

MILLS & BOON



## Vintage *Cherish*

Fairy-Tale  
Family

PAT MONTANA

# Pat Montana

## Fairy-Tale Family

### Аннотация

ONCE UPON A FAMILY Once, Ellie Sander had believed in fairy tales...until her illusions were shattered and she found herself single mom to four cherubic—though sometimes challenging—children. For them, she had to be strong—and smart. No cads in Prince Charming clothes for her ever again! Gorgeous, gregarious, great with her kids—Mitch Kole arrived in Ellie's life like a knight in shining armor. But his stay was only temporary, while his bachelor status seemed permanent. Dare she dream that this man who'd claimed her heart and touched her soul could become her happily-ever-after husband...and a fairy-tale father?

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Barely able to breathe, Ellie rose on tiptoe. Just one kiss...just magic for one night. That was all Cinderella had asked.

As if a spell were unwinding, Mitch kissed her, molding his mouth to hers, seeking entry to deepen the kiss. Like a sorcerer, he made her forget everything but him; like a wizard, he filled her with magic. But Mitch was a man, every hard, burning inch of him pressing against her.

She trembled at the quaking she felt in him. She savored his taste. She felt the thunder of his heart against her own.

Or was it the galloping race of time? For an instant she listened, knowing tonight the only things she and Cinderella had in common were a prince and a fatefully ticking clock....

Dear Reader,


As spring turns to summer, make *Silhouette Romance* the perfect companion for those lazy days and sultry nights! Fans of our *LOVING THE BOSS* series won't want to miss *The Marriage Merger* by exciting author Vivian Leiber. A pretend engagement between friends goes awry when their white lies lead to a real white wedding!

Take one biological-clock-ticking twin posing as a new mom

and one daddy determined to gain custody of his newborn son, and you've got the unsuspecting partners in *The Baby Arrangement*, Moyra Tarling's tender **BUNDLES OF JOY** title. You've asked for more **TWINS ON THE DOORSTEP**, Stella Bagwell's charming author-led miniseries, so this month we give you *Millionaire on Her Doorstep*, an emotional story of two wounded souls who find love in the most unexpected way...and in the most unexpected place.

Can a bachelor bent on never marrying and a single mom with a bustling brood of four become a Fairy-Tale Family? Find out in Pat Montana's delightful new novel. Next, a handsome doctor's case of mistaken identity leads to *The Triplet's Wedding Wish* in this heartwarming tale by DeAnna Talcott. And a young widow finds the home—and family—she's always wanted when she strikes a deal with a Nevada Cowboy Dad, this month's **FAMILY MATTERS** offering from Dorsey Kelley.

Enjoy this month's fantastic selections, and make sure to return each and every month to *Silhouette Romance*!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mary-Theresa Hussey". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with some ink bleed-through from the reverse side of the page.

Mary-Theresa Hussey  
Senior Editor, *Silhouette Romance*

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# Fairy-Tale Family

## Pat Montana



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

With love

to Joe and his fast feet,  
and to Princess Maggie Rose

**PAT MONTANA**

grew up in Colorado, but now lives in the Midwest. So far, she's been a wife, mother of four adopted daughters, and a grandmother. She's also been a soda jerk, secretary, teacher, counselor, artist—and an author. She considers life an adventure and plans to live to be at least one hundred because she has so many things to do.

Some of the goals Pat has set for herself include being a volunteer rocker for disadvantaged babies and teaching in the

literacy program. She wants to learn to weave and to throw pots on a wheel, not to mention learn French, see a play at the Parthenon in Greece and sing in a quartet. Above all, she wants to write more romances.

## A FLAT FIT FOR A FAIRY-TALE FAMILY

Alley

Back  
Stairs

Mermaid  
Bedroom

Dormitory

Big Bath

Refrigerator

Kitchen

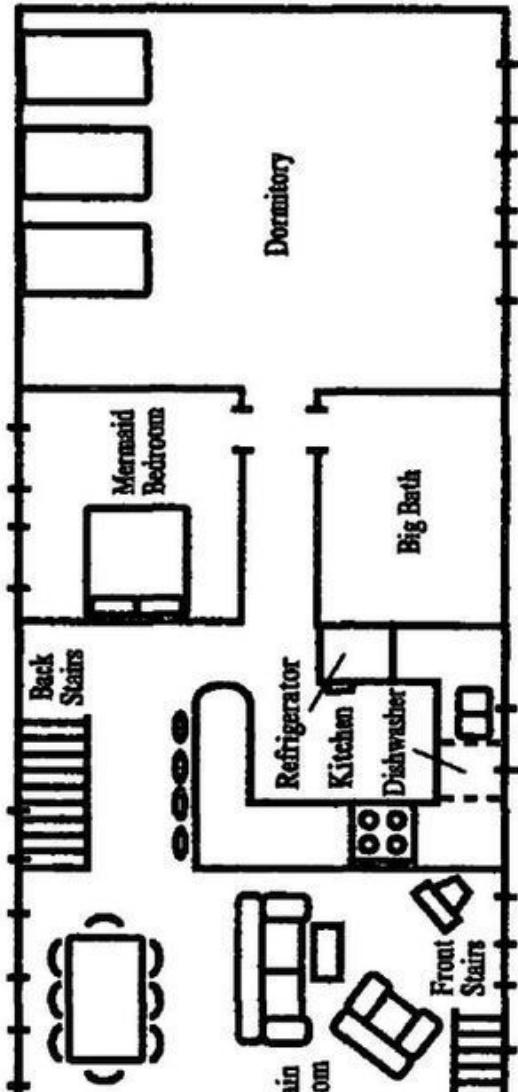
Dishwasher

Front  
Sidewalk



Front  
Stairs

Windows



## Prologue

Someone was sleeping in her bed Ellie Sander hugged her daughter closer and backed carefully from the doorway of the moonlit room.

What should she do? Call the police? She'd have to wake Rafe to find the portable phone. Wake all three boys and try to herd them quietly downstairs? "Quietly" was not part of her sons' little-kid vocabularies. Stand there and scream bloody murder? That was what she felt like doing.

She was so tired. Two minutes before midnight, and she'd just come upstairs from The Old King Kole Music Shoppe to find her four-year-old daughter sleeping with the dog—again. The day's receipts from Kendall Kole's store had refused to add up to the same total twice. She hadn't even started studying for her final in her dental hygiene class at the community college. And since Kendall's automobile accident four days ago, she and the kids hadn't made it to the hospital to visit him—not even once.

Now some jerk had decided to break into all this mess—and catch a few winks on the job? What were the standards of breaking and entering coming to these days?

Ellie tightened her hold around Seraphina's sleepheavy little body and rested her cheek against her daughter's head. Maybe, if she waited a second or two, some prince would come to their rescue.

Right. Except that all he would find were countrymouse kids

and a frazzled mom fresh out of glass slippers. Hardly the makings of a fairy tale.

She let go a slow, silent sigh. Decision time again. Time to take some action. If she just weren't so tired. Her gaze traveled to a jacket hung on the old desk chair. She squinted to make out the letters stitched across the back. Winterhaven, Colorado.

Ellie froze. Omigod.

The man in the bed mumbled through a snore.

She leaned forward to stare at him, careful not to step on the squeaky board just inside the door.

Darn, darn, darn. How could she have forgotten?

The man lay tangled in her daughter's sheets, one arm flung across his face as if to ward off the moonlight flooding through the flimsy white curtains. But his arm didn't hide his dark, wavy hair, tousled like wind-tossed midnight on Seri's pillow. The same dark hair dusted his arms and the planes of his broad chest and tugged her reluctant gaze down the flat ridges of his stomach...to the folds of the sheet.

Ellie scrunched her eyes shut. Her heart pounded. She'd had no idea Mitchell Kole would look like this.

He was big. Bigger than his father. Kendall Kole was attractive for an older man, but his son? Darn, this man was truly handsome. In the moonlight he looked almost... magical.

The Prince! He's come to rescue us! Ellie could imagine her daughter's eager proclamation.

Something inside her stirred, something warm and wanting,

feelings all but forgotten. As if, for just a moment, she were a woman again—not just an exhausted mother. Her heart thundered.

Whirling from the doorway, she hurried down the hall, carrying her child away from this new danger. She buried her face in the sweet warmth of her daughter's wispy hair, but the scent only brought back painful memories.

Was it just a year ago she'd hidden her tears in her daughter's hug on the most horrible night of her life? Her husband, her rock 'n' rollin' husband, had rocked off the audition stage at Branson, Missouri, and right on down the highway...along with their ailing van and their pitiful savings. Peter had abandoned them! The realization still stunned her.

If Kendall Kole hadn't offered her this job and a place to stay, she didn't know what would have become of her and her kids.

Tiptoeing into the dormitory, she crept to the twin bed nearest the bathroom and nudged her six-year-old son.

"Rafe, go climb in with Michael," she whispered.

The skinny little guy slid his feet to the floor and tugged down his oversize T-shirt. Clutching a portable phone, he curled into the middle bed next to his eight-year-old brother.

With a heavy heart, Ellie watched the two settle in together. It wasn't the first time they'd had to share a bed. She hoped it would be the last.

In the past twelve years, the only good judgment she'd used had been trusting "King" Kole, she thought ruefully. That and

the decision to stop crying over Peter—Peter who had thought playing parent was the same as doing a musical gig. When he was done playing, he just packed up and moved on.

Ellie lowered her four-year-old daughter into the stillwarm impression of her son, then turned to pull the sheet up over the two slender bodies in the middle bed, the small one light-haired, the other darker, like his father. Stealing to the far bed, she brushed a kiss on the forehead of her oldest son. A small black terrier grinned up at her from behind Gabe's legs, tail thumping the blanket softly.

Ellie raised a silencing finger to the dog. "You are as bad as a doting grandma," she whispered. She hurried back to the first bed, slipped out of her long skirt and oversize sweater and slid in beside her daughter.

A dog for a grandmother and a lonely shopkeeper for a benefactor and substitute grandfather. Things could be a lot worse. King had become her friend. She knew her kids loved him.

But now? With his son here, their futures were in jeopardy again. Mitchell Kole wouldn't be happy when he discovered his Humpty Dumpty father had taken in a woman with so many kids she didn't know what to do. And a dog who thought she was their nanny.

Ellie curled protectively around Seraphina. Seri might think Mitchell Kole was a prince, but this was hardly a fairy tale. Just plain old, nitty-gritty reality—four grubby kids, one single mom

trying to give them some stability while she learned to clean teeth, and a kindhearted widower with more broken bones than she'd ever known existed.

Ellie didn't believe in Tinker Bell. She didn't believe in magic. And no matter how stirring Mitchell Kole looked in his sleep, she sure didn't believe in Prince Charming.

Not anymore.

## Chapter One

“Someone's sleeping in my bed!”

Mitchell Kole squinted one eye open long enough to stop the ridiculous dream, the childlike voice that sounded a lot like Goldilocks accompanied by the distinct scent of peanut butter. He didn't even like peanut butter.

Scrunching his eyes shut, he tugged the sheet up around his ears. Not Goldilocks. Just a very little girl with flyaway brown hair standing by the side of his bed in a pink tutu.

“What the...?” In one swift motion, he shoved up to a sitting position.

The child scurried to the foot of the double bed, her tutu bouncing like a tugboat in choppy waters. Leaning forward, she rested her elbows in the folds of the bright comforter, cupped her chin in the heels of her hands and stared back at him. The tutu popped up behind her like a limp peacock's tail.

She couldn't be more than—what? Three...four years old? What did he know about kids' ages? Her fingernails, he noticed irrelevantly, glowed a bright green.

What the hell was a kid with green fingernails doing in his room? What was any kid doing here? He didn't even like kids.

"Hello." She studied him curiously, her big brown eyes framed by dark lashes. "I'm Seraphina. You're sleeping in my bed. I slept with Bubba Sue last night."

"I'm sleeping in your—?" Mitch stopped himself midoutburst, suddenly aware that everything around him looked...different. He hadn't bothered to turn on a light last night after coming in so late. Too upset from his visit at the hospital. Incredibly none of the changes in the room had tripped him up in the dark.

"That's my dollhouse."

The kid pointed to a strange accumulation of stacked cardboard boxes filling the space next to the door where his electronic keyboard used to sit. Each box was decorated like a tiny room. They were all painted a headache-inducing shade of pink. Mitch resisted the urge to shade his eyes.

"Those are my animals."

This time she pointed beneath the window where he'd kept his treasured first ski poles. A faded yellow tiger with one ear missing sat there now next to a teddy bear who looked as if he had the mange. Both of them hunkered down in a pile of crumpled tissue-paper flowers.

The kid must have decided he didn't need help with the rest of the room, because she watched him silently while he took inventory. His Ski Aspen, Ski Vail posters were missing from the walls, replaced with pictures of figures he vaguely recognized as

some of the new Disney characters. And the bed he lay on was afloat in more of the same. He had never slept in sheets covered with mermaids!

“Your room?” he mumbled, scraping a palm up the bristles on his cheek. Somewhere in the distance, children’s shouts overrode the steady chatter of morning TV cartoons. He dragged fingers back through his hair, struggling to get awake, searching to make some kind of sense of all of this...this mayhem. Through it all he caught the rich aroma of coffee.

Thank god. Evidence of adult-type beings. What were kids doing in his father’s place anyhow? Living here, from the looks of this room. What the devil was going on?

The little girl straightened. With a gesture that reminded him of a queen, she swept her thin bangs to one side.

“My name means angel,” she offered, as if she’d read his mind. “But really I’m a princess.” She studied him from the foot of the bed with those grave brown eyes.

She looked more like a waif. She was about as skinny as a puppet, and her mouse brown hair stuck out in feathery wisps from a pink thing on top of her head. On closer inspection, he saw that the netting of her tutu drooped, and the straps across her thin little shoulders had shed most of their shiny stuff.

Mitch eyed her warily. For a princess, this kid’s treasures looked mighty tattered. But she didn’t seem to know. She acted as self-assured and expectant as any royalty he’d ever entertained.

In spite of his growing annoyance, Mitch allowed himself a

half smile. Such seriousness in one so little. Seemed to him that a kid her size ought to be giggling about something, not looking as if she carried the weight of a kingdom on her shoulders.

But what did he know about kids? Or care?

Grabbing the edge of the sheet, he held it against his bare middle and slid to the side of the bed. He hadn't come all the way back to Missouri to be stalled by a little squirt's solemn face. He had business to take care of. And a plane to catch back to Colorado this evening.

He'd told Jack he would be back in Winterhaven in two days—Jack Winter who'd taken him in when he'd been an angry, scared runaway of almost seventeen. Jack had given him a place to stay, a job. His wife, Josey, had given him the courage to call King and tell him where he'd run. Over the years, Jack had become his mentor—and his friend. Mitch wasn't about to let him down.

So... Still clutching the sheet, Mitch swung his feet to the floor. One thing he'd learned teaching skiing at the Lodge: where there was a princess, there was bound to be a king or a queen. He needed to seek a royal audience pronto. Whoever was living with his father could be the answer to his problem.

“Okay, Princess, I'm...Mr. Kole, and I'd like to get up now so —”

“I know. You're The Prince.”

“Seri? Where are you? You'd better not be bothering Mr. Kole.”

Hell. Mitch pulled the sheet of redheaded mermaids a little

higher around him. If he remembered his fairy tales, princesses weren't supposed to catch The Prince in bed naked.

“Seri, I told you not to—” A woman appeared in the doorway. “Oh...” At the sight of him her eyes widened.

Mitch watched color rosy the woman's cheeks. Things were taking a decided turn for the better.

There could be no mistaking Seraphina's mother. This woman promised everything the funny little princess would someday become. The kid was skinny, but her mother—now here was pleasure to behold. The kind of woman the word “petite” must have been invented for, with feathery hair the color of light ale brushing her shoulders when she moved.

In spite of her size, she acted about as regal as the kid. Even in that long, shapeless dress, and that brown sweater—which had to be a hand-me-down from her grandfather—she still didn't manage to hide a figure that was...lush. It was the only other word Mitch could think of. Or wanted to.

Until he looked into her eyes. They were blue, the blue of Colorado skies. Of columbine flowers. Of deep, cool mountain lakes.

Or an Alaskan glacier. He tugged the sheets closer.

None of her daughter's studious curiosity there. Instead he found wariness—and other feelings he recognized. Anger. Resentment.

She studied him as if he were some form of outer space alien, a very stupid alien who had witlessly landed in her daughter's

bed. A state of affairs she definitely didn't approve.

"Go on now, Seri. To the kitchen." She shooed the girl out the door.

Given the same circumstances in his bedroom at Winterhaven, Mitch would have stretched into a slow, sensuous yawn, given the woman a provocative grin...and stood up. But something about this woman made him hesitate.

Her gaze came to a halt at the fistful of sheet he held against his stomach. Her eyes thawed just a bit. Her honey-colored brows ticked upward.

Fascinated, he watched a corner of her pale pink mouth curve ever so slightly. To his dismay, he felt himself respond. Clearly this was a woman he couldn't unnerve, not even with the threat of six feet of buck nakedness. The thought pleased him.

"Did not!"

"Did, too! Mo-om!" Crash!

A dog barked.

Mitch winced.

The woman didn't even flinch, but her gaze refrosted. "Your father didn't tell you about us, did he?"

Obviously a rhetorical question, because she spun out of the doorway before he could decide between a bitter laugh and a fierce growl. He hadn't come here to get turned on by a little bit of a woman, a woman who was apparently living with his father!

Flinging the sheet aside, he slammed his feet to the floor. Just then the kid popped into the room. Mitch lunged back under the

concealing mermaids.

“Seri?” The woman reappeared in the doorway. One glance and she grabbed the kid and ushered her toward the door.

“But, Mommy—”

“Let Mr. Kole get dressed.”

They disappeared together, but not before Mitch could check her hand. The woman wasn't wearing a ring. The discovery left him teetering between a definite upswing in mood—and pure raw anger.

“Wait! Miss... Ms...” How was it she already had him analyzed and categorized while he hadn't even known she existed? His frustration level shot skyward. “Hey, lady, who are you?” he shouted. He didn't like being out of control. He didn't like being so...perturbed by such a...woman.

She reappeared in the doorway. The kid peeked from behind her legs.

“Sander. Ellie. I'm the one who called about your father's accident.”

There was that resentment again. That anger.

“I told him we didn't need to bother you, but he insisted.”

Mitch scowled into Ellie Sander's rejecting azure eyes. Damn it, she did bother him. She bothered him a lot.

“There's breakfast in the kitchen,” she announced flatly, then swung out of the room, her hair fanning her shoulders like a silk skirt.

“Just coffee,” he shouted after her. “I don't do breakfast.”

Damn! He didn't need to growl just because there were still old issues between him and his father. He especially didn't need to watch her retreat—just because he liked the way she moved. He didn't have time for—

For anything. He'd done his duty; he'd flown to his father's deathbed. But when Ellie Sander had called, she'd failed to give him one minor detail. Old “King” Kole wasn't dying.

Last night at the hospital, Mitch had discovered that King was only temporarily inconvenienced—by a cast on one ankle and another all the way up his other leg. And a headache the size of Mount Rushmore. Which he undoubtedly deserved.

Shoving back the sheet, Mitch tugged into his briefs and stalked down the hall to the bathroom, defying an encounter with more princesses along the way.

He'd go see his father—one more time. He'd make arrangements with the hospital for a visiting nurse. He'd contact a temp agency for someone to help run the store. He'd arrange for whatever his father and this woman needed till King was on his feet again. But Mitch wasn't going to stay.

His father had never been there for him when he was growing up. He hadn't been there for his mother when she'd needed him. King had set the example; for once Mitch figured he'd be justified in following it.

But he would be nice to this Ellie Sander, whoever she was. Why such a pretty, pint-size woman like her would move in with his father—?

“Ouch!” He muffled an oath and gave the bathroom door another, more careful kick. Hell, she was clearly strong-willed enough to live with the old man. Which was good, he lectured himself. Because living with his father was exactly what Mitch wanted her to keep right on doing.

Ellie knew the minute Mitch Kole stepped into the kitchen. Even with her back to the door, she could feel his presence, could smell the faint, outdoor scent that slipped into her awareness right through the aroma of pancakes and coffee.

The same way he'd managed to slip into the apartment last night. Thank goodness she'd been downstairs in the store. For once she was even glad Seri had crawled in with the dog.

If Mitch Kole had arrived after Seri and she had fallen asleep in the double bed—? She hated to imagine. Her screams would have sent him scrambling back to Colorado in his Jockeys—if the man even slept in shorts. From the death grip he'd held on the mermaid sheets, Ellie suspected he did not.

The memory of his discomfort gave her a vengeful sense of satisfaction. It also made her warm. And disturbed.

But from what she knew of Mitch Kole, she wouldn't need screams to get rid of him.

Refusing to look at him, Ellie moved the portable phone away from Rafe and set plates of bear-faced pancakes in front of him and his sister, both of them seated on stools at the counter.

“Eat up, kids. I have to open the store in fifteen minutes.”

“Wonder if I could talk you out of a cup of coffee?”

She forced herself to look up at Mitch then. Right away she knew she'd made her second big mistake of the morning, ranking right up there with walking in on him in bed.

He was dressed now, but what undid her wasn't the way his jeans hugged his ski-tightened thighs nor the way his damp hair curled along the edge of his navy turtleneck. It was his smile. His smile made her feel the same way she had last night when she'd watched him sleep. Warm...and wanting.

Darn! She knew that smile—the carefree grin of a charming, persuasive man. She watched it warm his sapphire eyes and deepen the lines around his broad mouth. His teeth shone startlingly white against his ruddy tan. The effect was breathtaking.

Ellie frowned. She'd given up breathtaking years ago. Along with a lot of other things—like teasing smiles and exciting promises. And when the kids had started coming, she'd given up dreams of a close-knit family...and a home...and security...

But she'd learned—oh yes, she'd learned. And she had no doubts that a charming ski instructor, like a charming musician, was not breathtaking. At least not for long. In the real world, there were no Prince Charmings.

“Sugar? Milk? We only have skim.”

“Mommy, The Prince wants bearcakes.”

Mitch stepped forward. “Coffee'll do. Don't know if I could handle bearcakes.” He smiled down at Seri.

Ellie reached into the glass-doored cupboard for a mug,

fighting the melting feeling inside, tightening her defenses.

“Gabe? Michael? Time to eat.” Come on, guys. Please show up—fast.

Sometimes four kids almost overwhelmed her, but when she gathered them around her and looked into their trusting faces, they always gave her strength. Which was what she needed now. King hadn't told her his son was attractive. He hadn't said Mitch had this...appeal! Intuitively, she knew it put them all in danger.

To her relief, Gabe shuffled in from the living room. When he saw Mitch, he stopped.

She watched the two males size each other up, could almost see the hair rise on Gabe's neck as Mitch smiled at him.

Good She didn't want her kids snagged by Mitch's charm.

Gabe resumed his trek to the end of the counter, his blue eyes filled with uncertain apology, his golden mop of curls almost level with her head.

“I'm sorry we were arguing, Mom,” he mumbled.

“Here.” He handed her a slightly tattered tissue-paper carnation. Head turned away, he leaned stiffly into her hug.

Pride, and a huge dose of regret, shot through her. In another year she'd be looking up at him.

“Hey!” Michael trotted into the kitchen followed by the dog. “Hey, hi! You must be King's son. Know what? He told us you were coming. Can I ask you something? Will you teach us how to ski? Wanna see my fast feet?”

“Michael...”

He grinned that two-teeth-missing smile she loved so much and met her at the end of the counter, extending his own offering, half-crushed in his hand. Another paper flower, this one pale green and newly constructed.

“Sorry, Mom. I just wanted to—”

Ellie quieted him with a hug, allowing herself the impulse of wanting to protect him. It gave way quickly to the joy of wrapping her arms around his slender body and breathing in his little boy scent of hard play. Michael was as lean and full of energy as Gabe was solid and steady. She needed what she could draw from them both.

But she also knew when to let go. Before Michael could protest, she pulled away, tickling and poking. “Ooh, cooties.”

Michael giggled, and Ellie breathed a slow sigh of relief. Her sons had come to apologize. Michael had made a new “I love you” flower exactly the way she’d taught all of her children on their fourth birthday. And—blessed relief—for the moment Michael had stopped talking.

“Thank you, boys. I love you, too. Love you all.” She smiled at her brood of angels and felt a surge of strength. She would never let anything happen to them again. They had finally found a home and a bit of stability... at least for a while. She wouldn’t let Mitch Kole threaten their future.

“Climb up, guys. Time for bearcakes.”

She laid the two paper flowers on top of the others in the shallow basket on the counter, cherishing this bouquet of love

from her children. Then she lifted more plates from the overhead cupboard and filled them with bear-faced pancakes, adding lots of butter and syrup.

Stalling again.

She had to convince Mitch Kole to go back to Colorado. He'd made it clear that he hadn't wanted to come in the first place, so the task shouldn't be too difficult. Gathering courage, she set the plates in front of her sons.

"Eat up. guys."

"S'pose I could get that cup of coffee now?"

"Coffee—?" Omigod. She'd completely forgotten. Rattled by another of Mitch's breathtaking smiles, she poured the mug too full. Steamy brown liquid sloshed onto the counter.

Mitch lifted the mug, and she swiped away the puddle with a cloth, ignoring the inquiring rise of his dark brows. He was watching her too closely. She recognized that look. Once Peter had watched her like that, when she'd been young and rebellious and smitten with his promises. Before they'd had children.

Peter had made her giddy, the way only an eighteen-year-old could feel. Mitch's regard stirred something else, something that made her nervous and selfconscious and short of breath. Something that made her spill coffee and made her heart race. Whatever it was, she knew she had reason to be alarmed.

King had told her Mitch wasn't a family kind of man. She'd already known that kind of man.

"These are my children, Mr. Kole." She presented them to

him with a wave of her hand, her protectors, her talismans against whatever weakness it was in her that Mitch's charm touched. She was well aware that four children under the age of ten would ward off just about any kind of man.

He continued to watch her too closely, with just a shadow of a smile. "Call me Mitch."

Ellie regrouped her defenses. "This is Gabe, my oldest. He's ten. Michael's going on nine. Rafe just turned six..." Pride filled her as each of the boys offered a reluctant hand "...and you've met Seraphina."

"I'm four years old and two months," Seri piped up, holding up four fingers. "We're The Angels," she added. "Gabriel, Michael, Raphael and—"

"Seri!" Instantly Ellie regretted her sharpness.

"We used to be The Angels," Seri said softly. "Before..."

Ellie's throat tightened with contrition. "Sweetheart, I'm sure Mr. Kole isn't interested—"

"Oh, but I am." He eased onto the empty stool beside Seri. "You'll call me Mitch, won't you, Princess?"

she nodded eagerly.

"Good. Then tell me, who's Bubba Sue?"

"Don't you know? Bubba Sue's King's dog."

"King's dog? Well, I'll be a—" He looked down at the little dog curled up under the stools. "I'm surprised her name's not Queeny."

Seri giggled.

With a sinking heart, Ellie watched her wide-eyed daughter warm to Mitch. In spite of Peter's haphazard fathering, Seri missed her daddy. Ellie didn't want her daughter filling his absence with Mitch's easy appeal. She didn't want her hurt all over again.

Like mother, like daughter—both suckers for those Prince Charming types. Ellie would have to teach Seri better. Right after she convinced Mitch Kole to leave.

“Hey, Mom, it's five past nine.”

Gabe's too-grown-up voice interrupted her worries. Almost gratefully, she grabbed at the safety of routine.

“Okay, kids, Saturday morning schedule. Michael, kitchen, Rafe, bathrooms, Seri, beds. Gabe, I need you in the store to move boxes. If anybody needs anything, remember the bell.”

She hurried to the stairs leading to the shop below, glancing back for one last check. Burners off, pan in the sink, nothing harmful left untended.

Except Mitch Kole.

“We have things under control here, Mr. Kole. You can go visit your father right away. I'm sure he'll be glad you came. Please tell him we'll be there this evening.”

Mitch's watchful gaze sent her backing down the stairs. “I—uh—guess we won't see you again, so I hope you have a very nice life in Colorado.” She marched down three more stairs. “Now, if you'll excuse us, we have things to—”

The telephone made her stop. Through the stair railing, she

watched Rafe snatch the ringing phone from the counter.

He punched it on. “Daddy? Oh.” The hope in his dark eyes faded quickly. “Yeah. Yeah. Okay.” Dejectedly he punched the Off button.

Ellie’s heart ached for her son. She had to make Rafe give up that phone—soon. “Who was it, sweetheart? What did they want? You should have let me talk.”

“It’s okay, Mom. It was just King. He said...he’ll bring him home from the hospital.” He pointed at Mitch.

Ellie lurched back up the stairs. “Home? Did he say when?”

“Um...yeah.” Rafe laid the phone back on the counter. “I think he said...tomorrow.”

Mitch stood outside the doorway to his father’s narrow room staring at the high, four-poster bed his mother had loved, trying to ignore the memories. Now was not the time to brood over the past. He had a problem to solve here.

“I thought you’d be at the hospital by now.”

Somehow he managed not to turn, though he couldn’t mistake Ellie’s voice. Or her challenge. “I didn’t expect you back from the store so soon.” He sure as hell didn’t want to see her again now. Especially not here.

“The high school kid who works weekends came in early.”

Hell, Ellie practically looked like a high school kid herself. Too young to have four kids. Too damned young to be living with—No. He shoved down the anger. Her relationship with his father was none of his business.

“I thought I’d check the place out first, get an idea of what King will need.”

“That’s what I tried to tell you at breakfast.” Without looking up at him, she brushed past and into the room. “You can go back to Colorado right away. We’ll take care of King.”

He should be glad she was avoiding him. But heaven help him, he wanted to look into those blue eyes. “You can’t take care of him by yourself.”

She still wouldn’t look at him. “Yes, I can. The kids and I can take perfectly good care of him.”

“There’s hardly space in this room for one person to move around. He won’t be able to get in and out of that bed.”

Ellie pulled herself to her full height and turned to frown at him. “We can help him.”

“We? Who else are you planning to move in here? Ellie, good intentions aren’t enough. You’re too small, and your kids are...well. they’re just kids.” Mitch couldn’t decide which was worse, standing here fighting over King’s care, or fighting his attraction to the woman who slept with him.

Especially when she was so damned valiant. When her lips looked so full and determined. When the top of her head would barely reach his chin even if she tipped her face up to—Why, a man would almost have to pick her up to...

Ellie stepped back. “Why are you trying to intimidate me, Mr. Kole?”

A damn good question. Except that his anger wasn’t

intimidation, it was self-defense. Because what he really wanted was to kiss her. A most unwise impulse. But then, when had his impulses ever been wise?

“Look, just call me Mitch, okay?”

He saw her back stiffen, her own defenses go up another notch. His anger just kind of collapsed. “Come on, Ellie, call me Rumpelstiltskin if you want, but give Mr. Kole a rest.” To his surprise, her eyes warmed—just a little—as they did when she teased her kids.

“Okay. Mitch. So why don’t you want us to take care of your father?”

“Oh, but I do. I just don’t see how.”

“Look, I’ve already figured that out, so you don’t need to waste your time.”

Not so much a waste of time as a waste of emotion. This place stirred too many memories, but the feelings Ellie stirred were far worse. Especially since he had no intentions of doing anything about them. Especially under the circumstances.

“Look, correct me if I’m wrong, but I’d guess my father weighs about a hundred and eighty pounds—dripping wet. Without casts. There’s no way he can get around in here with them.”

She fixed him with a firm gaze that clearly said, Get out of my way, and marched toward the doorway. “We’ll move him into the dormitory.”

“The dormitory?” He slouched against the frame, not wanting her to go.

She slowed to a stop. "If you'll move, I'll show you."

Unwillingly he stepped back, bowing slightly.

She moved carefully, turning sideways to keep from brushing against him. She trailed a fragrance that was clean and fresh.

How could he resist? How could he let her go without stealing just one sweet brush of those half-opened lips? The thought of her softness against him sent heat humming through his veins. Raising an arm, he blocked the doorway.

Her blue eyes widened with uncertainty. "Um, the dormitory? I think...when you lived here...you called it—" Her voice caught.

"The Jam Room?" he murmured, leaning toward her.

Almost imperceptibly she turned her face up to him. "Yes. The Jam Room," she whispered. Then she froze.

"No!" She jerked away. "I mean, yes! The Jam Room." Before he could stop her, she ducked under his arm and disappeared down the hall.

Damn! What had he been thinking? He needed to get King's arrangements made and get out of here. His pulse still hammering, he followed reluctantly through the small kitchen and down the hall of the second flat.

She hurried across the hardwood floor of the long, rectangular room at the end. Keeping distance between them. A whole lot smarter than he was.

"The boys sleep in here now." Nervously she smoothed the plain, unmatched bedspreads on the three twin beds lined up under the back windows.

He tried to ignore her caring gesture. But her touch was everywhere—in the football and race car posters on the walls, in the plastic basketful of balls and dinosaurs and action figures. In the string of paper flowers hanging above the head of each bed.

The Jam Room—where King Kole and his Merry Men had practiced those rare times when his band hadn't been out on a gig. His father had been gone more than he'd ever been home. Gone when a family really needed him. A lot of things besides this room had changed since then.

“We'll put King in Rafe's bed—the one by the big bathroom. Rafe can sleep with Seri.”

“What about you?”

She seemed to pull farther away from him, hugging herself until she was almost lost in the bulkiness of her brown sweater. A businesslike frown darkened her eyes.

“You're right. I'll move Seri and Rafe into King's room. I should be near to help Gabe and Michael with him at night. I'll stay where I am.”

“Where you are?”

“With the mermaids.”

For an instant, he thought she was teasing. He watched with growing regret as the possibility faded and understanding crept into her face.

“You thought—?” Her eyes narrowed, chilling again to Arctic frost. “You thought I slept with... and yet you tried to—? I sleep with my daughter, Mr. Kole, not with your father.”

Her shoes snapped like gunshots on the wooden floor. “Your father offered me a job and a place for my kids when I was pretty desperate.” She descended on him from across the room. “I suspect it was because he was lonely. Because he doesn’t have much family of his own.”

Mitch actually felt himself flinch. What was going on here? His father had always cared more about his music than anything else. More than his family.

Ellie stopped right under his nose and glared up at him. “When you see King, why don’t you tell him what you thought about me. Only a man like you would think such a thing. I’m sure he could use a good laugh.” She swept by him, disappearing through the door.

A man like him? Mitch knew what he was. Too much like his father for anyone’s damn good. But at least he would never lose a wife the way his father had. He would never lose a kid. An unmarried man made no promises to break.

So why did Ellie’s words sting?

“You sleep with your daughter?” he mumbled after her, unable to muster a heartfelt shout. Last night, in the dark, he’d climbed into bed with Seri’s mermaids—naked. Where had Ellie been then?

Worse, what if she had been there?

And why was she sharing a bed with a restless little four-year-old instead of with his father?

More to the point, no matter where Ellie slept, why the hell

did he care?

## Chapter Two

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Ellie gasped at the sound of Mitch’s sharp voice. She grabbed the TV tighter, but her startled jerk pulled the big black monster right off the edge of the scarred television stand.

Omigod.

“Hang on, Gabe. Michael, Rafe, come here. Hurry!”

The two boys jumped up from the living-room floor, followed by the little black dog. Bubba Sue pranced around wagging her tail.

“Come on, guys, grab hold. Lift!”

Dam! She’d hoped to have the TV moved by the time Mitch got back from the hospital. She’d show this...this renegade who’d accused her of...of... And after he’d tried to kiss her!

She wasn’t a kept woman! She and her kids could take care of King. They didn’t need help from Mitchell Kole—or anyone.

But the darned TV weighed more than a carton of bricks!

“Heave, guys.” She shifted her weight, took a wider step and came down on something that rooolllled...

“Ooohh, nooo... The crayoonnns!”

“Out of the way, kids. I’ll take that”

Mitch descended on them from the landing, just barely capturing the TV as it plummeted toward the floor.

Ellie kept right on plummeting.

“Unnhhh.” Whatever she landed on imprinted itself, probably

permanently, on her backside.

Seri dashed across the room, with the dog hot on her heels, and threw her arms around Ellie's neck. "Mommy!"

"I'm okay, sweetheart." Ellie nudged the licking dog away and hugged her daughter, all the while avoiding Mitch's glare. Her ego hurt a whole lot more than the bruise that would no doubt tattoo her bottom.

"Good—!" two very large, very warm hands lifted her to her feet making her feel like a rag doll with a silly, wobbly heartbeat—"because I'd hate to have to wait till you recover to read you the riot act."

Ellie tried to pull away, but Mitch glowered down at her, holding her tight, making her forget she'd ever wanted to escape. His warmth ribboned through her like some kind of magical potion. She watched his eyes change to a cloudy uncertainty, his gaze slide to her lips. Her knees went weak—the same way they had that morning. What was this man doing to her?

Then he stepped back.

But the distance wasn't enough, not nearly enough to stop what was happening to her. The explosions of light. The wanting. She was overheated and out of control because of his closeness. His touch.

Men like Mitch should never happen to her.

"Would you please tell me what you were doing?" he demanded. "You could have hurt yourself. Or a kid. You damn near dropped the TV."

Ellie smoothed her sweater over her throbbing bottom and prayed her face wasn't flaming. She tried to ignore her confusion.

"We're moving the TV into the dormitory. I thought since King will be on crutches, I'd bring the land mines out here. Fix a safe place for him in there."

"Land mines?" Mitch scanned the room, clearly uncomfortable.

"Toys." Thank goodness for her children. She waved an arm to introduce him to the hazards of child rearing. And to hide her trembling.

Gabe had flopped back on the threadbare plaid sofa with a book and the dog, though he kept a wary eye on Mitch. More books cluttered the floor and the coffee table where Mitch had rested the TV. Michael crouched in front of his cardboard fortress, talking nonstop to a half-dozen army figures. Rafe stretched on his stomach in front of a coloring book and at least a hundred crayons—along with the portable phone. And Seri fussed with her dollhouse boxes, arranging them like an estate near Michael's fortress.

"All this stuff makes walking...difficult. As I've just so cleverly demonstrated." Ellie managed an embarrassed smile. "I don't want King doing what I just did."

She stood a little taller, the movement reflected in the mirror above the sofa. Mitch's reflection caught her attention, too, and she couldn't stop herself from meeting his gaze. He was watching her again with that same meltdown intensity. For a moment her

heartbeat threatened to run away.

“Neither do I,” he murmured.

Neither did he what? Dam! Now he had her forgetting what they were talking about. Ellie gave herself a swift mental kick. This was the man who’d assumed she was his father’s mistress, for heaven’s sake. The woman staring back from the mirror hardly qualified for that kind of job. Clothes hanging too loose, eyes sporting dark circles—and her children, her wonderful children, added up to four.

No man took a mistress with four children—Mitch should know that. Her husband hadn’t even wanted a wife with four children.

She made a point not to look at Mitch again as she headed toward the door. “Okay, guys, let’s bring the rest of your stuff out here.”

“Since he thinks we’re too weak, why don’t you have him help?” Gabe’s defiant voice rose from behind his book.

“Gabriel Sander, that’s no way to—”

“I...uh...have a few things to tell you first.”

Mitch’s announcement stirred Ellie’s concerns. “Is King okay? They’re keeping him in the hospital longer, aren’t they? I didn’t think he should come home after only four days.” Please let that be all Mitch had to tell them. She didn’t know how she would deal with anything more.

“He’s doing as well as can be expected—for a man who’s used to his freedom.” A shade of bitterness darkened Mitch’s tone.

How could he talk about his father like that? “For a son who hasn’t been around in years, you seem to know an awful lot about your father.”

For once, Mitch avoided looking at her. “The doctor said he can come home tomorrow. But there’ll have to be more changes around here.”

“Like what?” she demanded.

“To start with, he’ll need a hospital bed, one that raises and lowers. And a mattress that’ll hold more than a fifty-pound kid. Also, a trapeze bar.” Mitch ticked the items off slowly. He looked downright uncomfortable.

Michael jumped up from the floor. “King’s gonna have a trapeze? I want to swing on King’s trapeze, can I, Mom? Please, can—”

“I bet King will let you.” Mitch ruffled Michael’s hair.

Ellie eased her son out of Mitch’s reach, squeezing his shoulders possessively before she nudged him back to his toys.

“It’s not a circus trapeze, Michael. It’s for...”

“Exercise,” Mitch offered.

“Right.” Ellie braced herself, not trusting where Mitch was headed with this information. “I’m sure we can find something in the store to rig one up.” Even if she couldn’t imagine a man wearing a cast and exercising on a trapeze. “We can double up the mattresses and put Michael and Rafe in King’s room.”

“The kids won’t have to sleep together.” Mitch hesitated. “I rented a bed.”

“You rented—?”

“It’ll be delivered this afternoon. We just have to make room for it.”

A bed. To help her and the kids care for King by themselves. Mitch was arranging things so he could go back to Colorado. Suddenly all the wind went out of her defensiveness.

“A bed. Right. There’ll be plenty of room in the dormitory for another bed. We’ll get the toys out...and move the TV in. You can do that, Mitch.” She should be saying thank you instead of sounding like the job foreman. She wanted Mitch to go back to Colorado. So why wasn’t she feeling grateful?

“I don’t think you’ll have to isolate King from the toys.”

With each of Mitch’s announcements, her uneasiness grew. “Were you planning to tell us why anytime soon?”

“He won’t be on crutches for a while.”

“Why?”

Mitch inhaled slowly, as if what he had to say came hard.

“They’ve got him kind of wired together. His right ankle has a pin, and his left shin... Let’s just say he’d never make it through a metal detector. Both legs have to be elevated—for circulation. He can’t put weight on either leg.”

“You mean he won’t be able to get out of bed?”

Mitch winced. Then he nodded.

Ellie’s hopes plunged—because she could imagine King lying in a bed surrounded with railings, both legs encased in plaster casts suspended from the ceiling by ropes, his body swathed in

miles and miles of white bandages. Like an accident victim in a cartoon.

But the cartoons never showed the jillion things about which she didn't have a clue. Like shaving a patient... and getting him dressed. And undressed? Like bedsores...and bedpans? And baths? How did a person care for a very large, very active, very bedridden...male?

How could she and four little kids possibly do it?

Mitch watched worry spread across Ellie's face. He was doing this to her. The shadows under her eyes seemed to darken each time he spoke.

"King won't have to stay in bed." He hoped what the doctor told him would reassure Ellie better than it had him. "He can use a wheelchair. They'll deliver that this afternoon, too."

"A wheelchair!" Michael popped back up from the floor. "Wow, do you think King will let us ride in it? Mom, can we have races with our skateboards?"

Mitch shoved his fingers into his jeans pockets to keep from tousling Michael's hair again. Ellie made it pretty clear she didn't want him warming up to her kids. Good sense told him he shouldn't be wondering if her hair felt as soft as Michael's. Unfortunately good sense had never been his long suit.

Ellie rested her hands on her bouncing son's shoulders and shook her head.

"Aw, Mom, why not? I want—"

"A wheelchair isn't for racing, Michael." Mitch regretted the

words the minute they were out of his mouth. He sounded positively parental.

Gabe frowned at him over the edge of his book. “They race them in the Special Olympics,” he challenged.

“Hey, you’re right.” Since when had Mitch started acting like his old man? Since when did he think Ellie needed help with her own kids?

Ellie sighed. “Points for you, Gabe.” She marked the air with two fingers, then kissed the end of one and touched it to Michael’s nose. “But no rides for you, young man.”

“Aw, Mom.” Michael slumped to the floor.

Mitch shrugged off the thought of renting a second wheelchair just for the kids. A crazy attempt to win points for himself? A kiss from Ellie’s fingertip? Damn, he was letting himself get way too involved here. And he hadn’t told them the worst yet.

“King won’t be running any races. You’ll have to move him real slow—” he took a deep breath “—’cause his legs’ll be sticking straight out in front of the chair.”

“He’ll run into the walls,” Gabe announced tersely.

Mitch groaned as he watched Ellie’s eyes widen in alarm. Out of the mouths of preadolescents—was that the saying?

“Things will go just fine, Gabe.” Mitch doubted Gabe believed that any better than he did. “Your mom will be in charge of wheeling him around, and you guys will be in charge of keeping your toys out of the way. You can all help swing him in and out of bed while he pulls himself up on the trapeze. I’ll

put one in the bathroom, too, so—”

Gabe sat up and squinted at Mitch. “Who’ll do all that stuff while we’re in school?”

“School?” School wasn’t out yet—Mitch knew that. Skiing vacations had long since passed, and families hadn’t started showing up at Winterhaven for summer vacations. Jack always claimed this was Mitch’s favorite time of the year—no kids, no lessons, no avalanches, no rescues.

“Mommy and I go to school, too,” Seri piped up. “She’s going to be a dentist.”

“Seri...” Ellie shook her head at her daughter.

“You go to school?”

She nodded. “But my finals are done in two weeks. I’ll be here after that.”

“And she helps King in the store,” Gabe added defiantly. “Are you going to help in the store now, too?”

Mitch couldn’t believe it. “You go to school and you work in the store and you’re trying to raise four kids? Just how, exactly, were you planning to take care of King? Or maybe I should be asking when?”

His anger flared—at this too slender, too tired, too enticing little woman—for taking on more than any sane person could possibly handle; and at her defensive, protective son—for challenging Mitch’s intentions. Most of all, he was angry at himself. For caring.

This wasn’t like him. He never let himself get involved. Any

more than it was like his father to get involved. The father he remembered never would have taken people into his home. And not just any people—a woman with four kids. And a dog. What had happened to his father?

What was happening to him?

He glared at Ellie, saw her pull herself up the way she did, like a little bird puffing her feathers to look bigger. But her blue, blue eyes didn't snap with electricity. She looked worried and tired. And he knew if she were in his arms, the top of her head would barely brush his chin.

Thoughts like that would get him into a whole lot of trouble. He fought to keep from reaching out to brush wisps of hair from her forehead. Undaunted, she turned her face up to him—and wiped out his resistance.

“I didn't know King would be so...restricted, but I'm sure he'll want to wheel himself around as soon as he can. When classes start again, I'll fix his lunch before I leave. The kids will be here after school.”

She smiled up at Mitch, a tired, unwavering little smile that never made it to her eyes. “You don't need to worry about King. We'll manage, won't we, guys?”

Mitch wanted to yell at her. He wanted to believe her. Damn it, what he really wanted to do was kiss her. But he couldn't do any of those things.

“Ellie, you can't even lift the TV with the help of your ragtag kids. How do you think you can take care of King?”

Ellie's determined voice never faltered. "I always take care of my responsibilities."

In her eyes, he read the challenge, What about you?

Michael hopped from one foot to the other in front of the living-room windows. "When will they get here, Mom?"

"I don't know, hon. Why don't you go do something? Time will go by faster."

Following her own advice, Ellie moved from the windows that looked out on the tree-lined side street of KirkKnoll. Shoving hands deep into the pockets of her overalls, she circled the small living room for the fifth time, nudging Gabe's feet from the sofa where he'd stretched out to read a book. Feeling confined, she pulled her hands free, straightened magazines on the coffee table, picked up a stray crayon, combed fingers back through Rafe's hair. Bubba Sue looked up at her from her place next to him on the floor.

"How many more minutes?" Rafe never took his eyes from the cartoons on the reinstalled TV. Bubba Sue's tail thumped.

"I'm sure they'll be here soon."

But not soon enough. Ellie wanted to see King with her own eyes. She wanted to know for certain he was recovering from the terrible car crash. She wanted to evaluate for herself how difficult it would be to care for him.

"Mommy, how many minutes is soon?" Seri still perched on the windowsill, her nose pressed against the glass, a tissue-paper flower clutched in her hand.

Ellie glanced at her watch. “Maybe fifteen.”

Fifteen minutes and Mitch and his father would be here. Half a day and Mitch would be gone. Just as she had hoped.

Be careful what you wish for. She could still hear her father’s voice issuing his favorite warning. At eighteen, she’d wished for an exciting life, and look what Peter had given her. She glanced at her four beautiful children—all of whom Peter had abandoned.

When she and Peter had eloped, her father had disowned her. But he couldn’t fault her wish this time. Mitch Kole was just another variation on her flamboyant ex-husband—full of charm and persuasion. But when responsibilities became too demanding, ready to head for the hills. In Mitch’s case, the mountains. Hardly a fairy-tale kind of guy.

Ellie sighed. Mitch was far too attractive, but maybe she was finally beginning to learn that princes and rescues and the power of love only showed up in stories. Maybe she could start to trust her judgment again.

“They’re here! I see Mitch’s car! The King and The Prince are here!” Seri shouted. Bubba Sue started barking.

Michael grabbed a tissue flower from the sofa and thundered down the front stairs.

Seri tugged Ellie’s hand. “Let’s go, Mommy.”

“We’ll all go, but wait for me at the bottom.”

That was all they needed. Flowers in hand, Rafe and Seri raced after Michael, the little black dog close behind. Only Gabe stalled at the top landing.

Ellie followed his gaze to the strange contraption in the ceiling of the stairwell that Mitch had rigged before breakfast. With a man like Mitch, there was always something new like this, something intriguing.

She waited as Gabe shuffled down the stairs behind her. At the bottom, he slouched against the door frame and dug his hands deep into his pockets.

“Okay, remember what I told you.” Ellie directed her words especially to Michael. “Mitch is responsible for getting King upstairs. We’ll help when it’s needed. Otherwise, we’ll stay out of the way.”

That was what she’d decided last night. She would make sure Mitch got King safely settled in. She would have him show them how to take care of his father. Then they would all wave as he drove off to the airport.

She and her kids would manage. They had to. Somehow.

“They’re here, they’re here, can we go out now?” Michael pranced in the narrow entryway like a colt ready to run.

“Okay, but be care—” Before she could finish, they were out the door. All except Gabe. Just as well. The three younger ones were as excited and noisy as a circus parade—just the kind of welcome King needed to lift his spirits.

“Come on, sweetheart, let’s go help.” She put her arm around Gabe’s shoulder and nudged him outside. “King will want to hear what you’ve been doing at the store.”

She followed her children to the curb where King sat in the

back seat of Mitch's rental car. They crowded around the older man delivering their paper flowers, but Ellie still managed to get a good look.

King looked better than she'd expected. For some reason, she'd imagined he would lose his salt-and-pepper hair. She'd worried that his broad shoulders would stoop and the mellow lines of his face would be tight with pain. It struck her again how much he looked like Mitch. How much Mitch would someday look like him. But appearance was where the similarities ended, she thought with regret.

She moved nearer, and King smiled at her through the open car door, a warm, accepting smile, the kind her father had so rarely given her.

Abruptly his face knotted into an exaggerated scowl. "Rafe, come get this plastic bag out of here. It's got my toothbrush in it. And my bedpan." He winked broadly. "Gabe, Michael, get these sweet smellin' flowers away from me and give them to your mom before the dam things die. Here, Seri, you'll have to take care of this for me. Those nurses accused me of just keepin' on going." He handed her a giant pink rabbit with sunglasses, flip-flops and a big bass drum.

Seri squealed with delight. The stuffed animal was almost as big as she was.

"Where's that son of mine? Let's get this show on the road."

A muffled grunt rose from the rear of the car—the sound of a man about to lose his temper. Ellie resisted the urge to go to his

rescue. Brief though the activity was, bringing King home was the one responsibility Mitch had accepted. She'd vowed to leave this much to him.

Another grunt followed, this one suspiciously like a word she didn't allow her children to hear. Good sense told her to keep her distance. Habit sent her hurrying to the car.

Mitch leaned almost double into the small trunk, tugging on a wheelchair. Reaching in, she straightened one of the smaller wheels. The chair pulled free. Mitch jerked backward.

"Ouch!" He dumped the chair on the pavement and reached up to rub his head. "Son of a—"

Ellie raised her eyebrows.

"...sea lion," he added lamely. "Dam small trunk," he muttered, working his fingers on his scalp.

Ellie shoved her hands into her pockets, which didn't help at all. She still had the urge to run her own fingers into his dark hair.

"Thanks," he grumbled. "I can take it from here." He opened the chair and wheeled it to the sidewalk.

She could see him measuring the distance to the front door, weighing the problem of getting King upstairs. As far as she could see, there was only one solution. King would just have to live in the car till he got his casts off.

But this wasn't her problem. This much Mitch had claimed as his own. She stepped back to watch.

"Okay, King, I have to lift you out."

Just as quickly, she rushed back across the sidewalk. "Mitch,

you can't do that. He's too—" But he'd already reached inside the car.

Omigod. He hadn't set the wheelchair brakes.

She spun around, pressed both levers and flipped the foot rests into place. By the time she turned back, Mitch had King in his arms. She reached to guide King's legs out of the car.

That was when she saw what Mitch had told them yesterday. One of King's legs sported a plastic-type cast from his toes to his knee. The other leg stuck straight out in front of him with a cast that ran all the way from his foot to his hip. She felt herself getting light-headed.

"Ellie...there's a lever on the side...to extend the leg rest. Can you find it?" Mitch's breathing came heavy.

She whirled back to the wheelchair, searching frantically for the leg extension. "I found it. It's up. Hurry." Aching to help, she turned back, longing to soothe King, to give Mitch more strength.

King patted Mitch on the shoulder. "Tables have turned, haven't they, son? Used to be I carried you around." He drew in a sharp breath. "Diaper didn't weigh half as much as these damn things, though." He scowled down at his casts.

Ellie saw Mitch's face freeze, felt tension spark the air again. She'd sensed it before. What was there between father and son that caused Mitch such anger? Resentment seemed to roll off him like sweat. What made him call his own father King?

Mitch lowered King carefully into the wheelchair, and Ellie guided his legs into place. Then she made the mistake of looking

up at the older man. His face had gone taut. His swarthy coloring had turned chalk white. Moisture beaded above his lips.

Her heart clenched. “Are you all right?”

“Couldn’t be better.” He managed a labored grin as he blotted a jacket sleeve against his forehead. “Okay, kids, pretend I fell down a mountain. Mitch is going to rescue me.”

Ellie put her hand on King’s arm. “This isn’t a game. I think we should call the hospital for help.”

King patted her hand. “Mitch knows what he’s doing, Ellie. He’s a member of Mountain Rescue. Don’t worry, a pair of Fiberglas long johns isn’t going to keep me down. Besides, I’ve always wanted to see what this boy does in his spare time.” He grinned up at Mitch. “What say we get this over with, son?”

King might have thought he’d convinced her with his bravado, but she saw his strain. Mitch might be more than a ski instructor, but right now he looked as grim as an undertaker. She didn’t feel good about this at all.

But there wasn’t much she could do except help. She ran to hold the door while Mitch backed King up the step and into the entryway.

“Seri, Rafe, Michael—upstairs,” Mitch commanded. “Remember how we practiced? Wheel that new chair into the living room and be ready when I call you.”

They nodded solemnly, then raced up the stairs, Seri dragging the big pink rabbit, Bubba Sue barking the whole way.

“Gabe, I want you here to help your mom and me.”

Any other man, Ellie would have refused to let command her children this way. But Mitch seemed to know what he was doing. She trusted him on this. The realization startled her.

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