to him the whole time."

Rebecca rubbed the sleep from her face and sank into the chair next to the round table that sported an All About Boise magazine and a giant bouquet of silk flowers. "It wasn't a big lie."

"I told him he didn't need to worry about birth control!"

"So it was sort of a big lie. But that was the whole point. If you'd told him the truth, he wouldn't have invited you up to his room."

"I wish he hadn't. I wish I'd never come here. I wish..." She stopped pacing and flopped onto the bed. "Oh God, what if I'm pregnant?"

Rebecca stood and leaned over her. "Wasn't that the point of this whole exercise?"

Delaney remembered Conner's surprise when she'd begun to leave his room, his earnest entreaty for her telephone number, and wished she could die. "No! If I'm pregnant, I'll never be able to forgive myself, never be able to forget what I've done. I'll have to stare into my child's eyes and know..." She was about to say that deep down I'm no better than my mother, but she stopped herself because she couldn't handle a philosophical discussion right now. She was too busy browbeating herself. "That I cheated his or her father."

"You're overreacting," Rebecca said. "You haven't hurt anyone. He had a good time, didn't he?"

"I'm not going to answer that question."

"I'm just saying, I'm sure he doesn't regret it."

"Whether he regrets it or not, he was a nice guy, Beck. I had no right to treat him the way I did."

Rebecca lit a cigarette. "How do you know he's such a nice guy? What do you really know about him, Laney? One night doesn't tell you anything."

Delaney thought her night had told her a few things about Conner. For one, he was generous. He'd been concerned about her enjoyment and what she might feel afterward. Two, he was loving and kind. He'd seemed as happy to hold her and keep her warm as he'd been to make love, which was a large part of what she'd liked about last night. Three, he was a good listener. He'd made her feel more important and understood than she ever had before.

And she'd taken advantage of him. "I have to go back there," she said. "I have to tell him what I've done." She climbed off the bed, but Rebecca blocked the door.

"You're crazy," she said. "He had a good time. Leave it alone. Do you think he wants you to drop a bomb like that? It's over, and he's gone on his merry way. Let him. I doubt that you're pregnant, anyway."

Delaney hesitated, trying to count how many times they'd made love. What were the chances that after five...no, six times, she'd be carrying his child?

Probably not very good, she decided. Besides, Conner didn't want children yet. He'd told her as much. Rebecca was right: Delaney would be doing him more of a favor at this point simply to let it go...and hope for the best.

SO THIS WAS DUNDEE, where he'd been born and lived with his mother for the first six years of his life.

Conner frowned as Roy, the foreman of the Running Y, who'd picked him up just after breakfast in Boise, drove him through the center of town, where several buildings rose out of the surrounding mountains, leaning on each other like old men. Built of wood and painted red, brown or white, they ran along both sides of the street, fronted by a covered boardwalk that extended for several blocks like something out of an old western. Only the gas station down the street and the new A&W looked out of place or the least bit modern.

Modern? He thought of the spacious, Spanish-style villa he'd grown up in, with its expansive wings and gardens, inside swimming pool and tennis courts, and knew he'd been banished to hell.

Where he'd rot, if his uncles had their way.

Swallowing a bitter sigh, he glanced at his companion. Tall and lanky, Roy had red hair and a mustache that entirely covered his top lip. His freckled, sunburned complexion gave his face a leathery appearance and made him look older than the fifty-five or so he probably was. And he wore, like most other men within sight, a parka with a pair of Wranglers that were so tight his chewing tobacco stood out in marked relief.

Conner considered his own jeans, which were loose fitting by comparison, his Doc Marten loafers and Abercrombie sweatshirt, and knew he was going to blend in about as well as his clothes did.

"How much farther to the ranch?" he asked, breaking the silence that had fallen between them almost immediately after their brief greeting in Boise. He needed to dispel the lingering sense of loss and confusion he'd experienced since Delaney's sudden departure, and after a twenty-five year absence, he remembered the ranch and the cemetery where they'd buried his grandma, but not much about the town or surrounding area.

"Nother ten miles or so round that mountain." He pointed to their right before slinging his arm casually over the steering wheel.

Conner gazed off in the distance. "Who lives there these days?"

"Only a handful of us. Ben, Grady, Isaiah and me live in the cabins behind the barn."

"No one stays at the main house?"

"Just Dottie. Least during the week. On weekends she stays with her son and his family in town."

"And just what does this Dottie do?"

"The cookin' and cleanin' and stuff. Takes care of the dogs and chickens, too."

"So there's just the five of you?"

Roy cast him a sideways glance. "Now there's you."

Conner was painfully aware of that fact. "I think I heard one of my uncles say that the Running Y is twenty thousand acres," he said. "Is that about right?"

Roy spat out the window as they rumbled to a stop at what appeared to be the town's biggest intersection. A brick municipal building with the date 1847 carved above its arched entry stood on

one corner, across from two stately homes that looked as though they hailed from the same era and a redbrick building designated as the city library.

“Give or take a few,” he said. “Not that twenty thousand acres is very big, far as ranches go. You want big, go to Texas.”

“Where they raise Longhorns.” Even Conner knew that. “What kind of cattle do we stock?” he asked. He’d been too angry at his grandfather and his uncles to reveal the slightest interest in returning to the Running Y by asking even the most basic questions.

The light turned green, but his companion squinted at him for a second or two before giving the pickup enough gas to roll through the intersection. “We’ve got about two thousand Bally-faced Herefords.”

Bally-faced? Conner hadn’t heard that term before, but he did, thankfully, recognize Herefords. Unless he was mistaken, they were the common reddish cattle seen in so many places. “Is the entire ranch fenced?” he asked, trying to imagine how one might manage such a large chunk of land.

Roy accelerated to their usual traveling speed of about forty-five miles per hour. Because of the load of hay Roy had picked up in Boise before appearing at Conner’s hotel, Conner doubted the truck could go any faster.

“Parts are fenced,” Roy said. “But some of the land is open range leased from the BLM, and I doubt they’d like us fencing it off.”

“The BLM?”

Another squinty gaze. “The Bureau of Land Management. It operates state land. We hold the grazing rights for about ten thousand BLM acres down along the south pass.”

“I see,” Conner said, but he didn’t see much. He’d thought owning a twenty-thousand-acre ranch meant owning twenty thousand acres of deeded property. Evidently that wasn’t strictly the case.

What are the grazing rights worth? he wanted to ask. How do we keep our cattle from straying if our property isn’t completely fenced? How do we stop thieves and predators from stealing and slaughtering our Bally-faced Herefords? Did a few cowboys keep a constant vigil over them?

There were hundreds of things he’d need to know. But he didn’t ask anything more. His lack of knowledge wasn’t exactly inspiring confidence in his foreman, and he was still too disgruntled about what had happened with Delaney this morning to handle the situation diplomatically.

There’d be plenty of time to learn how to run the ranch once he arrived, he supposed. At this point, he preferred his unhappy thoughts to Roy’s resentment. But Roy wasn’t ready to let the conversation lapse.

“Ever been out on a horse?” he asked as they rumbled along.

“On occasion,” Conner told him.

“For work or for pleasure?”

It didn’t take a crystal ball to see where Roy’s questions were leading, and the implication of his words caused the irritation already rushing through Conner’s blood to get the better of him. He’d gone against his saner judgment when he’d taken Delaney to his room last night, and she’d left him feeling jilted and used. He didn’t need a crusty old cowboy to make him feel worthless, as well.

“What do you think?” he said.

“I don’t think you look like much of a cowboy.”

“Well, I guess I’ll have to buy myself a belt buckle tomorrow.”

Roy’s furry eyebrows shot up, but he kept his eyes on the road as he shifted onto one hip to reach his chew. “It’s gonna take a lot more than a belt buckle, son.”

Conner recognized the challenge in the man’s voice. Fixing him with a level gaze, he said, “I’ll manage,” even though, in all honesty, he couldn’t blame Roy for resenting his lack of experience. The ranch was deeply in debt and would probably fail in far more capable hands. His grandfather had obviously sent the wrong man. Conner had known that from the beginning, and now he and Roy both knew it.

"You want to tell me a little about what's been going on, why we're so far from showing a profit?" Conner asked. As long as Roy had no illusions about his abilities, they might as well get down to the nitty-gritty.

The foreman took a pinch of tobacco, settled it between his cheek and gum and put his tin away before answering. "Price of beef's been falling. What with foreign competition and the price of feed after the drought last summer, we're not lookin' to have a good year."

"Is there any way to turn things around?" Conner asked as they approached a black wrought-iron archway with the words "Running Y Ranch" inscribed on it.

Roy spat out the window as he slowed to make the turn. "That's what you're here for, ain't it?"

"YOU'LL HAVE TO MOVE BACK HERE with us. How else will you get by once Rebecca leaves?" Aunt Millie asked, watching Delaney closely.

Delaney paused in her dusting but kept her face purposefully averted from Aunt Millie, who sat propped up in bed, suffering from a touch of the flu or a cold or, more likely, simply the need for a little tender loving care.

"I'll get by," she said for probably the hundredth time and went back to dusting, hoping Aunt Millie would let the subject drop. But Delaney knew she wouldn't. Ever since Millie had heard about Rebecca's engagement, she'd been pressing Delaney to move home again. She'd never liked the fact that Delaney had moved out in the first place, especially to go and live with Rebecca. But Delaney wasn't about to return to the days of having Aunt Millie cluck over her constantly, monitoring her diet, her spending habits, her social success. Much as she loved Millie and Ralph, she liked her privacy and was determined to preserve it.

"But coming home for a few months would help you save a little money," Aunt Millie said. "What's wrong with saving money? You don't want to live all alone, do you?"

"I don't mind living alone. Can I get you anything else to eat?"

"No, I'm finished," Aunt Millie said, but she wasn't so easily distracted. The white-haired woman who'd raised Delaney was getting on in years. Her body was beginning to succumb to arthritis and advanced age, but nothing could diminish her iron will. "You could have your old room," she went on. "We haven't changed a thing in there, but we could, if you want. We could sew some new drapes, buy a new spread...."

The cornered feeling Delaney knew so well crept over her, along with a touch of resentment. If she'd wanted to move home, she would have done it by now. Why couldn't Millie understand that? Why did she have to keep pushing?

"The room's fine," she said.

"Think of the time we'd have. We never did finish putting that quilt together, you know."

Delaney imagined living under Aunt Millie's regime again, imagined Uncle Ralph sitting in front of the television most of the time, monopolizing the remote, while Millie insisted Delaney take her vitamins, eat her bran, get more sleep—and thought she might scream.

Then she felt guilty for wanting to scream because Aunt Millie and Uncle Ralph had been so good to her. They'd never formally adopted her; there'd been no one to contest their guardianship, so paying for the paperwork to be filed seemed unnecessary. But Millie and Ralph had given her their name and treated her as lovingly as a blood daughter.

God, she couldn't win.

"That house of yours is too drafty in the winter," Millie was saying. "I just freeze to death whenever I go there. You need to tell that landlord of yours that you're moving out because it's so cold. He should really do something about the insulation."

"I'll mention it," Delaney said, but she wasn't thinking about insulation. She'd role-played this exact situation online with her assertiveness training coach. She knew what she had to do. She had to tell Aunt Millie in a kind but firm manner that she wasn't moving home under any circumstances, and

now was as good a time as any. But when she turned, she saw the hope on her adoptive mother's face and couldn't bring herself to say what she knew would hurt Millie, no matter how kindly she framed it.

"I'll think about it," she said instead, then mentally kicked herself. She was never going to overcome her passivity. She'd probably be the first person to fail a class that gave no grades.

"Ralph could borrow the neighbor's truck, so we wouldn't have any trouble moving your things," Millie said, struggling to lift the breakfast tray from across her lap.

Delaney put down her dusting cloth and went to help. "I'll get that," she said, setting it on the nightstand. "Are you sure you wouldn't like another cup of coffee?"

"No. Ralph says drinking so much coffee will kill me. But arthritis won't let me do much of anything else these days. I'm just sitting here getting fat."

Uncle Ralph was at the barbershop, probably drinking his own share of coffee while he complained about the rising price of gasoline to the same friends he'd met there every Sunday for the past thirty years. Dundee was nothing if not comfortable with routine.

"Uncle Ralph likes the way you look, and so do I," Delaney said, straightening the covers on Aunt Millie's bed.

Aunt Millie raised a gnarled hand to pat her arm. "You're a good girl, Laney. I've always been so proud of you. I knew the moment I saw you when you were just six years old that you were nothing like your mother. And you've never disappointed me."

Delaney felt the bonds of obligation grow a little tighter, tying her hands, trapping her in the mold Millie had created for her. And fear overwhelmed her as the memories she'd been trying so hard to suppress for the past twenty-four hours quickly surfaced—Conner standing at his hotel room door wearing only his jeans...Conner smiling above her...Conner's lips, his hands, his body...

She closed her eyes, feeling as though she might pass out. What if she was pregnant? What if she had to tell Aunt Millie and Uncle Ralph that their perfect little girl wasn't so perfect after all?

"It's getting kind of late," she said awkwardly, her face growing hot. "If I don't head home, there'll be people breaking down my door for pies. You think you'll be okay here until Uncle Ralph gets back?"

"Of course." Aunt Millie waved her away. "I've got my cross-stitch. And the books you brought me."

Delaney moved the stack of romances she'd checked out of the library closer to the bed so Aunt Millie could reach them, then did the same with the remote control to the television. "You want me to raise the blind a little higher?" she asked, hearing the reedy thinness of her voice and hoping Aunt Millie wouldn't notice it. "It's overcast right now, but the weather report said we're supposed to get some sun later this afternoon."

"That would be nice, dear."

Delaney raised the blind, put away the dust cloth, gathered the coupons Aunt Millie had clipped for the weekly grocery shopping—which Delaney did every Monday before work—and reclaimed the breakfast tray. "There's an apple pie in the fridge for your dessert," she said, dropping a quick kiss on Aunt Millie's lined cheek.

Then she ducked her head and hurried out of the room, eager to escape that loving smile and those adoring eyes, afraid that Aunt Millie would see what a fraud she really was. Afraid that if Aunt Millie looked too hard, she'd realize Delaney was her mother's daughter, after all.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE MEMORIES OF THOSE FEW YEARS when Conner had lived at the Running Y were far more vivid than he'd ever dreamed they would be. After all, he'd been only six when his grandmother died and the whole household had moved to California, and the twenty-five intervening years had changed him into another person entirely. The hopeful little boy who'd ridden behind his grandfather to rescue a stranded calf, whose job it was to feed the chickens and gather the eggs, was long gone. Yet something as simple as the crackling fire beneath the large stone mantel in the living room, the lingering scent of pine and smoke or a glimpse of the snow-covered mountains crouched protectively on either side of the house flooded him with images and snatches of conversation he thought he'd completely forgotten.

"Why do you get up so early, Grandpa?" he'd once asked, entering the very room in which he sat now, his grandfather's study, to find Clive hard at work, even though the sky beyond the windows was still black and dawn seemed hours away.

"Because I have a lot to do, son," his grandfather had replied, glancing up from the papers on the desk.

"No one else gets up so early."

"You do," he'd responded with a wink. "And that's why we Armstrongs are going to stay one step ahead of our competition. You're my future, Con."

You're my future. Such hope, such confidence. At the time, Conner had swelled with pride to think the same blood flowed through his veins. But that was before he'd found out he wasn't really an Armstrong at all, before his uncles had made it abundantly clear that he was nothing but a bastard, a ward, a parasite.

Other memories threatened, but Conner forced them from his mind and returned his attention to the ranch's account books, which lay open before him. As he'd feared, the financial picture wasn't good. His grandfather had bought the place over fifty years ago, when ranching was still profitable. It had given the old man his start, and he'd built an empire from there. But for the past five years, the cost of feed and hands had climbed steadily while the price of beef had fallen. Unless something significant happened, the ranch wasn't going to make it, and even a frat boy who'd spent most of his time at college trying not to learn could see that.

The end was coming, Conner thought. There wasn't a thing he could do to change the inevitable. Why was he even sitting here, going through the books, racking his brain for solutions?

Clive would tolerate the losses for only another year or so before he sold out. And Conner knew he was in much the same situation. Like the ranch, he'd started out full of promise but had eventually fallen into decline. He'd barely graduated from high school, had dropped out of college just as he was about to receive his diploma, and had spent more time traveling and playing than working. He'd drunk, gambled and squandered money. He'd spent his time driving fast cars and associating with even faster women. And his grandfather had finally drawn a line in the sand.

Tough love. What a concept. His grandfather loved the ranch more than he loved Conner.

Staring out the window, which looked over acres of pasture, Conner stopped fighting the past and let the memory of his last meeting with Clive play in his mind. His grandfather had summoned him to the office at the winery, where Conner's uncles already waited. Forty-three-year-old Dwight had offered him a seat, as though he were some sort of stranger. Thirty-eight-year-old Jonathan had smiled, obviously relishing a moment he'd anticipated. And the balding, thirty-five-year-old Stephen had come right out and told Conner that his wild days were over. If he didn't settle down and start contributing to the family, he'd be cut off from the Armstrongs forever.

Conner would have expected nothing less from his uncles. But his grandfather...What had happened in that meeting had twisted something inside him that Conner had thought long dead.

Clive had sat behind his expansive desk, fingers steepled beneath his chin, watching and listening to everything that occurred. He'd nodded when Stephen announced that they were sending Conner to the Running Y, adding nothing until Conner stood to leave. Then he'd said only this—that he was sending Conner back to Dundee where he belonged.

Which was absolutely laughable because Conner didn't belong anywhere.

The telephone rang. Conner hesitated, expecting Dottie, the widow his grandfather paid to cook for the cowboys and manage the house to answer it, but she didn't seem to be available.

He picked up at the same time as the answering machine came on. "You've reached the Running Y. We're either out with the animals or running an errand in town—"

When Conner spoke, the machine automatically shut off. "Hello?"

"Conner? Is that you?"

His mother. She was as excited about his return to Dundee as her younger brothers were, but for entirely different reasons. An eternal optimist, she saw it as a great opportunity for him.

"Yeah, I made it," he said. "How are things at home?"

"The same. I'm more worried about things at the ranch. Is the situation as dire as we thought?"

"It's not good."

"When life hands you lemons, make lemonade."

Her cliché, as much as the unfailingly cheerful note in which it was spoken, confirmed what Conner had suspected for years—his mother was delusional. Make lemonade? "This was a setup," he said, feeling his irritation rise. "There's no way for me to win. You realize that, don't you?"

"I don't think Dad would set you up," she argued.

Of course he would. His grandfather was finally getting rid of him. Conner had known it would happen someday. But he wasn't going to argue with his mother, who was singularly devoted to the old guy. "Then he let Stephen, Jonathan and Dwight do it. Either way, the result is the same."

"The result is what you make it."

"Mom, you don't know anything about the beef market or ranching or—"

"I know your grandfather started with a lot less than what you have going for you now," she interrupted, and Conner dropped his head in his hands to massage his temple. Why had he answered the phone?

"I don't want to hear about the time Grandpa was too poor to buy a pair of shoes to wear to school, or the time he nearly froze his feet off trying to reach cattle that would've starved without the feed he carried," he said. "I've talked to Roy. He obviously knows how to manage a herd, so there's nothing I can improve on there. Rhonda, the accountant who works here three days a week, knows what she's doing, too. I've got the books in front of me now. Grandfather's money has been tracked to the penny, and receipts account for every expense. Coyotes are picking off a few steers, but our losses are in line with those suffered by other ranchers in the area. So I can't increase profits by improving the general running of the ranch."

"Then, think of something else."

"You want me to end the drought that's plagued the area for three years? Or why don't I figure out what to do about the competition from other countries that's driving down American beef prices?"

"I don't like the tone of your voice. You're being negative."

"I'm being honest!"

"If you didn't think you had a real chance of succeeding, then why did you go?" she asked impatiently.

It was a good question. Conner had asked himself the same thing a million times. He'd almost rebelled that day in the winery. Without the Armstrongs he'd simply be the son of a no-good auto mechanic who was spending his life in jail. He would have nothing to live up to, nothing to prove, nothing left to fear....

But there was his mother to consider. She'd given birth to Conner and kept him, despite the circumstances of his conception. And she'd loved him. That was the crux of the matter, wasn't it? He couldn't turn his back on her.

"I came to spite your brothers," he lied.

"Then, spite them," she said. "Make the ranch a miraculous success."

Conner stifled a groan. Hadn't she heard what he'd just told her? There wasn't any way to save the ranch. "You're not listening," he said.

"I am listening. I've just heard enough. Quit looking for reasons to fail and decide to succeed."

She made it sound so easy....

"Dad wants to speak to you," she said. "Hang on."

"Wait," Conner said. "I have to go. Tell him I'll call him later." But she'd already set the phone down, presumably to get her father, and Conner forced himself to hold, even though he wasn't sure what he and his grandfather would say. They hadn't parted on the best of terms. They'd barely nodded at each other when Conner boarded the plane in San Francisco.

A voice came over the line, but it wasn't his grandfather's. It was his uncle Stephen. "Well, what do you know. My nomadic nephew's actually up on a Sunday and it's only, what, just past noon?"

Conner felt the muscles in his jaw tighten but fought the building tide of anger. When Conner was a child, Stephen and the others had constantly riled him until he used his fists or broke down in tears. As he grew older, he refused to give them the pleasure of knowing when anything they said or did bothered him.

"Did you need something specific, Stephen?" he asked, trying to sound as indifferent as possible.

"Dad was wondering if you got in okay. He was probably afraid you'd taken a detour to Vegas or something."

"No plans for Vegas yet."

"Give it a few days. I'm sure your stint in Dundee won't last long."

It had already lasted a day and a half longer than Conner wanted it to.

"So how are things there?" Stephen asked.

His uncle had phoned to hear that the situation was hopeless, of course, that Conner was defeated before he'd begun. And even though that was precisely the truth, as he'd just explained to his mother, Conner would be damned if he'd admit it now. "Great," he said. "Never better."

"If they were that good, the ranch would be turning a profit."

"It'll be turning a profit soon enough."

His uncle's surprised silence was well worth the lie.

"Yeah, well, we'll see," his uncle finally replied. "The last thirty years speak for them—"

"Did you have something important to say?" Conner said, cutting him off.

Stephen chuckled. "Not really. I'm just following directions. I know that's a novel concept for you, but the rest of us have always had to toe the line. Only little Con gets away with murder."

It was Conner's turn to laugh. "That's too juvenile, even for you, Stephen. When are you going to forget about me and live your own life?"

"I am living my own life. As far as I'm concerned, you don't even exist. At least, you won't in a few months, when you give up on the ranch and go on another party cruise or whatever."

"I guess I could spend more of my time brown-nosing, like you."

"Is that what you call doing my duty as my father's son?"

"You wouldn't know your duty if it bit you on the ass," Conner said. "You're too ready to line your own pockets, too eager to pick Grandfather's bones once he's gone. It's pathetic, really, that you're such a grasping bastard. No wonder I took myself out of the picture."

“You were never in the picture, Con, because you’re the real bastard. My family’s tolerated you all these years, for Vivian’s sake, but do you think anyone’s been happy about having a rape baby in the house? Everyone told her to put you up for adoption, and she should’ve listened.”

She should have listened. Conner had always believed that. Then he wouldn’t have to face, daily, what had happened the night he was conceived, or know that he would never truly be part of the family in which he’d been raised.

Regardless, he was growing tired of his uncles’ reminders. “Feeling a little cocky now that I’m two states away, Stephen?”

“I’ve never been afraid of you,” his uncle countered, but Conner knew his words weren’t entirely true. Stephen and his brothers had plagued him his whole life with subtle barbs that kept Conner constantly aware of his status, but in recent years, they were generally careful not to go too far. At well over six feet, Conner had several inches on Stephen and Dwight, and almost half a foot on Jonathan, and though they all outweighed him—Jonathan by at least fifty pounds—they were soft.

“We’ll have a talk about this again sometime when we’re all together,” Conner promised.

“I think we should do that.”

“I’m available any time you’re ready, Uncle.”

Conner was expecting a sharp comeback, but the tone of Stephen’s voice suddenly changed.

“Sure, I understand, Con,” he said. “I’m glad you’re there safe and sound, and that you’re willing to give the old ranch a try. You know how much it means to Dad.”

Confusion left Conner tongue-tied for a moment, but then he heard Clive’s voice in the background and understood. His grandfather had entered the room, and Stephen had snapped into character, pretending to be the long-suffering, if not loving, uncle.

“You’re such a greedy asshole,” he said, sickened by the blatant playacting. God, this was what he’d rebelled against, wasn’t it? This was why he’d forged his own path. Wild as his past had been, it had kept him, for the most part, far from the back-stabbing that went on among Clive’s immediate family. His mother was still in the fray to protect his interests, she said, but Conner didn’t care about his grandfather’s money. The posturing and conniving of his uncles turned his stomach.

“I think just as much of you. You know that, Con,” Stephen said, unmistakably smug at the double entendre. “And it’s never going to change, is it? Now, here’s Dad. He wants to talk to you.”

Conner closed his eyes as he waited, bracing for what might come. He doubted his grandfather would say much. Clive had always been rather aloof and preoccupied, too busy to be bothered with family. But for some reason, maybe because Conner had worshipped him so much as a child, even the slightest criticism from him hurt far worse than anything Dwight or the others had to say.

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