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ROMANCE

The Baby Agenda

JANICE KAY JOHNSON

Janice Johnson

The Baby Agenda

«HarperCollins»

Johnson J. K.

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One of Moira Cullen's few walks on the wild side has come back to haunt her. Now she has to tell the man who rescued her from a disastrous evening he's going to be a father. Not the best thank-you she can give Will Becker. He proves her instincts were sharp the night she took a chance on him. Not only does he commit to being involved with their baby, he also returns from his dream job in Africa to do it. He's a good man...perhaps too good. Moira has to wonder if he's here because he wants to be or because he always does the right thing. And the way she's falling for him, she wants a marriage...for real.

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“Don’t say no, Moira.”

Like that day outside the obstetrician’s clinic, Will’s face spasmed with some emotion Moira couldn’t read any more than she could understand her own. His voice was hoarse. “Please. Don’t say no.”

When she still failed to say anything at all, he let her hands go and leaned forward until he could draw her into his arms. Gently but inexorably he tugged her forward until her brow rested against his broad chest and he could settle his chin on top of her head.

“Marry me, Moira,” he said, so low she barely heard him. “Let me do this for both of us.”

Dear Reader,

Those of you who read Charlotte’s Homecoming might remember Moira Cullen, who was the hero’s best friend and his partner in an architectural firm. For me, linked books are usually planned that way; secondary characters rarely linger in my mind the way Moira did. There was just something about her....

For one thing, it’s unusual for a woman to be such good friends with a man, and an attractive one at that. I hint in that book that Moira, although successful professionally and an attractive woman, lives with quite a bit of self-doubt. And she had to be lonely, didn’t she? So...what if she reaches desperately for intimacy and ends up in a one-night stand with a man who can’t give her more—because he’s leaving for a two-year job commitment in Africa? And what if Moira then discovers she’s pregnant? What kind of man was he, and how will he react to the news that a woman he hardly knows but who haunts him is carrying his baby while he pursues his dreams half a world away? And this is a man who’d already given up his dreams once, to raise his two brothers and sister. Two lonely, conflicted people...

Of course I couldn’t resist Moira, any more than I could resist Will Becker! I hope you feel the same.

Janice Kay Johnson

The Baby Agenda

Janice Kay Johnson



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author of more than sixty books for children and adults, Janice Kay Johnson writes Harlequin Superromance novels about love and family—about the way generations connect and the power our earliest experiences have on us throughout life. Her 2007 novel *Snowbound* won a RITA[®] Award from Romance Writers of America for Best Contemporary Series Romance. A former librarian, Janice raised two daughters in a small rural town north of Seattle, Washington. She loves to read and is an active volunteer and board member for Purrfect Pals, a no-kill cat shelter.

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CHAPTER ONE

EVEN THOUGH THE GALA was part of a professional conference, it looked as though almost everyone had arrived two-by-two. Moira Cullen had known they would, and decided to come anyway. So what if this, like most social occasions, had too much in common with Noah's ark? She was supposed to have been half of a couple tonight, too, until she'd gotten the email this afternoon from Bruce.

I'm sorry, Moira, but I won't be able to escort you tonight after all. Something has come up. I know you hadn't planned to attend until I asked you, so I hope it won't be too big a disappointment.

He'd signed off with "Bruce." Plain and simple. No "Love, Bruce," or "I'll think of you tonight and wish we were dancing together," or even "I'll call tomorrow and explain."

She still had no idea what could have happened since this morning, when they'd parted after a conference session. She and Bruce Girard both had been attending the conference held in Redmond, across Lake Washington from Seattle, for members of the building trade. He was a real estate attorney, she was an architect. They'd been dating for nearly six weeks, and she'd decided that tonight was a fitting time to invite him into her bedroom for the first time.

And she'd bought the most beautiful dress!

In a spirit of defiance, she'd decided to come to the gala anyway. Lots of attendees were from out of town and had come without significant others. A single woman would surely be asked to dance. It could be fun, she had decided, surprising herself with her determination. Bruce was probably disappointed, too, and would undoubtedly be in touch. They'd have other nights. She had no reason to feel hurt.

She hesitated only momentarily in the lobby, then walked toward the ballroom, telling herself she looked voluptuous in her new dress, not fat.

Repeat after me: I am not fat.

She knew she wasn't. Believing, though, that could be another story.

Right by the open doors, she saw a man she knew. She'd worked with Stan Wells on a job a couple of years ago. He appeared to be by himself.

He turned, looked her up and down, and said, "Well, hello," then did a double take. "Moira?" He sounded stunned.

Stan had never once looked at her as if he'd noticed she was a woman when they had worked together.

She smiled pleasantly and said, "Hello, Stan," then strolled past him, enjoying the knowledge that he'd swiveled on his heel to watch her walk away. The dress must be as flattering as she'd imagined it to be.

It was also form-fitting, which meant that she scanned the buffet table with a wistful eye but didn't dare partake. So what. She wasn't here to eat.

Moira made her way around the outskirts of the ballroom, pausing to chat a couple of times and to promise a dance once the musicians started to play. She'd been right to think she'd have fun—it was nice to come to a party where she actually knew many of the people.

Then her roving gaze stopped on a tall, handsome man with sandy hair and a lopsided grin. Bruce Girard, wearing a well-cut suit, had his head bent as he talked to a beautiful, slender woman in a fire-engine red dress cut short to bare long legs. Moira stared in shock. She wouldn't have dared wear a dress that short, because she didn't have legs like that. On her, the razor-sharp, chin-length bob wouldn't have emphasized sculpted cheekbones, because she didn't have those, either. And—oh, God—if she'd worn a red dress, never mind the slash of scarlet lipstick, her hair and freckles would have looked orange. They were orange.

She had to quit staring. Moira knew that, in some distant part of her mind. It would be humiliating if Bruce were to happen to glance her way and catch her gaping.

Maybe, at the last minute, his plans had changed and he'd come on the chance that she would be here. If he'd tried calling her at home, and thought that because she didn't answer...

He laid his hand on the brunette's lower back. Really, almost, on her butt. The way his hand was splayed there was unmistakably proprietary and...sexual. Recognizing it, the woman smiled and tilted her head so that it, very briefly, rested against his upper arm.

Pain squeezed Moira's chest. Surely he hadn't been seeing someone else all this time. Or was even married? They had several mutual acquaintances who knew they were dating each other. Wouldn't someone have said something?

And—face it—why would he have dated her at all if he had a wife or a lover who looked like that?

The backs of her eyes burned, and she suddenly felt homely and fat. Probably Stan Wells had turned in incredulity at the amount of flesh she'd squeezed into this damn dress.

Breathe, she told herself, and couldn't.

She couldn't seem to make herself move, either. She was frozen between one step and the next, excruciatingly self-conscious. What she'd convinced herself were curves were really bulges. And no one thought a woman whose skin was spotted was sexy. With self-loathing, she wondered who she had been kidding.

Then, to complete her misery, Bruce's head turned and their eyes met. His face went still. Knowing a riptide of red was sweeping up her neck to her cheeks, Moira forced herself into motion. With her redhead's skin, she didn't blush, she flamed. Even from a distance, he would see.

Her eye fastened desperately on a bar ahead. She could pretend she'd been looking for a drink. That gave her a goal. Made her feel as if she was less pathetically, obviously alone.

Except, of course, that she was.

There was a short line. The couple ahead of her were strangers and paid no attention to her. She wished someone else would join the queue, someone she could hide behind. Unfortunately, in her peripheral vision she could still see Bruce and the woman. He spoke to her, then left her watching him speculatively and approached Moira.

If only she could cool her cheeks, she might be able to handle him with *savoir faire*. A surprised glance, an, "Oh, you made it after all?" If only she had any actual confidence.

"Moira." He was here, at her side.

She tilted her chin up and, somehow, smiled. "Bruce. I didn't expect to see you."

"I didn't think I'd see you, either."

Anger was her salvation, or maybe it would embarrass her, she didn't know which. She went with it anyway.

With raised eyebrows, she glanced toward his date. "Yes, that's obvious."

"Ah...I'm sorry about this. I should have told you."

"That we weren't dating each other exclusively?" She was proud of her level tone.

"It's not like that." He frowned at her. "We were. I was. It's just that I ran into Graziella and..." Bruce spread his hands and shrugged. "We'd broken it off, but as soon as we saw each other again we both knew we'd made a mistake."

In other words, Moira realized, he'd been in love with another woman the entire time he'd dated her. No wonder he'd been so patient. He'd been filling time with her. Licking his wounds. She couldn't even flatter herself that he'd been on the rebound. He hadn't been interested enough in her for their relationship to qualify.

It hurt. Her heart or her pride, she wasn't sure which, but either way, it did hurt.

The couple in front of her stepped up to the bar. She moved forward.

"Honesty would have been nice."

“I didn’t lie—”

“Yes, you did. If only by omission.” Anger was still carrying her along, thank goodness. “I didn’t understand that I wasn’t supposed to come tonight. You’ve embarrassed me. That wasn’t necessary, Bruce.” Drinks in hand, the couple stepped away. To Bruce, Moira said, “Please excuse me,” and turned to the bartender. “A martini, please.”

By the time she’d paid, Bruce was gone, striding across the ballroom toward his Graziella, whose name was as exotic as her looks.

Moira took a huge gulp of the martini and wished she could go home. But if she did that, the jerk would know that she wasn’t just embarrassed, she was humiliated and wounded. And she refused to give him that satisfaction.

She’d dance, and maybe even get a little bit drunk. She would clutch at her pride, because that’s all she had. And she wouldn’t let herself think until she got home about the fact that Bruce Girard hadn’t wanted her, not really.

Men never did.

WILL BECKER LEANED AGAINST the railing, his back to the view of dark woods that somehow still existed within a stone’s throw of the Redmond Town Center mall and the surrounding upscale hotels and restaurants. Instead, nursing a drink he didn’t really want, he looked through the floor-to-ceiling glass at the ballroom where other people seemed to be having a fine time.

Him, he hated affairs like this. He was content lurking outside, glass separating him from the gaiety within.

Circumstances being different, he wouldn’t be here at all. As it was, he and Clay had attended a few conference sessions together, but the real point of the weekend had been for Will to introduce his brother to everyone he knew. This had been a four day long changing of the guard, so to speak.

“Yes,” he’d said dozens of times, “Clay will be taking over Becker Construction. He knows the business. Hell, better than I did when I stepped in for my father.” Got stuck, was what he really meant. “I have confidence in Clay.”

That was the important part: to convey to everyone that he believed Clay could replace him without one of the county’s biggest construction companies suffering even a minor hiccup.

“I have plans,” he’d said vaguely when asked what he’d be doing. Only to a select few had he admitted that a week from tomorrow he was flying to Zimbabwe to begin a two-year commitment to build medical clinics. He only knew how to do one thing—build—but at least he’d be having an adventure. That, and doing good, instead of adding another minimall where it wasn’t needed.

Now, he was lying low. He’d done his duty this evening and would have left if Clay didn’t still seem to be having a good time.

Music spilled from the crowded ballroom, and he idly watched the dancers. Not for the first time, Will found his gaze following a redheaded woman whose lush body was poured into a high-necked forest-green dress that might have been demure on someone else—someone who didn’t have a small waist, a glorious ass and breasts that would overflow a man’s hands, even hands as large as his.

The guy she was dancing with kept trying to pull her closer, and she was refusing to relax into him. She sure as hell had no intention of melting against the guy, which seemed to be frustrating him no end.

When the music ended, he said something to her, his hand still resting against her waist. She shook her head and walked away, straight to the bar.

Will had noticed that, too. The beautiful redhead was putting away the drinks. Not enough yet to have her tanked, but more than was wise if she intended to drive home. And he guessed she’d need to, because he hadn’t seen any sign she was here with anybody, friend or date. In fact, for all the dancing she was doing, she didn’t look like she was having a very good time. Maybe a mistaken impression, but...he didn’t think so.

She took her fresh drink and this time headed for the doors that stood open to the terrace where he currently lurked. Just like he had, the redhead went straight for the dark perimeter where light from the ballroom didn't reach. She didn't realize she wasn't alone until she was almost on top of him.

When she started, Will said, "Hey," making his voice soothing. Even if he hadn't been standing in the dark, his size tended to alarm lone women. "Want to hide out here with me?"

She blinked owlshly. "I didn't see you."

"I know. That's okay, I wouldn't mind some company." Hers, anyway. To himself, he could admit that he'd been humming with a low level of arousal since he'd first set eyes on her. He didn't like bony women, and this one had the most luscious body he'd seen in longer than he could remember.

He wished he could make out what color her eyes were. He knew she had a pretty face and a mouth made for smiling. But her eyes, he hadn't been sure of from a distance. Brown? Didn't most redheads have brown eyes?

"I don't want to intrude," she said after a minute.

Will shook his head. "You're not. I was watching you dance."

Her head tilted his way. "You were?"

Some undertone in her voice puzzled him. She sounded surprised. Or even disbelieving.

"You're beautiful," he said simply.

His mystery redhead snorted. "Yeah, right. That's me."

Oh, yeah. Definitely disbelieving.

He grinned at her. "You think I'm full of hot air."

The pretty mouth was mulish and not smiling. "I know what I look like."

He was tempted to end the argument by kissing her, but he didn't make a habit of grabbing women he hardly knew. And anyway...she wasn't being coy. The words had been pained, as if pushed through a throat that was raw.

"Did somebody insult you?" Will asked gently.

She took a long swallow of her drink, swayed and clunked it down on the railing beside his. Liquid splashed.

"You could say that," she said in a small, tight voice.

He was hardly aware of his hands tightening into fists. Partly to keep them off her, and partly because he wanted to slug the bastard who'd hurt her feelings. "Who?"

She blinked at him again.

"Who?" he repeated.

"Oh, it was my own stupid fault," she said finally. "I guess I was supposed to get the message when he let me know he wouldn't be bringing me tonight." She heaved a sigh. "The part I missed was that he was bringing someone else."

"He thought you wouldn't come."

"Bingo."

Will's eyes narrowed. "So he's here."

"Yes. With Graziella." She grimaced. "Of course she couldn't have a name like Ethel."

Not many women in their twenties or thirties were named Ethel, Will thought with a trace of amusement. But he liked the way she said it, and the way she spit out Graziella.

"I'll bet you're nothing as plain as Ethel, either."

"No," she mumbled, "I'm Moira."

"As Irish as your hair."

She reached up and touched the skillfully tumbled mass of red curls atop her head as if to remind herself what was up there. "I suppose."

"I'm Will," he said, and held out his hand. "Will Becker."

She laid hers in it and they shook with an odd sort of solemnity. "Good to meet you, Will Becker."

She sounded as if the booze was starting to go to her head, as if she was having to form words carefully. He hoped she'd forget she still had most of a drink.

"Having a good time anyway?" he asked.

Moira sighed. "Not especially. You?"

"No. I'm not a real social guy."

She stirred. "You probably wish I'd leave you alone."

"No." He clasped her wrist loosely. "No. Don't go."

After a moment she said, "Okay." She didn't seem to notice he was holding on to her. "I kind of wish I could go home, 'cept...except I don't want him to catch me slinking out. You know?"

"Is he really worth the heartburn?"

"I thought so," she said sadly.

"Have you been seeing him long?" Will didn't actually want to know; he didn't want to talk about the scumbag at all. But he also didn't want her to go back in, and he couldn't think of anything else to talk about. Sure as hell not the local building trade, since as of Monday morning he was no longer president of Becker Construction.

"I don't know," she said in answer to his question. "A month or six weeks."

Will slid his hand down and laced his fingers with hers. It was almost more intimate than a kiss, he thought, looking at their clasped hands. There was something about being palm to palm.

She didn't seem to notice that they were holding hands now.

"I just want to forget about him," she declared. "And Graziella."

There it was again, the name as abomination.

Will laughed. "Definitely forget them. Talk to me. Did you grow up around here?"

She turned to look at him instead of the ballroom. "Uh-uh. Montana. Missoula. You?"

"I'm a local boy."

"So your family is here?" She seemed bemused by the idea.

"Yeah. Not my parents, they're gone. My mother when I was a kid, and then my dad and stepmom in a plane crash when I was twenty. One of those freak things, a sightseeing flight—" He stopped. Sharing long past tragedy wasn't the way to get the girl.

Not that he was trying to get her. Not when he'd be winging to Africa a week from now. He just wanted to enjoy her for a little longer.

"But I have two brothers and a sister," he continued.

"From Dad's second marriage."

She nodded her understanding.

"The youngest just graduated from college. My sister, Sophie. She'll be going to grad school come fall." He smiled. "And that's more than you wanted to know, I bet. Do you have sisters or brothers?"

Moira shook her head. "There was only me and my mom. I didn't really even know my dad. My parents split up when I was two."

And her father was a jackass who hadn't bothered to make time for his daughter, Will diagnosed. He really, really wished he could see her face better. Once again, she sounded a little sad, but he might be imagining things. He was surprised to realize that, for the second time tonight, he was feeling protective and angry on her behalf. He thought he'd worn out all those instincts getting his siblings safely raised.

"Have you ever been river rafting?" he asked, at random, determined to lighten the conversation.

She made a little gurgle of amusement. "I can't swim. So no."

"You can't swim?" Will repeated. "How is that possible? Doesn't every kid take lessons?"

"Not this one." She opened her mouth as if to say something, then closed it. "And I'm not about to start now," she finished with a hint of defiance.

"So, is taking the ferry across the Sound your worst nightmare?"

“No, the ferry is okay. I keep a close eye on the lifeboats. Now, those I wouldn’t like, but it’s a comfort that they’re there. My worst nightmare...hmm. Sailing cross the Atlantic.”

“The Perfect Storm wasn’t your favorite movie?”

“I never have liked horror movies.”

He found himself smiling at the description. Standing here this way felt good. Somehow they’d come to be closer together than they had started. His much larger hand enveloped hers. Their voices were low, as if they were lovers murmuring secrets to each other.

“What’s your worst nightmare?” she asked.

Will had to think about that. He didn’t have any phobias, per se. He guessed he might be a little claustrophobic; he’d had a construction site injury once and when the doctor sent him for an MRI he’d found the experience hellish. Given the breadth of his shoulders, he’d been crammed in that damn tunnel as if it were the skin of a sausage and he was the innards. And he’d had to lie there for an aeon. Yeah, being buried alive wouldn’t be high on his list. But it wasn’t the worst thing, although it was oddly akin.

“Being trapped,” he finally said quietly. “Any freedom of choice taken away from me. Spending my entire life doing what I have to do, no matter how desperately I chafe at it.”

Now where had that come from? It was true, every word of it, but he didn’t think he’d ever spoken the words aloud. God help him, that’s what his life had been like since the day he’d taken the phone call in his college dorm telling him his parents were dead. He hadn’t known what he wanted to do with his life yet, but it wasn’t going to be construction. He’d worked summers for his dad for the past five years, and that was enough.

Until all choice had been yanked from him when he realized his brothers and sister had no one else.

He couldn’t regret the decisions he’d made then. He loved Clay, Jack and Sophie. But these past couple weeks, knowing the end was in sight, he’d felt like a kid who’d suffered through his school years looking toward high school graduation.

Free at last.

He felt Moira’s scrutiny. Finally she nodded, but said softly, “Life’s made up of obligations, though, isn’t it?”

“But we ought to be able to choose the ones we take on, don’t you think?”

Her head tilted, reminding him of a curious bird. Perhaps the owl he’d likened her to earlier, with downy, unruly feathers around the enormous, unblinking eyes.

With that tilt of the head, enough light touched her face that he thought, green. Her eyes were green.

“Yes,” she said. “I’m a big fan of free choice.” Her fingers wriggled in his, and she glanced down in apparent puzzlement.

So she’d finally noticed that they had been holding hands for the past ten minutes. Although reluctant, he released hers.

“If you’ll excuse me, my feet are killing me and I think I had too much to drink. I’m about to conk out.”

“You’re not planning to drive, are you?”

She shook her head. “I think I’ll get a room.”

Will smiled at her. “I’ll walk you down.”

“You don’t have to—”

“It would be my pleasure,” he said with a formality unusual to him.

After a moment, she murmured, “Then, thank you.” She started toward the open doors, and he strolled at her side.

When they reached the ballroom, he could hardly tear his eyes from her face. She was indeed pretty, but in a way that contrasted with her curvaceous, seductive body. Her cheeks were round, her

forehead high, giving her an unexpected look of vulnerability, and her milk-pale skin was dusted with pale gold freckles. Her eyes were green, but flecked with gold, too. And her eyebrows, like the hair on her head, were the pure color of copper.

She looked...innocent, which made him feel guilty for wondering if the rest of her body was freckled, too, if the nipples crowning her generous breasts were pink or dusky brown, whether her pubic hair was copper bright, too.

He almost groaned. Yes, of course it was. And, damn it, he had no business thinking this way when he couldn't start anything with her. He was tying up the last strands of this part of his life, not opening any new packages. However enticing this one was.

Moira greeted a couple of people, and he did the same. They even had a few mutual acquaintances, none of whom seemed to think anything of the fact that they knew each other. He wondered what she did for a living, but decided he didn't want to know. He'd prefer to remember her as his mysterious redhead.

Then she stiffened. Raising his eyebrows, Will saw the couple directly in front of them. Good-looking guy, beautiful woman if you liked hip bones sharp enough to draw blood and thought counting ribs was an excellent postcoital activity.

The scumbag, clearly, and Graziella. Feeling Moira's tension, Will wasn't nearly as amused as he'd been when she last said the name.

"Bruce," she said coolly.

Some instinct made Will lay his hand on Moira's back in a way any other man would recognize. Mine. He nodded, making plain his disinterest, and steered her around the other couple.

"Aren't you Will Becker?" the other guy said.

Will nodded. "Yes." And kept going.

Moira gave another of those little gurgles of laughter that sounded like a small brook tumbling over rocks.

"Well, that was rude."

"Yeah, and I enjoyed it," he said truthfully.

She turned that laughing face up to him, her eyes sparkling, and said, "Thank you."

"You're very welcome." He kept his hand on her until they reached the front desk, at which point he stood back and let her take a credit card from the small, sparkly bag she'd carried over her shoulder. When eventually she turned around, he asked, "All set?"

"Yes. You don't have to walk me up, Will."

"Yes, I do."

She bit her lip and studied him for a moment, her eyes curiously vulnerable in a way that gave him a pang.

Twice now he'd thought of her as such, which had to mean something.

He knew what that something was. His gut was telling him to say good-night to her outside her hotel room door and leave. Don't kiss her. Don't step over the threshold. She wasn't a one-night stand kind of woman, and he wasn't interested in anything but.

Moira nodded and let him walk beside her to the elevators. One opened as soon as she pushed the button, and they rode upward in silence, side by side. He heard the soft sigh of a breath from her, caught an elusive scent that seemed old-fashioned. He had a flash of standing on the deep front porch of his family home, the sky purple with twilight, and that scent filling his nostrils.

Lilac.

The elevator opened and he said, "What's your room number?"

She stumbled, stepping out, and he wrapped a hand around her arm to catch her. "Um..." She looked at the small folder she held. "Two-eighteen."

Will nodded and directed her to the right. The hall was broad, the plush charcoal-gray carpet inset with maroon. He stopped in front of 218 and watched as she fumbled with the card, finally getting it into the slot correctly and turning the knob when the green light flashed.

“I should say good-night now,” he said hoarsely.

Holding the door open, she met his eyes. “Did you mean it, when you said...” She seemed to lose courage.

“Said...?” His heart was hammering.

She whispered, “That you think I’m beautiful.”

“I meant it.” He lifted a hand, hesitated, then only grazed her round, plush cheek with his knuckles. “You are.”

Her tongue touched her lips; she took a deep breath. “Then will you stay?”

CHAPTER TWO

STUNNED PLEASURE BLOSSOMED inside him like the warmth from good whiskey.

“You’re sure?” Will asked.

Had she really invited him in? Could he get this lucky?

But already Moira’s eyes had widened, as if she’d shocked herself, and her face flushed. Even so, she mumbled, “I think so.”

Despite the rising tide of hunger, he found himself smiling. “That wasn’t the strongest yes I’ve ever heard.”

Now her gaze was shy. “I haven’t done this in an awfully long time.”

His every instinct was to kiss her and keep kissing her until she was past any second thoughts. Damn, he hadn’t had sex in...it had to be a year, since he’d parted ways with Julia. But as desperate as he felt, Will wasn’t willing to risk making love with a woman who might hate herself or him immediately afterward.

“It’s been a good long while for me, too,” he admitted.

“Probably not as long as it’s been for me.” This mumble was so low he doubted it had been for his ears. It was a good reminder that his redhead had maybe had too much to drink. She was clutching onto the door frame pretty hard.

“Why me?” he asked.

She raised her chin. “You can just say no.”

“I don’t want to say no.”

“Oh.” Her lashes fluttered. “I’m attracted to you. I suppose...I needed someone to tell me I’m beautiful. You sounded like you really did mean it.” Her shoulders moved in an oddly unhappy jerk. “This is only for tonight...”

“It can only be for tonight.” His voice came out harsh.

Now alarm flashed in her green eyes. “You’re not married?”

“No.” He laid a palm against her cheek and felt the heat of her blush. “No,” he said, softer. “Nothing like that.”

“Okay.” Her breath tickled his wrist. “Then...?”

“Are you on birth control? I don’t have anything with me.”

Now her cheeks blazed. “I do. I was planning...”

He got it. The jackass downstairs was supposed to be standing here, not him. He was a substitute.

This was one time, Will thought with amusement and a leap of desire, that he didn’t mind filling in.

“In that case,” he said huskily, “I’d love to stay.”

He had a fleeting moment of being bothered that she looked surprised—had she really thought he’d say no?—but it was forgotten when he stepped forward until their bodies touched, chest to thighs. He took the hotel key from her hand and urged her backward, until the door swung shut behind them.

The room was dark; he fumbled for a switch and batted at it. The lamp beside the king-size bed came on, casting a golden circle of light. Perfect.

Damn, she was pretty. Will tossed the hotel key onto a dresser top and divested her of the small evening bag, sending it after the key. Then he cupped her face in his broad palms and bent his head.

He didn’t feel gentle, but he made sure his mouth was. Simply a little friction on her lips, a nibble, a stroke of his tongue. He could taste the martini, and something more. Something, he thought, that was distinctly her. He lifted his head and looked down at her face where color still blossomed. This close he could see that her lashes were darkened with mascara. Their natural color was undoubtedly that same bright copper. He’d like to see her without the mascara, with no defenses.

Although she had precious few now. She might have started with lipstick, but it had worn off, and the roses in her cheeks were surely her own. It would take a lot of powder to cover her freckles, and why would she bother trying? He liked those freckles.

“Can I take your hair down?” he whispered.

Her eyes were dazed. “I... Yes. Of course.”

When he delved his fingers in, he found an intriguing texture. As he removed pins, curls sprang free. One leaped around his index finger as if to entrap it. Her hair was thick and strong, strands sleek but not downy soft. Despite the sexual tension that gripped Will, he found himself foolishly smiling, imagining her trying to tame this mass every day.

“It’s awful hair.”

“It’s glorious.” Pins showered to the carpet; he was too busy playing to care. The curls tumbled below her shoulders. He guessed if her hair had been straight it might have fallen to the middle of her back. He could see that calling it copper wasn’t right: a hundred colors seemed to be mixed, from hairs as pale as flax to ones a deep auburn, and every shade in between. It was beautiful in this light. With sun shining on her head, she must glow.

“Man,” he whispered, and buried his face in her hair. The lilac fragrance was coming from it, and he let himself wallow happily for a minute. Then he pulled back enough to nip her earlobe and finally string kisses across her cheek to her nose and mouth.

This time he kissed her deeply, hungrily, sliding his tongue past her teeth to stroke hers. She made a muffled sound and wrapped her arms around his neck. Her body molded itself to his as if they were custom shaped. Sensation piled atop sensation: her tongue, slippery and sinuous against his, the plump, firm pillow of her breasts pressed against his chest, the vitality of the curls tangled around the hand he had cupping the back of her head.

He wanted her now, and fought to hold himself in check. That bastard downstairs had made her feel undesirable, and Will needed to fix that. Come morning, he was determined that she had no doubt in her mind how much he’d wanted her and how rich her own response was.

As he slid her zipper down and trailed his mouth over her throat, he murmured disconnected words meant to tell her what he felt. Her skin was unbelievably soft, and the leap of pulse under his lips aroused him like he couldn’t remember being. He nipped at her neck, wanting to leave a mark but careful not to. He couldn’t claim the right, not when he wouldn’t be around tomorrow.

She let out little gasps as he eased her dress down and peeled it off her arms then over her hips. His blood surged at the sight of her deep purple satin bra and a skimpy pair of matching panties.

“Beautiful. So beautiful,” he managed to say, although the words came out sounding raw. Her dress fell to her feet and he scooped her in his arms and moved her a few feet closer to the bed.

She wore no stockings, only strappy high heels and the bra and panties that were... His hands explored. Not a thong, but there wasn’t much there except the generous curve of butt that had him so hard he hurt.

Damn. He kissed her again, both his hands gripping her ass to hold her tight to his hips. They rocked where they stood, as if they couldn’t help themselves, and a groan tore its way from his throat.

He eased back and started yanking at his own clothes, flinging his suit coat to the floor, his tie after it the moment he got the damn knot undone. Moira was wrestling with the buttons of his shirt at the same time, and it fell to the floor, too.

Somehow he got the covers pulled down and laid her across the wide bed, her sprawl so wanton he couldn’t do anything but follow her even though he wanted to finish stripping. He had to cradle his erection between her thighs or he thought he might die right now.

They kissed and rolled, his hands everywhere on her body, hers on his. Not until she rose above him, sitting atop him, did he manage to undo the catch on her bra and free the most beautiful breasts he’d ever seen. Her chest was freckled, and a scattering of paler freckles danced down over the creamy

skin traced with faint blue lines, as though her skin was more transparent than normal. Her nipples were pink, the aureoles larger and just a little deeper in color.

Will heard himself making sounds that weren't even words as he tugged her near so that he could lave her nipples with his tongue, first one then the other. Kiss them softly, blow on the damp skin until she shivered, then suckle her, pulling the hard nubbin deep into his mouth as his cheeks flexed.

She clutched his shoulders and whimpered. Her hips rose and fell on his as if she couldn't help herself, but he was afraid he'd come right now, in his pants, if she kept riding him that way. He rolled her onto her back so that he was on top, able to savor her breasts for another few minutes before he rose to his knees and tugged her panties off. There were the curls as bright as the ones on her head, nestled between a smooth, freckled stomach and perfect legs that were freckled, too. He wanted to kiss every single freckle, but he knew he wouldn't last that long.

Her stomach. He'd start there. He loved the give of it; she had a tiny waist, but not the washboard abs of a woman who worked out every day. She felt intensely feminine, the ripples of reaction under his mouth amazingly erotic.

He finally had the strength of will to retreat enough to remove her shoes and, with clumsy hands, unbuckle his belt and shed his pants and socks. Then he kissed and licked his way up her legs, from the quivering arch of her feet to the sensitive back of her knees and the velvet softness of her inner thighs. He nuzzled her curls and inhaled her scent, his head swimming. A few strokes of his finger told him she was hot and wet and ready. Her cries had become something closer to mewls, and her head was flung back, her hair a halo against the white sheet.

He moved up between her thighs and got as far as pressing against her opening when his brain finally kicked in.

A condom! What in the hell had he been thinking?

He all but sprang from her. "Your purse?" he asked.

For a moment he could tell she didn't comprehend, but then her eyes widened in shock that matched his. They'd come so close. Too damn close.

"Yes." She swallowed. "Yes. I don't know where..."

"I put it..." He turned his head and spotted the glittery bag. He leaped out of bed. When he got his hands on the bag, he dumped the contents on the dresser top, not caring that some fell to the floor. Between folded bills was one small packet, and that was it.

He wished she'd brought more than one.

Will ripped it open and put on the condom. Two long steps and he was at the bed, where her legs were still splayed wide. He ran his hands up them, caressing, squeezing, until his fingers reached her damp center and he stroked as he knelt there. Not until her hips rocked again did he lower himself, taking her mouth in a deep, hungry kiss even as he pushed inside her.

She was tight. So tight he had a brief, horrified moment of wondering whether she might be a virgin. But he met no barrier, although he had to quit kissing her to grit his teeth at the exquisite pressure her body put on him. He was a big man, but he'd never felt anything like this.

"Am I hurting you?" he asked roughly.

She was panting for breath and her eyes were dilated.

"No," she whispered. "Oh, no."

Will moved. Out, in, slowly this time. He was near to exploding, but he had to give her pleasure first. Had to.

"Never felt...anything...this good," he groaned against her throat.

"Please." She wrapped her legs around his hips and rose to meet his next thrust. "Oh, please."

He knew what she needed. He just wasn't sure he could hold out long enough. He tried to blank his mind as he plunged, again and again, clasped so tight by her. He'd been holding his weight from her on his elbows, but now he reached down with one hand and gripped her hips, lifting her higher, changing the angle at which their bodies met.

“Will?” She sounded...almost frightened. Stunned, certainly. And then she cried out, and her body spasmed. He drove himself in her as deep as he could go and let the climax roll through him, the pleasure so powerful he couldn't have formed a coherent thought if his life had depended on it.

He collapsed on top of her and couldn't move.

Through a haze, it occurred to him that he'd never felt this amazing in his life. That sex had never approached being this powerful. He didn't know how or why it had been this time. Maybe something about the night, about having watched her for so long through the glass. And they didn't know each other.

That was it: anticipation, and mystery.

Eventually he made himself roll to one side and tuck her against him, her head on his shoulder, her hair tickling his chin. Eyes closed, he smiled, imagining those tendrils reaching for some kind of toehold, like ivy scaling a brick wall.

“You're amazing,” he murmured, his voice thick.

She snuggled closer and said nothing.

Will let himself drift, aware of the change in her breathing as she fell asleep. And, in drifting, he slept himself.

It was probably the unfamiliar weight of her head on his shoulder that awakened him. Will was disoriented only for a moment. He reached up with his free hand and brushed curls from his mouth, then tilted his head enough to be able to see her face. Her lips were parted, and a faint snore came to his ears.

His body stirred, and Will wished again that they had more than one condom. He supposed he could call down to the front desk... But she was sound asleep. She didn't surface when he gently disentangled himself. Wishing for another condom had reminded him that he hadn't removed the last one, or cleaned up.

What he should do was get dressed and go. Staying longer wouldn't bring anything but frustration and, come morning, an awkward conversation he'd as soon not have. She'd asked for one night; he'd told her it couldn't be any more than that. What else was there to say?

Will eased away, used the bathroom, then quietly got dressed. He found a pen on the desk and wrote quickly on the back of one of his business cards:

You are beautiful. I wish more than one night had been possible.

Will.

He underlined the are with a dark slash.

He picked up her clothes and laid them over a chair, then tucked the covers under her chin. She sighed and shifted before sinking back into deep slumber.

Will took one last look at her face and the vivid hair spread across the pillow, turned off the lamp and quietly let himself out of the room.

MOIRA WOKE WITH A START. Her mouth felt disgusting and she tried to work up some saliva. When she moved, a headache blossomed. Ugh. Was she coming down with something...?

She opened her eyes and remembered. Oh, Lord, she thought in shock. Had she really...? She squeezed her eyes shut. Yes. Yes, she had.

Behind closed eyelids, she pictured him, broad and tall in the darkness, the way she saw him first, then his rough-hewn face above her here in this bed, his short dark hair and the deep brown eyes looking so intensely into hers. She saw him so vividly, she expected to see him in reality when she opened her eyes, even though she knew better.

When she rolled enough to check out the other side of the bed and the room, it was to find herself alone. He was gone. They'd had sex, and he'd left her sleeping.

After, Moira noticed, picking up her clothes so they weren't left wadded on the floor.

With a groan, she got out of bed, snatched up her clothes and rushed into the bathroom. Her stomach felt queasy but not too bad. She couldn't exactly say she was hungover, although she wished

she hadn't had the last drink or two. Maybe, with a clearer head, she'd have had more sense than to take a hotel room and invite a perfect stranger into bed with her.

Shame crawled over her skin like goose bumps. What on earth had made her do something like that? She'd had only one lover in her whole life, and that was a college boyfriend. All these years since, she'd never even been tempted to have a one-night stand.

Until last night. When she'd not only been tempted, she'd done it.

The shower was blessedly hot, and she stayed in it for a long time. Getting dressed afterward wasn't fun, given that she didn't have clean underwear and had to put on an evening gown and high heels. She'd have killed for coffee and breakfast to settle her stomach, but no way was she going in a restaurant dressed like this, advertising that she'd had a hard night. She could order from room service... But that seemed silly. She'd be home in forty-five minutes.

With no brush, either, all she could do was loosely braid her wet hair. Her evening bag... she spotted it lying atop the dresser, next to a TV schedule and some local promotional brochures. Her keys had fallen to the floor for some reason, and as she bent to pick them up she saw her lipstick, too. She grabbed the purse and straightened, stuffing the lipstick inside as she turned for the door. Moira had no idea where the room key was and didn't care. At last, gingerly, she picked up the business card with the short note written on the back. A painful lump seemed to form in her chest.

Why can't we have more than one night? But she wouldn't call him. He'd made clear his limitations. If he wanted to, he could find her.

Moira dropped the business card in her purse and let herself out of the room. All she wanted was to get to her car, preferably unseen, and go home.

Then she would try to understand why she'd so foolishly gotten naked with a stranger, however kind and sexy he was.

But she knew, of course: her feelings had been hurt and she'd needed consolation. Foolish was the word for it, Moira thought, blushing as she crossed the hotel foyer under the gaze of a woman behind the front desk. And risky. That was another word for having sex with a stranger.

Except, he hadn't hurt her, and she knew he'd used the condom. Because he'd remembered, not because she had. She'd been lucky. Done something dumb, and escaped any of the myriad possible consequences. She should be old enough not to have to learn a lesson this way, but apparently she wasn't.

Moira got into her car and momentarily laid her forehead against the steering wheel.

I learned. I did.

Time to go home and... No, she wouldn't wish Will Becker would call. Instead, she'd do her best to forget last night ever happened.

THE SECURITY LINE at the airport lay just ahead. This early in the morning, it was short. He'd have plenty of time for breakfast and coffee once he got through it.

Will had intended to take an airporter to SeaTac, but Sophie insisted on driving him. During the past week, he'd signed over the title to his pickup to Jack and piled a few plastic tubs filled with his possessions in the basement of the family home. This morning, he had taken one last look at his bedroom, stripped of personality, and felt something unexpected: grief. He was saying goodbye to his entire life to this point. He had grown up in this house, played with plastic dinosaurs on the floor of this same bedroom, fought later with his stepmother over how clean he had to keep it. Sneaked a high school girlfriend in here and had sex with her after his parents were in bed and asleep. Returned the one summer after his freshman year in college, swearing that it would be the last time he'd work for his father, the last time he'd swing a hammer.

Then he'd come home to stay after his parents died. He'd never considered moving into the master bedroom, which was still empty. It was stupid, really, with Jack, Sophie, Clay and him all here, all in small bedrooms designed for children. He hoped, if and when Clay got married, that he'd have the sense to overcome the past and make the house his. Really his.

Something Will hadn't done, in part because he hadn't wanted the house, or the company, and he sure hadn't wanted to be a twenty-year-old stand-in father of three, responsible for the financial and emotional well-being of his young sister and brothers.

And now, he thought, standing in SeaTac airport at the crack of dawn, he was done with all of it.

He turned to face his sister. "Thanks for bringing me."

Sophie was the shrimp of the family, and still stood five foot ten. "Somebody had to see you off," she insisted.

"Yeah." He grinned at her. "Don't do anything I wouldn't approve of, okay?"

Her brown eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Will!" she wailed. "I'm going to miss you!"

His arms closed fiercely around her. "Damn it, Soph. I thought we had this goodbye crap out of the way."

She shook her head hard. "I know it doesn't make sense, when I've been away at college the last four years, but...you were always here. And now you won't be."

"I'm sorry," he heard himself say. "Do I still need to be?"

She shook her head again, then pulled back to give him a watery smile. "Of course you don't. I'm being silly. It's just...I'll miss you, Will. I'm glad you're going. I know how much you need this. How much you gave up for us."

He scowled. "Don't start with that. I did what I had to do. I have no regrets."

Her smile became more genuine. "Yeah, sure you don't. Just, um, have a fabulous time, okay? And email."

"Yeah, yeah." He kissed her wet cheek. "I love you, Soph. I won't disappear, I promise."

"Okay." She sniffed and swiped at damp eyes. "I'm going. You don't need this. Just...take care." She gave him one more fervent hug, then hurried away.

He watched her go, not looking back, and remembered taking each of his siblings to college to start their freshman years. Helping them haul their stuff into dorm rooms, wishing he was the one there to stay, then driving away with the feeling that a big hole had opened in his chest. Except for the envy he hadn't been able to help, he'd been all parent, a little shocked to find out how much he was going to miss first Clay, then Jack, then Sophie.

By the time Sophie started her freshman year, Clay was home again and working with Will. Unlike Will, he had loved the summers he'd worked construction. It seemed to be in his blood. He'd learned the business eagerly and had a natural air of authority.

Will shook himself now, surprised again at how alone he felt. Glad he was, but a little sorry all the same. Maybe he should have expected these mixed emotions, but hadn't. He'd expected to be celebrating this morning.

He went through security, taking out his laptop, putting his shoes on the conveyor belt, having to go back and empty the change out of the pockets of his pants. Then he put himself back together and headed for the closest place to have breakfast.

Although he'd brought the morning Times to read while he was eating, Will found himself thinking instead about his redhead. He kept thinking he should have tracked her down and called her. Maybe she felt fine about making love with him, but maybe she didn't. He hated to think she was embarrassed.

He wished...oh, damn, he wished he'd met her at another time and place. That he'd been able to call her the next day and ask her out to dinner. Let her know that she could be special to him, not merely a chance to get his rocks off.

Face it, he thought harshly; that's all she'd been. And she deserved more.

He'd feel worse if he was sure saying "Thanks, but no thanks," would have been the right thing to do. Will was still afraid that would have hurt her, that she'd been emotionally fragile enough to need a man to want her.

And maybe he was trying to excuse himself for taking what she offered because he wanted to, whether it was a crappy thing for him to have done or not.

He hoped she didn't give the jackass another chance if he came begging.

Forget it, he told himself, frowning as he rose to walk to the gate. There was nothing he could do now. This was his new beginning. He should be rejoicing.

Too bad he wasn't already in Harare, instead of facing thirty-six hours on airplanes and airport layovers in Frankfurt and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He hoped like hell the promised aisle seats materialized; he was way too big a man to spend that many hours cramped between other passengers or at the window.

Half an hour later, his flight was called. Thinking, Here goes nothing, he took out his boarding pass and joined the line. But he was still picturing an apple-cheeked, freckled face with pretty lips and green eyes when he wedged himself into his airline seat and buckled the belt.

CHAPTER THREE

STANDING ATOP THE ROUGH concrete foundation, Moira studied the completed framing of the building that would house doctors' offices and an outpatient surgical center.

"Looking good," she told Jeb Morris, a contractor with whom she'd worked before. These visits were almost a formality with Jeb; he knew enough to spot problems before they tripped him up. And he maintained high standards.

A short, stocky man with a close-cropped beard, he pushed his hard hat back, his gaze resting on her. "Everything okay, Moira?"

She looked at him in surprise. "Sure. Why do you ask?"

He shook his head. "You seem distracted today."

Moira forced a smile. "I guess I am. Just things on my mind. Sorry, Jeb."

"Hey, no problem. I'll walk you to your car."

Because she was visiting several sites today, she'd worn her clunky work boots, jeans and a green flannel shirt over a T-shirt, in case the day got warmer. It was May, tulips were in bloom, but the morning had been chilly.

She was trying very, very hard to think about the job site and the wiring and electrical and plumbing that would soon go in, about spring flowers and how she was meeting Gray and Charlotte for lunch later. Gray Van Dusen was her partner in Van Dusen & Cullen, Architects, and her best friend in the world. Charlotte had quickly become almost as good a friend.

Moira was doing her best to think about anything and everything except the fact that she was almost positive her period was late. At least a week late. Maybe ten days. She didn't keep exact track, so she wasn't sure. But...it should have come and gone.

Sickening fear rose from her belly to swell in her chest, as it did every time she let this worry creep through her defenses. She felt Jeb's scrutiny and made a point of smiling again and asking about his oldest son, who was a senior in high school waiting to hear which colleges had accepted him.

Jeb's face brightened. "Didn't I tell you? He received early acceptance to Stanford. Can you believe it?" He wore a goofy grin. "My kid, going to Stanford."

She laughed. "Your kid, your tuition bills."

That didn't wipe the smile away. "Worth every penny." He slapped the top of her car. "Take care, Moira."

"Yeah, thanks, Jeb." She put the key in the ignition and closed the door as he walked away. Not wanting him to turn back and see her sitting here, she reversed then drove across bumpy ground toward the street. Meantime, her stomach churned.

Was it too early for a pregnancy test?

Once out of sight of the construction, she pulled to the curb and set the car in Park. Still holding on to the steering wheel for all she was worth, Moira let the fear wash over her. It sensitized her skin, set her to rocking, made her pant.

How could this be? He'd used the condom. She knew he had, saw him put it on.

Yes, but condoms had a failure rate a whole lot higher than birth-control pills. Which she wasn't on. Hadn't wanted to start until she was sure her relationship with Bruce was moving to that point.

She'd had sex once. Once! And they'd used a condom. Even if it had failed—had a hole, or leaked, or whatever went wrong—a woman shouldn't get pregnant the one and only time she'd had sex in over ten years. Wasn't there some justice, somewhere, that would keep her from being punished so severely for her foolish need to prove she was desirable?

And to make matters worse, she wasn't even convinced she'd proved that much. Yes, he'd made passionate love to her. He'd said the right things. He'd touched her with such care, such longing, and

his eyes had darkened to near black when he thrust into her. But...he had also left the minute she fell asleep, simply stole away.

And even though he'd said it would be only the one night... A part of her couldn't help wondering why. Why, in the three weeks that had passed since then, he hadn't made the effort to find out who she was, hadn't called. She would have been easy to find, Moira knew, with her flaming red hair and freckled face. They'd known people in common; all he would have had to do was make a phone call or two.

But he hadn't done that.

Please don't let him be married, she prayed. Don't let him have lied. I'd hate to have to live with that. Especially now, especially if...

If she was pregnant. Moira bit her lip so hard she tasted blood.

What would she do if she was pregnant? Would she track him down and tell him?

Still rocking herself, she thought, No. If this was anyone's fault, it was hers. She'd asked him to make love to her. The condom was hers, so she couldn't even blame him for using a defective one. He'd warned her that the one night was all he could offer, and she'd agreed. How could she now contact him and say, "Hate to tell you, but you're going to be a father, so how do you feel about paying child support for, oh, say, the next eighteen years?"

That wasn't the deal they'd made.

My fault, my risk.

And—oh, Lord—she didn't know if she could face him anyway. Maybe the standards she'd grown up with in Montana were dated, but the closest she'd come to shaking them was sleeping with her college boyfriend. Having too much to drink followed by a one-night stand... She shivered. She'd all but begged him to have sex with her.

Moira was whimpering now, the fear swamping her. She felt like a drowning victim, going down for the last time, desperate for a hand to reach for her. But there wasn't one. Wouldn't be one. If she made Will Becker take responsibility, all she'd be doing was dragging him under with her.

It was a long time before she felt able to drive again. She'd made one decision: she would wait another week before she bought a home pregnancy test. Heck, maybe her anxiety was holding off her period. A watched pot never boils, after all. And...really, was there any advantage to knowing for sure this early? Abortion wasn't an option for her, she knew that. She wanted to have children. She'd always assumed she would be married by the time she had a baby, that there would be a father in the picture, too, but hard reality was that she was thirty-four years old. Maybe she should be grabbing at any chance to have a family, even if it wouldn't be the ideal one.

Moira wished she wasn't supposed to meet Gray and Charlotte. Hiding her distress would be hard. And the truth was, if she really was pregnant, carried the baby to term and kept him or her to raise, Gray would pay some of the price, too, however unfair that was.

When he got the idea of running for mayor of West Fork, they'd had a long talk. He wasn't married then, hadn't even met Charlotte, so it was only the two of them making the decision. The mayoral job wasn't full-time, or he wouldn't have considered it. But he'd have to cut back substantially on how many architectural commissions he took. Unless they wanted their revenue to decline substantially, Moira would be carrying more than her share of the work.

She'd liked what he wanted to accomplish for this town that was now home for both of them, and understood why it mattered to him. Understood more, probably, than he'd be comfortable realizing. Gray was usually closemouthed about his deepest motivations, but they had been best friends in college. There'd been a couple of times when he'd had too much to drink and had told her things he had probably regretted—assuming he'd remembered the next day.

She knew he had had a twin brother who died in an accident when the two boys were ten years old. They had been riding bikes together, racing down a hill. Garret had pulled ahead, just a little. He slammed into the side of a car passing on the street that intersected the foot of the hill. Gray shot

past the rear bumper. A split second one way or the other and it would have been different. Garret might have been fine and Gray dead. Or both fine. Garret went into a coma and never came out before dying two days later. In their grief, Gray's parents pulled away from each other and ultimately divorced, his mother moving to Portland, his dad to Boise. They'd left behind the small-town life that in later years came to seem idyllic to Gray, who had also had to cope with the realization that he was a constant, aching reminder to both of his parents of the son they'd lost.

In coming to West Fork, Gray was trying to recapture everything he had lost. She knew that, and feared it was impossible, but had agreed to open their architectural firm here anyway. To her surprise, he seemed to have found what he was looking for. The satisfaction of shaping the town to suit himself, a woman to love, the start of a family.

But Moira wasn't going to be able to keep her end of the agreement. Would she even be able to work full-time when she got near the end of her pregnancy? Didn't most new mothers have to take some time off? And then, how many hours a day could she bear to leave her baby in day care? There was no way Gray would be able to continue serving as mayor, not if Van Dusen & Cullen, Architects, was to survive.

And that made her feel horribly guilty.

Fortunately, if she was quiet during lunch, neither Gray nor Charlotte seemed to notice. They talked some about their current projects, some about Charlotte's pregnancy, which was starting to show, and some about Charlotte's twin sister, Faith, who had recently married West Fork Police Chief Ben Wheeler and who was also thinking of starting a family.

Call her pathetic, but it made Moira feel even lonelier to imagine Charlotte and Faith both pregnant at the same time as she was, but the two of them having men who loved them and worried about them and hovered over them. While all Moira was doing by getting pregnant was screwing up her life.

Worry about it when you're sure, she told herself.

A WEEK LATER, MOIRA BOUGHT a pregnancy test at a pharmacy in Everett where nobody knew her, and decided to wait until after dinner to use it. She should be hungry, but wasn't. A part of her knew it wasn't only anxiety, that the lack of appetite and faint queasiness of the past few days shouldn't come as any surprise.

She peed on the stick, then sat on the edge of the bathtub waiting, staring at it. Maybe the watched pot wouldn't boil. If she didn't take her eyes off it, didn't blink....

But she couldn't help blinking, and the blue color first tinted the slot, then brightened.

Oh, God. Oh, God.

All of her fear poured back. She dropped the stick in the wastebasket and bent forward, holding herself as tight as she could as a hundred different emotions eddied and tumbled like flood waters, almost more than her body could contain.

In the end, all she could think was, I'm pregnant.

And now she had to live with it.

"LUNCH?" MOIRA SAID. "Um...sure. Now?"

Oh, heavens. She'd done her best in the two months since she realized she was pregnant to...not avoid Gray, how could she when they were partners and friends? She saw him every day, and she had dinner with him and Charlotte at least once a week. But she had tried not to spend time alone with him, not to let conversation become really personal. It hadn't been as hard as she'd have thought. Mostly in the office they talked business, exchanged ideas, looked over each other's preliminary sketches and made suggestions, offered solutions to jobsite problems. Lunch for Gray was usually fast food or a deli sandwich, snatched between city hall and their architectural office or a job site.

But today, he'd appeared earlier than she had expected him, and now stood in the doorway waiting.

"If not now, when?" he asked with his usual good humor.

She saved her CADD drawing and closed out the program, then took her purse from the bottom drawer of her desk. Gray stood back to let her out the door, then flipped the sign to Closed.

“The Pea Patch?”

“Fine.” Perfect, in fact. The small vegetarian restaurant used only organic, healthful ingredients, exactly what a pregnant woman should be eating. Gray had probably taken to eating there with Charlotte.

He didn’t say much during the short drive and found parking right in front. The main street of West Fork probably hadn’t changed much since the 1950s, with false-fronted buildings and small, locally owned businesses. The Pea Patch was relatively new, of course, as was the antiques store beside it, but the barbershop and hardware store could have starred in a Norman Rockwell painting. One of Gray’s goals had been to maintain the old-fashioned atmosphere of downtown and keep people shopping here.

Moira ordered the day’s special, a bowl of split-pea soup and a half sandwich, Gray a burrito. He glanced at her sidelong when she asked for a juice instead of the latte that had been her habit.

Once the waitress took the menus and left them alone, he contemplated Moira over the table. Gray was a handsome man with calm gray eyes and sun-streaked light brown hair. They had dated a time or two when they first met, then fell into friendship instead of romance. Gray wasn’t the first or the last guy to see her as buddy material instead of potential girlfriend. In his case, she didn’t regret it. He’d become family to her, a lot more important than the college boyfriend with whom she’d lost touch shortly after graduation.

“Something’s off with you,” he said bluntly. “Or maybe with us. Have I been unavailable when you needed to talk?”

Swallowing the lump in her throat, she shook her head.

“Then what, Moira?” His eyes were kind.

Her chest hurt. “Oh, Gray.”

“What?” He leaned forward and reached for her hand.

“I’ve been dreading telling you.”

“Telling me what?” His fingers tightened. “You’re not leaving me, are you?”

Even in her misery, Moira giggled. “Do you know what that sounds like?”

A grin tugged at his mouth. “Yeah, someone who knows I’m married might wonder.” The smile faded and he repeated, “What, Moira?”

She had to tell him eventually. Now was as good a time as ever.

“I’m pregnant.”

He jerked. “Pregnant?”

“Jeez, tell the whole town, why don’t you,” she said indignantly.

He looked around. “There’s nobody close enough to hear.” He paused. “Is it a secret?”

“No.” Damn it, she felt watery again. “I guess it’ll be obvious anytime.”

“How far along?”

“Um...three months.”

He frowned. “You’ve lost weight instead of gaining, haven’t you?”

“Didn’t Charlotte?”

“You’re sick, too?”

Moira nodded. “Well, not sick. Just...icky feeling. I don’t dare do more than nibble at any one time.”

He was staring at her. “Pregnant,” he repeated. His expression hardened. “Who’s the father?”

She gazed steadily back. “No one who is in the picture.”

“It was that son of a bitch Girard wasn’t it?”

Moira gave a choked laugh. “He is a son of a bitch, but no. It’s not him, Gray.”

“Then who?” This man, her best friend, sounded implacable, as if he intended to beat the crap out of the man who’d impregnated and abandoned her.

She swallowed, the backs of her eyelids burning again. “It really doesn’t matter. He...used a condom. It’s just one of those things. Not his fault. And we didn’t have the kind of relationship that means I’m going to stick him with this.”

The waitress appeared with their lunches, and Moira sat silent, head bowed, while Gray said the right things. The minute the waitress was gone, he said, “You’re having the baby.” It wasn’t really a question.

“I’d have done something about it long ago if I wasn’t.”

He gave a one-sided shrug, as if to say, Oh, yeah. “Why did you dread telling me? You’re not planning to move home?”

“Home?” She wished she could laugh. “Missoula? Are you kidding? I love my mother, but...no. I’m not going anywhere. It’s just that...”

Neither of them had reached for a spoon or fork.

“You’re trying to tell me I’m going to have to start carrying my fair share of the work, aren’t you?”

“Probably more than your fair share,” she said in a rush.

“Gray, I’m sorry. We had a deal, and now I’ve blown it.”

Suddenly he was smiling, so tenderly the tears she’d kept at bay filled her eyes. “Moira, falling in love and having babies are way more important than who does what share of work. You gave me my chance, I had fun. But I won’t run for reelection. I can’t even say I mind that much. It’s been a lot tougher than I envisioned, trying to hold down both jobs. I didn’t mind so much before Charlotte, but things are different now.” He picked up a napkin and dabbed at her cheeks. “It’s past time I take up the slack at work. It’s you I’m worried about.”

On the verge of major blubbing, she gulped and leaped to her feet. “I’m sorry, I—” She hurried to the bathroom, a small, unisex one where she could lock the door and sob without embarrassment.

It didn’t take her long; heaven knows, she’d cried enough lately, and should have had it all out of her system. Even though she splashed cold water on her face, she was blotchy when she returned to the table.

Gray gave her a comprehensive look, but all he said was, “Eat. Your soup’s getting cold.”

She sniffed and picked up her spoon.

“Do you mind if I tell Charlotte?”

“Of course not. I’ll be showing before I know it anyway.”

He nodded, and they ate in silence for a few minutes. Moira was hungrier than usual, she was surprised to discover. Maybe something had loosened inside her, now that she’d told Gray.

As though his mind was following a similar path, he asked, “Does your mother know?”

Moira groaned. “No.”

His mouth quirked. “Unless she’s planning a visit, you have six months to work yourself up to it.”

“She’ll be supportive.”

“Then...?”

“This isn’t the way I ever imagined starting a family,” she heard herself telling him. “I hated not having a father. It seemed like everyone else did. I always swore—” Her throat closed up.

Once again, his hand enveloped hers. “You know I’ll be there for you as much as I can.”

“Yeah.” She felt her smile wobble. “I do know. Thank you, Gray. But we’ll be fine.” Unconsciously, she laid a hand on her belly. “Mom and I were fine. It’s not as if I grew up unloved.”

He was quiet for a moment, his gaze perceptive. “Your baby does have a father.”

“I haven’t told him.”

“I’d have been pissed if a woman I was involved with kept that kind of secret from me.”

Admitting something like this was hard, but... “It was a one-time thing, Gray. We weren’t involved. He doesn’t even know my last name.”

His eyes narrowed. “But you know his.”

After a moment she nodded. “Damn, Moira.”

Heat swept over her face. “I’ve never done anything like that. Doesn’t it figure I’d get caught, big-time, when I did.”

“You know I love you.”

She nodded again. “I’ve cried enough, okay?”

Gray gave a low chuckle. “Okay. But let me say this again. Unless you know the guy’s a creep, I think you should tell him. If I had a kid out there, I’d want to be part of his life. Give the man a chance.”

She sighed. “I think...I’ve been trying to pretend it didn’t happen.”

His eyebrows rose. “An immaculate conception?”

Once again he’d managed to make her laugh despite everything. “Something like that.” She folded her napkin, then folded it again. And again. “I’m embarrassed to talk to him,” she mumbled. “And...it really doesn’t seem fair to me to ask anything of him.”

“He was there.” Gray’s voice was hard.

Yes. Will Becker definitely had been there.

“Give him a chance,” Gray repeated.

After a moment, she nodded. “Okay. You’re right. I know you are.”

He smiled then, satisfied, and reached for her hand. One quick squeeze conveyed plenty. “Let me know what I can do, all right?”

There wasn’t any point in saying more, not yet. She hated to think he wouldn’t be able to finish his term in office, that he’d have to resign early, but they’d have a better idea later when she found out how she was affected by the pregnancy. His term ended the first of the year, and her due date was the middle of January, so they’d be okay as long as she could work until the end.

She should feel better, having gotten this out of the way. And in a way she did. He’d reacted exactly the way she had expected he would: with understanding and affection.

But she still felt guilty, and panic still whispered at the edges of her awareness, prepared to engulf her if she let it.

No matter what, her life would never be the same again.

And now she’d committed herself to calling Will and saying the unthinkable: “I’m pregnant with your baby.”

CHAPTER FOUR

BY THE TIME HE REACHED the outskirts of Harare, Will was weary and grateful to be back. He'd spent the past two weeks in rural east Zimbabwe, negotiating with workers, suppliers, local officials, town leaders, hell, even the community n'anga, or healer, who seemed to be particularly influential in that district.

The job had turned out to be nothing like he'd envisioned. When he'd first arrived, it hadn't taken him two weeks to discover that the architectural renderings drawn by a firm in Providence, Rhode Island, were useless; that nothing near as elaborate as the original plans was required; that, if these community hospitals and medical clinics were to be useful, they needed to spring from local needs and with local approval. He'd made the mistake, too, of believing he could conduct most business in English, the official language. Zimbabwe had been, after all, a British colony when it was Southern Rhodesia. But, while road signs and the like were in English, it was mostly spoken in the cities. In the countryside where he was working it was another matter. He was now learning Shona, the language of the majority tribe. He still needed a translator, but was gaining confidence in his ability to understand discussions before they were sanitized and translated for his benefit. He was already adept enough to conduct the ritual conversations that preceded any real business.

"How is your mother? Your father? Your son? Good, good," he would say with grave nods. Then, in answer to the requisite polite questions for him, "I don't often speak to them, but my brothers and sister are well."

Nothing happened rapidly, and getting frustrated did no good.

He pulled his ancient Datsun pickup truck into a curb-side parking spot in the block adjacent to the foundation offices. As he got out, his mouth quirked as he imagined what Clay would say about the irony of Will, the strong, silent member of the Becker clan, having to spend his days and weeks and months in seemingly never ending conversation. Or—most delicious irony of all—being good at it. But these first months, Will had realized, would build the bridge of friendships strong enough to see a dozen medical clinics and two community hospitals built in the next two years. Or it wouldn't happen.

Harare was Zimbabwe's largest city. It had a surprisingly European look, to his eye, and a population of over a million people. Every time he reached the outskirts of the city after days' or weeks' absence, tension melted away. He was American enough to feel most at home here. There were Western-style grocery stores. He could dine out on Italian food, Greek, Chinese. Hold conversations with American businessmen and women.

He felt rueful amusement when he thought of the last cocktail party he'd attended. He wasn't any better at that kind of socializing. Lurking in a dark corner, he'd wished for his mysterious redhead.

In the first week Will had rented a small house less than half a mile from the office. Even though he seemed to be away more than he was here, he needed a base. And he'd somehow acquired a full-time housekeeper-cook.

At home in the U.S., the closest thing to a servant he'd ever had was a woman who came in to the Becker home weekly to clean. He'd seen her once in a blue moon; mostly they communicated by notes. Please clean the refrigerator this week, he'd write. I'll be coming on Tuesday instead of Thursday next week, if that's okay, her sticky note would inform him. But having someone wait on him...well, that was different. He'd intended to take care of himself. But he'd barely moved in when women began knocking on his back door asking for work. He was met with blank astonishment when he said he didn't need anyone, thank you. And it wasn't totally true, he discovered; buying food in the unfamiliar markets where English often wasn't spoken was a hassle, and he'd come to Africa with the intention of immersing himself in the culture, not living in a bubble like a tourist admiring the scenery. Yeah, sometimes he appreciated seeing familiar brands on grocery-store shelves, but he

didn't want to shop only in the Western-style supermarkets. God knows, he wasn't much of a cook. He had no microwave here. And unemployment was sky-high. He could afford to give someone a job.

So now, when he was in town, he came home to sadza ready when he sat at the table. Sadza was the word commonly used for any meal, but also for the staple of the diet: a sort of stew served on cooked grain. Jendaya, his housekeeper, most often used chicken in the stew, although she was scandalized that he preferred it to goat, which his relative wealth would have permitted. He liked the stew without meat at all, and she obliged with scandalized shakes of the head. Only the poor didn't put meat in their sadza, she made sure he knew. When he was in Harare, he usually ate lunch out, so Will was content with the traditional evening meal even though it varied little.

Jendaya had expected him back today, so he assumed dinner at home would be ready at the usual seven o'clock. That gave him time to stop at the office and check email. He hadn't even seen an internet café the past two weeks—to find one, he'd have had to drive into Mutare, the city closest to the Mozambique border, and it hadn't seemed worth the bother. One of the pleasures of getting home was anticipating email: responses to questions he'd asked of the foundation headquarters, and especially to hearing from Clay, Sophie and Jack. Will missed them more than he'd expected.

The early evening was cool enough to remind him of home as he walked the half a block to the two-story stucco-fronted office building. He'd become accustomed to the rich scent of the air: diesel fuel, wood smoke, ripe fruit and the heady scent of flowers in bloom. September was spring here, south of the equator, still dry, the reverse of seasons in the Pacific Northwest. The hard rains, he was told, fell during the summer in Zimbabwe, therefore at the same time as they would be falling in Washington State.

The front door to the foundation headquarters was still unlocked, although he was greeted with silence inside. He'd started up the stairs when a light went out in an office at the top and Perry Marshall rushed out. Another American, he'd arrived only a few weeks before, and would be acquiring the equipment, furniture and supplies for the clinics as they were built.

"Will!" He paused on the stairs. "Good trip?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Can we talk in the morning? We're having a dinner party, and Rachel's going to kill me if I'm late. You'd be welcome to join us," he added.

Will smiled. "Thanks, but I suspect Jendaya will have dinner ready. And I've got to tell you, I'm beat."

The other American's bushy gray eyebrows rose. "Then what are you doing here?"

"Just wanted to check email."

"Internet's slow today," Perry warned him, and kept going.

It was, but Will got on eventually and relaxed in his chair, glad the building seemed otherwise empty, as he watched a dozen messages load. Good, a couple from each of his siblings. He liked hearing from them so often. There was one from an unfamiliar address and he clicked on it first, figuring it would be a quick delete. But it wasn't the junk he expected. It was short, only a paragraph, and ended with Moira. His pulse quickened.

His mysterious redhead. What the hell? His thoughts had turned to her with disturbing frequency, but if she hadn't tried to get in touch in four months, why now?

Will, I've hesitated over contacting you at all, but I think you deserve to know that I'm pregnant. I don't know what happened; I suppose the condom tore or something. You need to know that I don't hold you responsible. I invited you to stay, I knew you weren't offering anything but the one night. Heck, I was the one who provided the condom. But...I am pregnant. I intend to have the baby, and am well able to afford to raise him or her. I have friends and family. I'm not asking for help from you, or any involvement. I'll be honest. I'm not even sure I would welcome either. Since you don't know me, you may not even believe the baby is yours. That's okay, too. I thought I should tell you, and now I've done that.

Moira

Stunned, he stared at the computer monitor, rereading the email a second time, a third time. She was pregnant.

The first wave of anger took him aback, because it was a stupid thing that pissed him off. Did she really think he wouldn't believe her when she said the baby was his? He'd have had to be an idiot not to recognize her essential innocence. His redhead didn't sleep around.

"I haven't done this in an awfully long time," she'd said. He'd wondered then how long that actually was. A year? Five years? She'd been incredibly sexy but also... awkward. Unpracticed. No, if she was pregnant, it was his baby she was carrying. Not if. After four months, she might even be showing.

He shook his head in...not disbelief, not shock, but something related. He was going to be a father.

A sound escaped his throat. A father was the last thing in the world he'd wanted to become, at least for the next few years. He'd already raised a family. The idea of starting over appalled him. And yet...that was his baby she was carrying.

He shoved his fingers into his hair. As things stood, his son or daughter would grow up without him, and it sounded as though that was what she'd prefer.

He should be grateful. Glad she wasn't demanding he be an every-other-weekend father, or that he send child-support checks. She was right; they didn't know each other.

Numbly, Will sat back in his chair. It would be worse if he hadn't liked her, if it really had been a typical one-night stand. A chance-met stranger encountered in a bar, say.

Wasn't that what it was?

He found himself scowling. No. No, he'd been drawn to her from the minute he set eyes on her. He'd ached the next morning to call her. The temptation to see her in the few days left to him had been acute. Now...hell. Now he wished he had. At least then they would know each other better.

He felt another surge of anger. She wouldn't welcome his involvement? Did that mean she hadn't liked him nearly as much as he had her? That he really was nothing but an available sub for the jackass?

Had it occurred to her that, if she'd had sex with him, using that same condom, she might still be pregnant? Would she prefer that, even given the way the creep had treated her?

I have friends and family, she said. Will gritted his teeth. A mother. She had a mother. Had she forgotten that she'd told him it was just her and her mom? Okay, she probably did have friends, but friends had their own families. With the best will in the world, how much good was a friend going to be to her, caring for a baby by herself?

He swore aloud, his voice hoarse. He didn't know what to tell her. How to respond. Damn. He looked again and saw that her email was dated almost two weeks ago, in fact the day after he'd left Harare. She had probably already concluded that he wasn't going to reply at all.

Maybe she was relieved. That idea pissed him off yet again.

One more day wouldn't matter. He had to think about this.

At last he made himself read the emails from his brothers and Sophie. None had any real news. Clay had met a woman shortly after Will left and sounded as if he might be serious about her. Jack had had a minor accident in a company pickup, and Clay was ragging him. Sophie was renting a room in a house with other grad students in L.A., where she'd be attending UCLA, classes to start next week. She'd met with her faculty advisor, and told a few amusing stories about her roommates, two guys and two girls.

Will responded to their emails with a general one telling them about this latest trip. He tried to draw word pictures, so they could see the general meeting held under a baobab tree, with him in a metal folding chair facing the sixteen men who'd sat comfortably on the dusty ground despite Western business attire that made him suspect they'd dressed up for his benefit. He described the tea

plantations, with leaves as big as elephant ears, and the kraals of round mud huts with thatch roofs, women wearing Western garb cooking on open fires outside. He made fun of his more ludicrous language mistakes.

He didn't say, "Hey, the real news is that I'm going to be a father." Although he'd have to tell them eventually, wouldn't he? After years of lecturing them on safe sex.

Yes, but he'd used the damn condom. He'd come close to forgetting it; closer than he'd ever come in his life. But he'd remembered in time, so he couldn't blame himself now for carelessness. He hadn't seen any obvious tear when he disposed of it, although now he wasn't sure he'd even really looked. He'd been wishing he had another condom, wishing he wasn't leaving his redhead to awaken alone in the hotel room.

Will sent the email, figuring he'd write shorter, more personal ones to each of them individually tomorrow. Then he read Moira's one more time, as incredulous and confused as he was the first time. Finally he closed the internet and turned off the computer.

What was he going to say to her?

IT WAS FIFTEEN DAYS AFTER she'd made herself write that hideous email and send it before she saw a reply in her in-box from Will Becker. The first week, Moira had compulsively checked her personal account at least twice a day while she was at work, something she rarely did, then a couple more times at home. When there was nothing from him, she'd...not given up, relaxed. A better choice of words. Since then, she'd gone back to reading personal email in the evening at home. Tonight, she'd sat at the computer while leftover casserole was heating in the microwave. At the sight of his address, her heart took an unpleasant bump and her hand was actually shaking when she reached for the mouse.

She distantly heard the microwave beep and ignored it.

Moira,

I'm sorrier than I can say that you've had to deal with this on your own. I should have told you that night why the one night was all I could offer. I suspect that, despite my denial, you still worried I might be married, engaged, whatever. It wasn't anything like that. I had just accepted a job from a nonprofit committed to build schools and medical clinics in sub-Saharan Africa. I've been in Zimbabwe for nearly four months now, and have made a two-year commitment. I often have no access to email for weeks at a time. I just read yours last night.

It would never have crossed my mind to think you'd tell me the baby was mine if it wasn't. Maybe you believe I don't know you, but I thought I did. Well enough to be sure you're honest, and that your invitation to me was out of the ordinary for you. I hope you know me well enough to guess what I'm going to say now.

No child of mine is going to grow up not knowing his father. I can't do much to help you right now, although I am more than willing to offer financial support if you find you can't continue to work all the way through your pregnancy. I ask that you stay in touch and let me know how you're doing. I'll be back in the states every few months, and we can talk the first time I am. Come up with a plan. But fair warning: I will be involved.

He gave her the website address of the foundation he worked for in case she was interested, and repeated that he wanted to hear from her. He closed by asking what she did for a living. Tell me about yourself, he said. Please.

Moira cried for the first time in months, and she didn't even know why. She didn't need him. She kept remembering the intense note in his voice when he told her about his worst nightmare. "Being trapped. Spending my life doing what I have to do." There was more, but she'd known what he meant.

This was what he'd been trying to say. Getting stuck with an obligation he hadn't willingly, wholeheartedly made. Having to accept responsibility for helping raise a child he couldn't possibly want.

Her email, she thought wretchedly, was his worst nightmare.

TWO DAYS LATER, MOIRA REPLIED.

Will,

Now I think I'm sorry I told you. I remember that you said your worst nightmare was to get stuck, to spend your life fulfilling obligations. I don't want to be your nightmare. And please, please don't feel you have to be involved if you'll resent it. That would have to be awful for a kid, don't you think? I barely remember my father—did I tell you that?—but even though I often wished that he was around when I was growing up, I know it might have hurt worse if he'd been there because he felt he had to be. I really will be fine, you know. We won't starve without you.

If you want to look me up when you get home, that's fine, though. I live in West Fork, and work here, too. I'm an architect, in partnership with a friend. Van Dusen & Cullen. I'm Cullen. I guess you can tell that from my email address, huh? It's not a real physical job, which is good right now. And I'm hoping I can bring the baby to work some of the time. I know Gray, my partner, won't mind.

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