

LINDA LAEL
MILLER



SIERRA'S
HOMECOMING

Cherish

Linda Miller

Sierra's Homecoming

«HarperCollins»

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When she moved to her family's ancestral ranch, single mom Sierra McKettrick was disconcerted by the Triple M's handsome caretaker, Travis Reid. But when her son claimed to see a mysterious boy in the house, and an heirloom teapot started popping up in unexpected places, Sierra wondered if the attraction between herself and Travis might be the least of her worries. In 1919, widowed Hannah McKettrick lived at the ranch with her son and her brother-in-law, Doss. Her confused feelings for Doss and her son's health problems occupied all her thoughts...until the family teapot started disappearing. Could Sierra and her ancestor, Hannah, be living parallel lives?

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Sierra's Homecoming
Linda Lael Miller



To Little Angels Everywhere

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Chapter One

Present Day

“Stay in the car,” Sierra McKettrick told her seven-year-old son, Liam.

He fixed her with an owlish gaze, peering through the lenses of his horn-rimmed glasses. “I want to see the graves, too,” he told her, and put a mittened hand to the passenger-side door handle to make his point.

“Another time,” she answered firmly. Part of her knew it was irrational to think a visit to the cemetery could provoke an asthma attack, but when it came to Liam’s health, she was taking no chances.

A brief stare-down ensued, and Sierra prevailed, but barely.

“It’s not fair,” Liam said, yet he sounded resigned. He didn’t normally give up so easily, but they’d just driven almost nonstop all the way from Florida to northern Arizona, and he was tired.

“Welcome to the real world,” Sierra replied. She set the emergency brake, left the engine running with the heat on High, and got out of the ancient station wagon she’d bought on credit years before.

Standing ankle-deep in a patch of ragged snow, she took in her surroundings. Ordinary people were buried in churchyards and public cemeteries when they died, she reflected, feeling peevish. The McKettricks were a law unto themselves, living or dead. They weren’t content with a mere plot, like other families. Oh, no. They had to have a place all their own, with a view.

And what a view it was.

Shoving her hands into the pockets of her cloth coat, which was nearly as decrepit as her car, Sierra turned to survey the Triple M Ranch, sprawling in every direction, well beyond the range of her vision. Red mesas and buttes, draped in a fine lacing of snow. Copses of majestic white oaks, growing at intervals along a wide and shining stream. Expanses of pastureland, and even the occasional cactus, a stranger to the high country, a misplaced wayfarer, there by mistake.

Like her.

A flash of resentment rose suddenly within Sierra, and a moment or two passed before she recognized the emotion for what it was: not her own opinion, but that of her late father, Hank Breslin.

When it came to the McKettricks, Sierra had no opinions that she could honestly claim, because she didn’t know these people, except by reputation.

She’d taken their name for one reason and one reason only—because that was part of the deal. Liam needed health care, and she couldn’t provide it. Eve McKettrick—Sierra’s biological mother—had set up a medical trust fund for her grandson, but there were strings attached.

With the McKettricks, she heard her father say, as surely as if he were standing there beside her, there are always strings attached.

“Be quiet,” Sierra said, out loud. She was grateful for Eve’s help, and if she had to take the McKettrick name and live on the Triple M Ranch for a year to meet the conditions, so be it. It wasn’t as if she had anyplace better to go.

Resolutely she approached the cemetery entrance, walked under the ornate metal archway forming the word “McKettrick” in graceful cursive.

A life-size bronze statue of a man on horseback, broad-shouldered and imposing, with a bandanna at his throat and a six-gun riding on his hip, took center stage.

Angus McKettrick, the patriarch. The founder of the Triple M, and the dynasty. Sierra knew little about him, but as she looked up into that hard, determined face, shaped by the rigors of life in the nineteenth century, she felt a kinship.

Ruthless old bastard, said the voice of Hank Breslin. That’s where McKettricks get their arrogance. From him.

“Be quiet,” Sierra repeated, thrusting her hands deeper into her coat pockets. She stood in silence for a long moment, listening to the rattle-throated hum of the station wagon’s engine, the lonely cry of a nearby bird, the thrum of blood in her ears. A piney scent spiced the air.

Sierra turned, saw the marble angels marking the graves of Angus McKettrick’s wives—Georgia, mother of Rafe, Kade and Jeb. Concepcion, mother of Kate.

Look for Holt and Lorelei, Eve had told her, the last time they’d spoken over the telephone. That’s our part of the family.

Sierra caught sight of other bronze statues, smaller than Angus’s but no less impressive in their detail. They were works of art, museum pieces, and if they hadn’t been solidly anchored in cement, they probably would have been stolen. It said something about the McKettrick legend, she supposed, that there had been no vandalism in this lonely, wind-blown place.

Jeb McKettrick, the youngest of the brothers, was represented by a cowboy with his six-gun drawn; his wife, Chloe, by a slender woman in pioneer dress, shading her eyes with one hand and smiling. Their children, grandchildren, great- and a few great-great-grandchildren surrounded them, their costly headstones laid out in neat rows, like the streets of a western town.

Next was Kade McKettrick, easy in his skin, wearing a six-shooter, like his brother, but with an open book in his hand. His wife, Mandy, wore trousers, a loose-fitting shirt, boots and a hat, and held a shotgun. Like Chloe, she was smiling. Judging by the number of other graves around theirs, these two had also been prolific parents.

The statue of Rafe McKettrick revealed a big, powerfully built man with a stubborn set to his jaw. His bride, Emmeline, stood close against his side; their arms were linked and she rested her head against the outside of his upper arm.

Sierra smiled. Again, their progeny was plentiful.

The last statue brought up an unexpected surge of emotion in Sierra. Here, then, was Holt, half brother to Rafe, Kade and Jeb, and to Kate. In his long trail coat, he looked both handsome and tough. A pair of very detailed ammunition belts criss-crossed his chest, and the badge pinned to his wide lapel read, “Texas Ranger.”

Sierra stared into those bronze eyes and, once again, felt something stir deep inside her. I came from this man, she thought. We’ve got the same DNA.

Liam gave a jarring blast of the car horn, impatient to get to the ranch house that would be their home for the next twelve months.

Sierra waved in acknowledgment but moved on to the statue of Lorelei. She was mounted on a mule, long, lace-trimmed skirts spilling on either side of her impossibly small waist, face shadowed, not by a sunbonnet but by a man’s hat. Her spirited gaze rested lovingly on her husband, Holt.

Liam laid on the horn.

Fearing he might decide to take the wheel and drive to the ranch house on his own, Sierra turned reluctantly from the markers and followed a path littered with pine needles and the dead leaves of the six towering white oaks that shared the space, heading back to the car.

Back to her son.

“Are all the McKettricks dead?” Liam asked, when Sierra settled into the driver’s seat and fastened the belt.

“No,” Sierra answered, waiting for some stray part of herself to finish meandering among those graves, making the acquaintance of ancestors, and catch up. “We’re McKettricks, and we’re not dead. Neither is your grandmother, or Meg.” She knew there were cousins, too, descended from Rafe, Kade and Jeb, but it was too big a subject to explain to a seven-year-old boy. Besides, she was still trying to square them all away in her own mind.

“I thought my name was Liam Breslin,” the little boy said practically.

It should have been Liam Douglas, Sierra thought, remembering her first and only lover. As always, when Liam’s father, Adam, came to mind, she felt a pang, a complicated mixture of passion,

sorrow and helpless fury. She and Adam had never been married, so she'd given Liam her maiden name.

“We're McKettricks now,” Sierra said with a sigh. “You'll understand when you're older.”

She backed the car out carefully, keenly aware of the steep descent on all sides, and made the wide turn that would take them back on to the network of dirt roads bisecting the Triple M.

“I can understand now,” Liam asserted, having duly pondered the matter in his solemn way. “After all, I'm gifted.”

“You may be gifted,” Sierra replied, concentrating on her driving, “but you're still seven.”

“Do I get to be a cowboy and ride bucking broncs and stuff like that?”

Sierra suppressed a shudder. “No,” she said.

“That bites,” Liam answered, folding his arms and settling deeper into the heavy nylon coat she'd bought him on the road, when they'd reached the first of the cold-weather states. “What's the good of living on a ranch if you can't be a cowboy?”

Chapter Two

The elderly station wagon banged into the yard, bald tires crunching half-thawed gravel, and came to an obstreperous stop. Travis Reid paused behind the horse trailer hitched to Jesse McKettrick's mud-splattered black truck, pushed his hat to the back of his head with one leather-gloved finger and grinned, waiting for something to fall off the rig. Nothing did, which just went to prove that the age of miracles was not past.

Jesse appeared at the back of the trailer, leading old Baldy by his halter rope. "Who's that?" he asked, squinting in the wintry late afternoon sunshine.

Travis spared him no more than a glance. "A long-lost relative of yours, unless I miss my guess," he said easily.

The station wagon belched some smoke and died. Travis figured it for a permanent condition. He looked on with interest as a good-looking woman climbed out from behind the wheel, looked the old car over, and gave the driver's-side door a good kick with her right foot.

She was a McKettrick, all right. Of the female persuasion, too.

Jesse left Baldy standing to jump down from the bed of the trailer and lower the ramp to the ground. "Meg's half sister?" he asked. "The one who grew up in Mexico with her crazy, drunken father?"

"Reckon so," Travis said. He and Meg communicated regularly, most often by e-mail, and she'd filled him in on Sierra as far as she could. Nobody in the family knew her very well, including her mother, Eve, so the information was sparse. She had a seven-year-old son—now getting out of the car—and she'd been serving cocktails in Florida for the last few years, and that was about all Travis knew about her. As Meg's caretaker and resident horse trainer, not to mention her friend, Travis had stocked the cupboards and refrigerator, made sure the temperamental furnace was working and none of the plumbing had frozen, and started up Meg's Blazer every day, just to make sure it was running.

From the looks of that station wagon, it was a good thing he'd followed the boss-lady's orders.

"You gonna help me with this horse," Jesse asked testily, "or just stand there gawking?"

Travis chuckled. "Right now," he said, "I'm all for gawking."

Sierra McKettrick was tall and slender, with short, gleaming brown hair the color of a good chestnut horse. Her eyes were huge and probably blue, though she was still a stride or two too far away for him to tell.

Jesse swore and stomped back up the ramp, making plenty of noise as he did so. Like most of the McKettricks, Jesse was used to getting his way, and while he was a known womanizer, he'd evidently dismissed Sierra out of hand. After all, she was a blood relative—no sense driving his herd into that canyon.

Travis took a step toward the woman and the boy, who was staring at him with his mouth open.

"Is this Meg's house?" Sierra asked.

"Yes," Travis said, putting out his hand, pulling it back to remove his work gloves, and offering it again. "Travis Reid," he told her.

"Sierra Bres—McKettrick," she replied. Her grip was firm. And her eyes were definitely blue. The kind of blue that pierces something in a man's middle. She smiled, but tentatively. Somewhere along the line, she'd learned to be sparing with her smiles. "This is my son, Liam."

"Howdy," Liam said, squaring his small shoulders.

Travis grinned. "Howdy," he replied. Meg had said the boy had health problems, but he looked pretty sound to Travis.

"That sure is an ugly horse," Liam announced, pointing towards the trailer.

Travis turned. Baldy stood spraddle-footed, midway down the ramp, a miserable gray specimen of a critter with pink eyes and liver-colored splotches all over his mangy hide.

“Sure is,” Travis agreed, and glowered at Jesse for palming the animal off on him. It was like him to pull off a dramatic last-minute rescue, then leave the functional aspects of the problem to somebody else.

Jesse flashed a grin, and for a moment, Travis felt territorial, wanted to set himself between Sierra and her boy, the pair of them, and one of his oldest friends. He felt off balance, somehow, as though he'd been ambushed. What the hell was that all about?

“Is that a buckin' bronc?” Liam asked, venturing a step towards Baldy.

Sierra reached out quickly, caught hold of the fur-trimmed hood on the kid's coat and yanked him back. Cold sunlight glinted off the kid's glasses, making his eyes invisible.

Jesse laughed. “Back in the day,” he said, “Baldy was a rodeo horse. Cowboys quivered in their boots when they drew him to ride. Now, as you can see, he's a little past his prime.”

“And you would be—?” Sierra asked, with a touch of coolness to her tone. Maybe she was the one woman out of a thousand who could see Jesse McKettrick for what he was—a good-natured case of very bad news.

“Your cousin Jesse.”

Sierra sized him up, took in his battered jeans, work shirt, sheepskin coat and very expensive boots. “Descended from...?”

The McKettricks talked like that. Every one of them could trace their lineage back to old Angus, by a variety of paths, and while there would be hell to pay if anybody riled them as a bunch, they mostly kept to their own branch of the family tree.

“Jeb,” Jesse said.

Sierra nodded.

Liam's attention remained fixed on the horse. “Can I ride him?”

“Sure,” Jesse replied.

“No way,” said Sierra, at exactly the same moment.

Travis felt sorry for the kid, and it must have shown in his face, because Sierra's gaze narrowed on him.

“We've had a long trip,” she said. “I guess we'll just go inside.”

“Make yourselves at home,” Travis said, gesturing toward the house. “Don't worry about your bags. Jesse and I'll carry them in for you.”

She considered, probably wondering if she'd be obligated in any way if she agreed, then nodded. Catching Liam by the hood of his coat again, she got him turned from the horse and hustled him toward the front door.

“Too bad we're kin,” Jesse said, following Sierra with his eyes.

“Too bad,” Travis agreed mildly, though privately he didn't believe it was such a bad thing at all.

The house was a long, sprawling structure, with two stories and a wraparound porch. Sierra's most immediate impression was of substance and practicality, rather than elegance, and she felt a subtle interior shift, as if she'd been a long time lost in a strange, winding street, thick with fog, and suddenly found herself standing at her own front door.

“Those guys are real cowboys,” Liam said, once they were inside.

Sierra nodded distractedly, taking in the pegged wood floors, gleaming with the patina of venerable age, the double doors and steep staircase on the right, the high ceilings, the antique grandfather clock ticking ponderously beside the door. She peeked into a spacious living room, probably called a parlor when the house was new, and admired the enormous natural-rock fireplace, with its raised hearth and wood-nook. Worn but colorful rugs gave some relief to the otherwise uncompromisingly masculine decor of leather couches and chairs and tables of rough-hewn pine, as did the piano set in an alcove of floor-to-ceiling windows.

An odd nostalgia overtook Sierra; she'd never set foot on the Triple M before that day, let alone entered the home of Holt and Lorelei McKettrick, but she might have, if her dad hadn't snatched her the day Eve filed for divorce, and carried her off to San Miguel de Allende to share his expatriate lifestyle. She might have spent summers here, as Meg had, picking blackberries, wading in mountain streams, riding horses. Instead, she'd run barefoot through the streets of San Miguel, with no more memory of her mother than a faint scent of expensive perfume, sometimes encountered among the waves of tourists who frequented the markets, shops and restaurants of her home town.

Liam tugged at the sleeve of her coat. "Mom?"

She snapped out of her reverie, looked down at him, and smiled. "You hungry, bud?"

Liam nodded solemnly, but brightened when the door bumped open and Travis came in, lugging two suitcases.

Travis cleared his throat, as though embarrassed. "Plenty of grub in the kitchen," he said. "Shall I put this stuff upstairs?"

"Yes," Sierra said. "Thanks." At least that way she'd know which rooms were hers and Liam's without having to ask. She might have been concerned, sharing the place with Travis, but Meg had told her he lived in a trailer out by the barn. What Meg hadn't mentioned was that her resident caretaker was in his early thirties, not his sixties, as Sierra had imagined, and too attractive for comfort, with his lean frame, blue-green eyes and dark-blond hair in need of a trim.

She blushed as these thoughts filled her mind, and shuffled Liam quickly toward the kitchen.

It was a large room, with the same plank floors she'd seen in the front of the house and modern appliances, strangely juxtaposed with the black, chrome-trimmed wood cookstove occupying the far-left-hand corner. The table was long and rustic, with benches on either side and a chair at each end.

"Tables like that are a tradition with the McKettricks," a male voice said from just behind her.

Sierra jumped, startled, and turned to see Jesse in the doorway.

"Sorry," he said. He was handsome, Sierra thought. His coloring was similar to Travis's, and so was his build, and yet the two men didn't resemble each other at all.

"No problem," Sierra said.

Liam wrenched open the refrigerator. "Bologna!" he yelled triumphantly.

"Whoopee," Sierra replied, with a dryness that was lost on her son. "If there's bologna, there must be white bread, too."

"Jesse!" Travis's voice, from the direction of the front door. "Get out here and give me a hand!"

Jesse grinned, nodded affably to Sierra and vanished.

Sierra took off her coat, hung it from a peg next to the back door, and gestured for Liam to remove his, too. He complied, then went straight back to the bologna. He found a loaf of bread in a colorful polka-dot bag and started to build a sandwich.

Watching him, Sierra felt a faint brush of sorrow against the back of her heart. Liam was good at doing things on his own; he'd had a lot of practice, with her working the night shift at the club and sleeping days. Old Mrs. Davis from the apartment across the hall had been a conscientious babysitter, but hardly a mother figure.

She put coffee on to brew, once Liam was settled on a bench at the table. He'd chosen the side against the wall, so he could watch her moving about the kitchen.

"Cool place," he observed, between bites, "but it's haunted."

Sierra took a can of soup from a shelf, opened it and dumped the contents into a saucepan, placing it on the modern gas stove before answering. Liam was an imaginative child, often saying surprising things. Rather than responding instantly, Sierra usually tried to let a couple of beats pass before she answered.

"What makes you say that?"

"Don't know," Liam said, chewing. They'd had a drive-through breakfast, but that had been hours ago, and he was obviously starving.

Another jab of guilt struck Sierra, keener than the one before. “Come on,” she prodded. “You must have had a reason.” Of course he’d had a reason, she thought. They’d just been to a graveyard, so it was natural that death would be on his mind. She should have waited, made the pilgrimage on her own, instead of dragging Liam along.

Liam looked thoughtful. “The air sort of . . . buzzes,” he said. “Can I make another sandwich?”
“Only if you promise to have some of this soup first.”

“Deal,” Liam said.

An old china cabinet stood against a far wall, near the cookstove, and Sierra approached it, even though she didn’t intend to use any of the dishes inside. Priceless antiques, every one.

Her family had eaten off those dishes. Generations of them.

Her gaze caught on a teapot, sturdy looking and, at the same time, exquisite. Spellbound, she opened the glass doors of the cabinet and reached inside to touch the piece, ever so lightly, with just the tips of her fingers.

“Soup’s boiling over,” Liam said mildly.

Sierra gasped, turned on her heel and rushed back to the modern stove to push the saucepan off the flame.

“Mom,” Liam interjected.

“What?”

“Chill out. It’s only soup.”

The inside door swung open, and Travis stuck his head in. “Stuff’s upstairs,” he said. “Anything else you need?”

Sierra stared at him for a long moment, as though he’d spoken in an alien language. “Uh, no,” she said finally. “Thanks.” Pause. “Would you like some lunch?”

“No, thanks,” he said. “Gotta see to that damn horse.”

With that, he ducked out again.

“How come I can’t ride the horse?” Liam asked.

Sierra sighed, setting a bowl of soup in front of him. “Because you don’t know how.”

Liam’s sigh echoed her own, and if they’d been talking about anything but the endangerment of life and limb, it would have been funny.

“How am I supposed to learn how if you won’t let me try? You’re being overprotective. You could scar my psyche. I might develop psychological problems.”

“There are times,” Sierra confessed, sitting down across from him with her own bowl of soup, “when I wish you weren’t quite so smart.”

Liam waggled his eyebrows at her. “I got it from you.”

“Not,” Sierra said. Liam had her eyes, her thick, fine hair, and her dogged persistence, but his remarkable IQ came from his father.

Don’t think about Adam, she told herself.

Travis Reid sidled into her mind.

Even worse.

Liam consumed his soup, along with a second sandwich, and went off to explore the rest of the house while Sierra lingered thoughtfully over her coffee.

The telephone rang.

Sierra got up to fetch the cordless receiver and pressed Talk with her thumb. “Hello?”

“You’re there!” Meg trilled.

Sierra noticed that she’d left the china cabinet doors open and went in that direction, intending to close them. “Yes,” she said. Meg had been kind to her, in a long-distance sort of way, but Sierra had only been two when she’d last seen her half sister, and that made them strangers.

“How do you like it? The ranch house, I mean?”

“I haven’t seen much of it,” Sierra answered. “Liam and I just got here, and then we had lunch...” Her hand went, of its own accord, to the teapot, and she imagined she felt just the faintest charge when she touched it. “Lots of antiques around here,” she said, thinking aloud.

“Don’t be afraid to use them,” Meg replied. “Family tradition.”

Sierra withdrew her hand from the teapot, shut the doors. “Family tradition?”

“McKetrick rules,” Meg said, with a smile in her voice. “Things are meant to be used, no matter how old they are.”

Sierra frowned, uneasy. “But if they get broken—”

“They get broken,” Meg finished for her. “Have you met Travis yet?”

“Yes,” Sierra said. “And he’s not at all what I expected.”

Meg laughed. “What did you expect?”

“Some gimpy old guy, I guess,” Sierra admitted, warming to the friendliness in her sister’s voice. “You said he took care of the place and lived in a trailer by the barn, so I thought—” She broke off, feeling foolish.

“He’s cute and he’s single,” Meg said.

“Even the teapot?” Sierra mused.

“Huh?”

Sierra put a hand to her forehead. Sighed. “Sorry. I guess I missed a segue there. There’s a teapot in the china cabinet in the kitchen—I was just wondering if I could—”

“I know the one,” Meg answered, with a soft fondness in her voice. “It was Lorelei’s. She got it for a wedding present.”

Lorelei. The matriarch of the family. Sierra took a step backward.

“Use it,” Meg said, as if she’d seen Sierra’s reflexive retreat.

Sierra shook her head. “I couldn’t. I had no idea it was that old. If I dropped it—”

“Sierra,” Meg said, “it’s not china. It’s cast iron, with an enamel overlay.”

“Oh.”

“Kind of like the McKetrick women, Mom always says.” Meg went on. “Smooth on the outside, tough as iron on the inside.”

Mom. Sierra closed her eyes against all the conflicting emotions the word brought up in her, but it didn’t help.

“We’ll give you time to settle in,” Meg said gently, when Sierra was too choked up to speak. “Then Mom and I will probably pop in for a visit. If that’s okay with you, of course.”

Both Meg and Eve lived in San Antonio, Texas, where they helped run McKetrickCo, a multinational corporation with interests in everything from software to communication satellites, so they wouldn’t be “popping in” without a little notice.

Sierra swallowed hard. “It’s your house,” she said.

“And yours,” Meg pointed out, very quietly.

After that, Meg made Sierra promise to call if she needed anything. They said goodbye, and the call ended.

Sierra went back to the china cabinet for the teapot.

Liam clattered down the back stairs. “I told you this place was haunted!” he crowed, his small face shining with delight.

The teapot was heavy—definitely cast iron—but Sierra was careful as she set it on the counter, just the same. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“I just saw a kid,” Liam announced. “Upstairs, in my room!”

“You’re imagining things.”

Liam shook his head. “I saw him!”

Sierra approached her son, laid her hand to his forehead. “No fever,” she mused, worried.

“Mom,” Liam protested, pulling back. “I’m not sick—and I’m not delusional, either.”

Delusional. How many seven-year-olds used that word? Sierra sighed and cupped Liam's eager face in both hands. "Listen. It's fine to have imaginary friends, but—"

"He's not imaginary."

"Okay," Sierra responded, with another sigh. It was possible, she supposed, that a neighbor child had wandered in before they arrived, but that seemed unlikely, given that the only other houses on the ranch were miles away. "Let's investigate."

Together they climbed the back stairs, and Sierra got her first look at the upper story. The corridor was wide, with the same serviceable board floors. The light fixtures, though old-fashioned, were electric, but most of the light came from the large arched window at the far end of the hallway. Six doors stood open, an indication that Liam had visited each room in turn after leaving the kitchen the first time.

He led her into the middle one, on the left side.

No one was there.

Sierra let out her breath, admiring the room. It was spacious, perfect quarters for a boy. Two bay windows overlooked the barn area, where Baldy, the singularly unattractive horse, stood stalwartly in the middle of the corral, looking as though he intended to break loose at any second and do some serious bucking. Travis was beside Baldy, stroking the animal's neck as he eased the halter off over its head.

A quivery sensation tickled the pit of Sierra's stomach.

"Mom," Liam said. "He was here. He had on short pants and funny shoes and suspenders."

Sierra turned to look at her son, feeling fretful again. Liam stood near the other window, examining an antique telescope, balanced atop a shining brass tripod. "I believe you," she said.

"You don't," Liam argued, jutting out his chin. "You're humoring me."

Sierra sat down on the side of the bed positioned between the windows. Like the dressers, it was scarred with age, but made of sturdy wood. The headboard was simply but intricately carved, and a faded quilt provided color. "Maybe I am, a little," she admitted, because there was no fooling Liam. He had an uncanny knack for seeing through anything but the stark truth. "I don't know what to think, that's all."

"Don't you believe in ghosts?"

I don't believe in much of anything, Sierra thought sadly. "I believe in you," she said, patting the mattress beside her. "Come and sit down."

Reluctantly, he sat. Stiffened when she slipped an arm around his shoulders. "If you think I'm going to take a nap," he said, "you're dead wrong."

The word dead tiptoed up Sierra's spine to dance lightly at her nape. "Everything's going to be all right, you know," she said gently.

"I like this room," Liam confided, and the hopeful uncertainty in his manner made Sierra's heart ache. They'd always lived in apartments or cheap motel rooms. Had Liam been secretly yearning to call a house like this one home? To settle down somewhere and live like a normal kid?

"Me, too," Sierra said. "It has friendly vibes."

"Is that supposed to be like a closet?" Liam asked, indicating the huge pine armoire taking up most of one wall.

Sierra nodded. "It's called a wardrobe."

"Maybe it's like the one in that story. Maybe the back of it opens into another world. There could be a lion and a witch in there." From the smile on Liam's face, the concept intrigued rather than troubled him.

She ruffled his hair. "Maybe," she agreed.

His attention shifted back to the telescope. "I wish I could look through that and see Andromeda," he said. "Did you know that the whole galaxy is on a collision course with the Milky Way? All hell's going to break loose when it gets here, too."

Sierra shuddered at the thought. Most parents worried that their kids played too many video games. With Liam, the concern was the Discovery and Science Channels, not to mention programs like Nova. He thought about things like Earth losing its magnetic field and had nightmares about creatures swimming in dark oceans under the ice covering one of Jupiter's moons. Or was it Saturn?

"Don't get excited, Mom," he said, with an understanding smile. "It's going to be something like five billion years before it happens."

"Before what happens?" Sierra asked, blinking.

"The collision," he said tolerantly.

"Right," Sierra said.

Liam yawned. "Maybe I will take a nap." He studied her. "Just don't get the idea it's going to be a regular thing."

She mussed his hair again, kissed the top of his head. "I'm clear on that," she said, standing and reaching for the crocheted afghan lying neatly folded at the foot of the bed.

Liam kicked off his shoes and stretched out on top of the blue chenille bedspread, yawning again. He set his glasses on the night stand with care.

She covered him, resisted the temptation to kiss his forehead, and headed for the door. When she looked back from the threshold, Liam was already asleep.

1919

Hannah McKettrick heard her son's laughter before she rode around the side of the house, toward the barn, a week's worth of mail bulging in the saddlebags draped across the mule's neck. The snow was deep, with a hard crust, and the January wind was brisk.

Her jaw tightened when she saw her boy out in the cold, wearing a thin jacket and no hat. He and Doss, her brother-in-law, were building what appeared to be a snow fort, their breath making white plumes in the frigid air.

Something in Hannah gave a painful wrench at the sight of Doss; his resemblance to Gabe, his brother and her late husband, invariably startled her, even though they lived under the same roof and she should have been used to him by then.

She nudged the mule with the heels of her boots, but Seesaw-Two didn't pick up his pace. He just plodded along.

"What are you doing out here?" Hannah called.

Both Tobias and Doss fell silent, turning to gaze guiltily in her direction.

The breath plumes dissipated.

Tobias set his feet and pushed back his narrow shoulders. He was only eight, but since Gabe's coffin had arrived by train one warm day last summer, draped in an American flag and with Doss for an escort, her boy had taken on the mien of a man.

"We're just making a fort, Ma," he said.

Hannah blinked back sudden, stinging tears. A soldier, Gabe had died of influenza in an army infirmary, without ever seeing the battleground. Tobias thought in military terms, and Doss encouraged him, a fact Hannah did not appreciate.

"It's cold out here," she said. "You'll catch your death."

Doss shifted, pushed his battered hat to the back of his head. His face hardened, like the ice on the pond back of the orchard where the fruit trees stood, bare-limbed and stoic, waiting for spring.

"Go inside," Hannah told her son.

Tobias hesitated, then obeyed.

Doss remained, watching her.

The kitchen door slammed eloquently.

"You've got no business putting thoughts like that in his head," Doss said, in a quiet voice. He took old Seesaw's reins and held him while she dismounted, careful to keep her woolen skirts from riding up.

“That’s a fine bit of hypocrisy, coming from you,” Hannah replied. “Tobias had pneumonia last fall. We nearly lost him. He’s fragile, and you know it, and as soon as I turn my back, you have him outside, building a snow fort!”

Doss reached for the saddlebags, and so did Hannah. There was a brief tug-of-war before she let go. “He’s a kid,” Doss said. “If you had your way, he’d never do anything but look through that telescope and play checkers!”

Hannah felt as warm as if she were standing close to a hot stove, instead of Doss McKettrick. Their breaths melded between them. “I fully intend to have my way,” she said. “Tobias is my son, and I will not have you telling me how to raise him!”

Doss slapped the saddlebags over one shoulder and stepped back, his hazel eyes narrowed. “He’s my nephew—my brother’s boy—and I’ll be damned if I’ll let you turn him into a sickly little whelp hitched to your apron strings!”

Hannah stiffened. “You’ve said quite enough,” she told him tersely.

He leaned in, so his nose was almost touching hers. “I haven’t said the half of it, Mrs. McKettrick.”

Hannah sidestepped him, marching for the house, but the snow came almost to her knees and made it hard to storm off in high dudgeon. Her breath trailed over her right shoulder, along with her words. “Supper’s in an hour,” she said, without turning around. “But maybe you’d rather eat in the bunkhouse.”

Doss’s chuckle riled her, just as it was no doubt meant to do. “Old Charlie’s a sight easier to get along with than you are, but he can’t hold a candle to you when it comes to home cooking. Anyhow, he’s been gone for a month, in case you haven’t noticed.”

She felt a flush rise up her neck, even though she was shivering inside Gabe’s old woolen work coat. His scent was fading from the fabric, and she wished she knew a way to hold on to it.

“Suit yourself,” she retorted.

Tobias shoved a chunk of wood into the cookstove as she entered the house, sending sparks snapping up the gleaming black chimney before he shut the door with a clang.

“We were only building a fort,” he grumbled.

Hannah was stilled by the sight of him, just as if somebody had thrown a lasso around her middle and pulled it tight. “I could make biscuits and sausage gravy,” she offered quietly.

Tobias ignored the olive branch. “You rode down to the road to meet the mail wagon,” he said, without meeting her eyes. “Did I get any letters?” With his hands shoved into the pockets of his trousers and his brownish-blond hair shining in the wintry sunlight flowing in through the windows, he looked the way Gabe must have, at his age.

“One from your grandpa,” Hannah said. Methodically, she hung her hat on the usual peg, pulled off her knitted mittens and stuffed them into the pockets of Gabe’s coat. She took that off last, always hating to part with it.

“Which grandpa?” Tobias lingered by the stove, warming his hands, still refusing to glance her way.

Hannah’s family lived in Missoula, Montana, in a big house on a tree-lined residential street. She missed them sorely, and it hurt a little, knowing Tobias was hoping it was Holt who’d written to him, not her father.

“The McKettrick one,” she said.

“Good,” Tobias answered.

The back door opened, and Doss came in, still carrying the saddlebags. Usually he stopped outside to kick the snow off his boots so the floors wouldn’t get muddy, but today he was in an obstinate mood.

Hannah went to the stove and ladled hot water out of the reservoir into a basin, so she could wash up before starting supper.

“Catch,” Doss said cheerfully.

She looked back, saw the saddlebags, burdened with mail, fly through the air. Tobias caught them ably with a grin.

When was the last time he'd smiled at her that way?

The boy plundered anxiously through the bags, brought out the fat envelope postmarked San Antonio, Texas. Her in-laws, Holt and Lorelei McKettrick, owned a ranch outside that distant city, and though the Triple M was still home to them, they'd been spending a lot of time away since the beginning of the war. Hannah barely knew them, and neither did Tobias, for that matter, but they'd kept up a lively correspondence, the three of them, ever since he'd learned to read, and the letters had been arriving on a weekly basis since Gabe died.

Gabe's folks had come back for the funeral, of course, and in the intervening months Hannah had been secretly afraid. Holt and Lorelei saw their lost son in Tobias, the same as she did, and they'd offered to take him back to Texas with them when they left. She hadn't had to refuse—Tobias had done that for her, but he'd clearly been torn. A part of him had wanted to leave.

Hannah's heart had wedged itself up into her throat and stayed there until Gabe's mother and father were gone. Whenever a letter arrived, she felt anxious again.

She glanced at Doss, now shrugging out of his coat. He'd gone away to the army with Gabe, fallen sick with influenza himself, recovered and stayed on at the ranch after he brought his brother's body home for burial. Though no one had come right out and said so, Hannah knew Doss had remained on the Triple M, instead of joining the folks in Texas, mainly to look after Tobias.

Maybe the McKettricks thought she'd hightail it home to Montana, once she got over the shock of losing Gabe, and they'd lose track of the boy.

Now Tobias stood poring over the letter, devouring every word with his eyes, getting to the last page and starting all over again at the beginning.

Deliberately Hannah diverted her attention, and that was when she saw the teapot, sitting on the counter. She looked toward the china cabinet, across the room. She hadn't touched the piece, knowing it was special to Lorelei, and she couldn't credit that Doss or Tobias would have taken it from its place, either. They'd been playing in the snow while she was gone to fetch the mail, not throwing a tea party.

“Did one of you get this out?” she asked casually, getting a good grip on the pot before carrying it back to the cabinet. It was made of metal, but the pretty enamel coating could have been chipped, and Hannah wasn't about to take the risk.

Tobias barely glanced her way before shaking his head. He was still intent on the letter from Texas.

Doss looked more closely, his gaze rising curiously from the teapot to Hannah's face. “Nope,” he said at last, and busied himself emptying the contents of the coffeepot down the sink before pumping in water for a fresh batch.

Hannah closed the doors of the china cabinet, frowning.

“Odd,” she said, very softly.

Chapter Three

Present Day

Sierra descended the rear staircase into the kitchen, being extra quiet so she wouldn't wake Liam up. He hadn't had an asthma attack in almost a month, but he needed his rest.

Intending to brew herself some tea and spend a few quiet minutes restoring her equilibrium, she chose a mug from one of the cupboards, located a box of orange pekoe, and reached for the heirloom teapot.

It was gone.

She glanced toward the china cabinet and saw Lorelei's teapot sitting behind the glass.

Jesse or Travis must have come inside while she was upstairs, she reasoned, and put it away.

But that seemed unlikely. Men, especially cowboys, didn't usually fuss with teapots, did they? Not that she knew that much about men in general or cowboys in particular.

She'd seen Travis earlier, from Liam's bedroom window, working with the horse, and she was sure he hadn't been back in the house after carrying in the bags.

"Jesse?" she called softly, half-afraid he might jump out at her from somewhere.

No answer.

She moved to the front of the house, peered between the lace curtains in the parlor. Jesse's truck was gone, leaving deep tracks in the patchy mud and snow, rapidly filling with gossamer white flakes.

Bemused, Sierra returned to the kitchen, grabbed her coat and went out the back door, shoving her hands into her pockets and ducking her head against the thickening snowfall and the icy wind that accompanied it. Nothing in her life had prepared her for high-country weather; she'd been raised in Mexico, moved to San Diego after her father died and spent the last several years living in Florida. She supposed it would be a while before she adjusted to the change in climate, but if there was one thing she'd learned to do, on the long journey from then to now, it was adapt.

The doors of the big, weathered-board barn stood open, and Sierra stepped inside, shivering. It was warmer there, but she could still see her breath.

"Mr. Reid?"

"Travis," came the taciturn answer from a nearby stall. "I don't answer to much of anything else."

Sierra crossed the sawdust floor and saw Travis on the other side of the door, grooming poor old Baldy with long, gentle strokes of a brush. He gave her a sidelong glance and grinned slightly.

"Settling in okay?" he asked.

"I guess," she said, leaning on the stall door to watch him work. There was something soothing about the way he attended to that horse, almost as though he were touching her own skin....

Perish the thought.

He straightened. A quiver went through Baldy's body. "Something wrong?" Travis asked.

"No," Sierra said quickly, attempting a smile. "I was just wondering..."

"What?" Travis went back to brushing again, though he was still watching Sierra, and the horse gave a contented little snort of pleasure.

Suddenly the whole subject of the teapot seemed silly. How could she ask if he or Jesse had moved it? And, so what if they had? Jesse was a McKettrick, born and raised, and the things in that house were as much a part of his heritage as hers. Travis was clearly a trusted family friend—if not more.

Sierra found that possibility unaccountably disturbing. Meg had said he was single and free, but she obviously trusted Travis implicitly, which might mean there was a deeper level to their relationship.

"I was just wondering...if you ever drink tea," Sierra hedged lamely.

Travis chuckled. “Not often, unless it’s the electric variety,” he replied, and though he was smiling, the expression in his eyes was one of puzzlement. He was probably asking himself what kind of nut case Meg and Eve had saddled him with. “Are you inviting me?”

Sierra blushed, even more self-conscious than before. “Well...yes. Yes, I guess so.”

“I’d rather have coffee,” Travis said, “if that’s all right with you.”

“I’ll put a pot on,” Sierra answered, foolishly relieved. She should have walked away, but she seemed fixed to the spot, as though someone had smeared the soles of her shoes with superglue.

Travis finished brushing down the horse, ran a gloved hand along the animal’s neck and waited politely for Sierra to move, so he could open the stall door and step out.

“What’s really going on here, Ms. McKettrick?” he asked, when they were facing each other in the wide aisle, Baldy’s stall door securely latched. Along the aisle, other horses nickered, probably wanting Travis’s attention for themselves.

“Sierra,” she said. She tried to sound friendly, but it was forced.

“Sierra, then. Somehow I don’t think you came out here to ask me to a tea party or a coffee klatch.”

She huffed out a breath and pushed her hands deeper into her coat pockets. “Okay,” she admitted. “I wanted to know if you or Jesse had been inside the house since you brought the baggage in.”

“No,” Travis answered readily.

“It would certainly be all right if you had, of course—”

Travis took a light grip on Sierra’s elbow and steered her toward the barn doors. He closed and fastened them once they were outside.

“Jesse got in his truck and left, first thing,” he said. “I’ve been with Baldy for the last half an hour. Why?”

Sierra wished she’d never begun this conversation. Never left the warmth of the kitchen for the cold and the questions in Travis’s eyes. She’d done both those things, though, and now she would have to explain. “I took a teapot out of the china cabinet,” she said, “and set it on the counter. I went up to Liam’s room, to help him settle in for a nap, and when I came downstairs—”

A startling grin broke over Travis’s features like a flash of summer sunlight over a crystal-clear pond. “What?” he prompted. He moved to Sierra’s other side, shielding her from the bitter wind, increasing his pace, and therefore hers, as they approached the house.

“It was in the cabinet again. I would swear I put it on the counter.”

“Weird,” Travis said, kicking the snow off his boots at the base of the back steps.

Sierra stepped inside, shivering, took off her coat and hung it up.

Travis followed, closed the door, pulled off his gloves and stuffed them into the pockets of his coat before hanging it beside Sierra’s, along with his hat. “Must have been Liam,” he said.

“He’s asleep,” Sierra replied. The coffee she’d made earlier was still hot, so she filled two mugs, casting an uneasy glance toward the china cabinet as she did so. Liam couldn’t have gotten downstairs without her seeing him, and even if he had, he wouldn’t have been able to reach the high shelf in the china closet without dragging a chair over. She would have heard the scraping sound and, anyway, Liam being Liam, he wouldn’t have put the chair back where he found it. There would have been evidence.

Travis accepted the cup Sierra offered with a nod of thanks, took a sip. “You must have put it away yourself, then,” he said reasonably. “And then forgotten.”

Sierra sat down in the chair closest to the wood-burning cookstove, suddenly yearning for a fire, while Travis made himself comfortable nearby, on the bench facing the wall.

“I know I didn’t,” she said, biting her lower lip.

Travis concentrated on his coffee for some moments before turning his gaze back to her face. “It’s a strange house,” he said.

Sierra blinked.

Cool place, Liam had said, right after they arrived, but it's haunted.

"What do you mean, 'It's a strange house'?" she asked. She made no attempt to keep the skepticism out of her voice.

"Meg's going to kill me for this," Travis said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"She doesn't want you scared off."

Sierra frowned, waiting.

"It's a good place," Travis said, taking the homey kitchen in with a fond glance. Clearly, he'd spent a lot of time there. "Odd things happen sometimes, though."

Sierra heard Liam's voice again. I saw a kid, upstairs in my room.

She shook off the memory. "Impossible," she muttered.

"If you say so," Travis replied affably.

"What kind of 'odd things' happen in this house?"

Travis smiled, and Sierra had the sense that she was being handled, skillfully managed, in the same way as the horse. "Once in a while, you'll hear the piano playing by itself. Or you walk into a room, and you get the feeling you passed somebody on the threshold, even though you're alone."

Sierra shivered again, but this time it had nothing to do with the icy January weather. The kitchen was snug and warm, even without the cookstove lit. "I would appreciate it," she said, "if you wouldn't talk that kind of nonsense in front of Liam. He's...impressionable."

Travis raised an eyebrow.

Suddenly, strangely, Sierra wanted to tell him what Liam had said about seeing another little boy in his room, but she couldn't quite bring herself to do it. She wouldn't have Travis Reid—or anybody else, for that matter—thinking Liam was...different. He got enough of that from other kids, being so smart, and his asthma set him apart, too.

"I must have moved the teapot myself," Sierra said, at last, "and forgotten. Just as you said."

Travis looked unconvinced. "Right," he agreed.

1919

Tobias carried the letter to the table, where Doss sat comfortably in the chair everyone thought of as Holt's. "They bought three hundred head of cattle," the boy told his uncle excitedly, handing over the sheaf of pages. "Drove them all the way from Mexico to San Antonio, too."

Doss smiled. "Is that right?" he mused. His ice-blue eyes warmed in the light of a kerosene lantern as he read. The place had electricity now, but Hannah tried to save on it where she could. The last bill had come to over a dollar, for a mere two months of service, and she'd been horrified at the expense.

Standing at the stove, she turned back to her work, stood a little straighter, punched down the biscuit dough with sharp jabs of the wooden spoon. Apparently, it hadn't occurred to Tobias that she might like to see that infernal letter. She was a McKettrick, too, after all, if only by marriage.

"I guess Ma and Pa liked that buffalo you carved for them," Doss observed, when he'd finished and set the pages aside. Hannah just happened to see, since she'd had to pass right by that end of the table to fetch a pound of ground sausage from the icebox. "Says here it was the best Christmas present they ever got."

Tobias nodded, beaming with pride. He'd worked all fall on that buffalo, even in his sick bed, whittling it from a chunk of firewood Doss had cut for him special. "I reckon I'll make them a bear for next year," he said. Not a word about carving something for her parents, Hannah noted, even though they'd sent him a bicycle and a toy fire engine back in December. The McKettricks, of course, had arranged for a spotted pony to be brought up from the main ranch house on Christmas morning, all decked out in a brand-new saddle and bridle, and though Tobias had dutifully written his Montana grandparents to thank them for their gifts, he'd never played with the engine. Just set it on a shelf in

his room and forgotten all about it. The bicycle wouldn't be much use before spring, that was true, but he'd shown no more interest in it once the pony had arrived.

"Wash your hands for supper, Tobias McKettrick," Hannah said.

"Supper isn't ready," he protested.

"Do as your mother says," Doss told him quietly.

He obeyed immediately, which should have pleased Hannah, but it didn't.

Doss, meanwhile, opened the saddle bags, took out the usual assortment of letters, periodicals and small parcels, which Hannah had already looked through before the mail wagon rounded the bend in the road. She'd been both disappointed and relieved when there was nothing with her name on it. Once, in the last part of October, when the fiery leaves of the oak trees were falling in puddles around their trunks like the folds of a discarded garment, she'd gotten a letter from Gabe. He'd been dead almost four months by then, and her heart had fairly stopped at the sight of his handwriting on that envelope.

For a brief, dizzying moment, she'd thought there'd been a mistake. That Gabe hadn't died of the influenza at all, but some stranger instead. Mix-ups like that happened during and after a war, and she hadn't seen the body, since the coffin was nailed shut.

She'd stood there beside the road, with that letter in her hand, weeping and trembling so hard that a good quarter of an hour must have passed before she broke the seal and took out the thick fold of vellum pages inside. She'd come to her practical senses by then, but seeing the date at the top of the first page still made her bellow aloud to the empty countryside: March 17, 1918.

Gabe had still been well when he wrote that letter. He'd been looking forward to coming home. It was about time they added to their family, he'd said, and got cattle running on their part of the Triple M again.

She'd dropped to her knees, right there on the hard-packed dirt, too stricken to stand. The mule had wandered home, and presently Doss had come looking for her. Found her still clutching that letter to her chest, her throat so raw with sorrow that she couldn't speak.

He'd lifted her into his arms, Doss had, without saying a word. Set her on his horse, swung up behind her and taken her home.

"Hannah?"

She blinked, came back to the kitchen and the biscuit batter, the package of sausage in her hands.

Doss was standing beside her, smelling of snow and pine trees and man. He touched her arm.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She swallowed, nodded.

It was a lie, of course. Hannah hadn't been all right since the day Gabe went away to war. Like as not, she would never be all right again.

"You sit down," Doss said. "I'll attend to supper."

She sat, because the strength had gone out of her knees, and looked around blankly. "Where's Tobias?"

Doss washed his hands, opened the sausage packet, and dumped the contents into the big cast iron skillet waiting on the stove. "Upstairs," he answered.

Tobias had left the room without her knowing?

"Oh," she said, unnerved. Was she losing her mind? Had her sorrow pushed her not only to absent-minded distraction, but beyond the boundaries of ordinary sanity as well?

She considered the mysterious movement of her mother-in-law's teapot.

Adeptly, Doss rolled out the biscuit dough, cut it into circles with the rim of a glass. Lorelei McKettrick had taught her boys to cook, sew on their own buttons and make up their beds in the morning. You could say that for her, and a lot of other things, too.

Doss poured Hannah a mug of coffee, brought it to her. Started to rest a hand on her shoulder, then thought better of it and pulled back. "I know it's hard," he said.

Hannah couldn't look at him. Her eyes burned with tears she didn't want him to see, though she reckoned he knew they were there anyhow. "There are days," she said, in a whisper, "when I don't think I can go another step. But I have to, because of Tobias."

Doss crouched next to Hannah's chair, took both her hands in his own and looked up into her face. "There's been a hundred times," he said, "when I wished it was me in that grave up there on the hill, instead of Gabe. I'd give anything to take his place, so he could be here with you and the boy."

A sense of loss cut into Hannah's spirit like the blade of a new ax, swung hard. "You mustn't think things like that," she said, when she caught her breath. She pulled her hands free, laid them on either side of his earnest, handsome face, then quickly withdrew them. "You mustn't, Doss. It isn't right."

Just then Tobias clattered down the back stairs.

Doss flushed and got to his feet.

Hannah turned away, pretended to have an interest in the mail, most of which was for Holt and Lorelei, and would have to be forwarded to San Antonio.

"What's the matter, Ma?" Tobias spoke worriedly into the awkward silence. "Don't you feel good?"

She'd hoped the boy hadn't seen Doss sitting on his haunches beside her chair, but obviously he had.

"I'm fine," she said briskly. "I just had a splinter in my finger, that's all. I got it putting wood in the fire, and Doss took it out for me."

Tobias looked from her to his uncle and back again.

"Is that why you're making supper?" he asked Doss.

Doss hesitated. Like Gabe, he'd been raised to abhor any kind of lie, even an innocent one, designed to soothe a boy who'd lost his father and feared, in the depths of his dreams, losing his mother, too.

"I'm making supper," he said evenly, "because I can."

Hannah closed her eyes, opened them again.

"Set the table, please," Doss told Tobias.

Tobias hurried to the cabinet for plates and silverware.

Hannah met Doss's gaze across the dimly lit room.

A charge seemed to pass between them, like before, when Hannah had come back from getting the mail and found Tobias outside, in the teeth of a high-country winter, building a snow fort.

"It's too damn dark in this house," Doss said. He walked to the middle of the room, reached up, and pulled the beaded metal cord on the overhead light. The bare bulb glowed so brightly it made Hannah blink, but she didn't object.

Something in Doss's face prevented her from it.

Present Day

Travis had long since finished his coffee and left the house by the time Liam got up from his nap and came downstairs, tousle-haired and puffy-eyed from sleep.

"That boy was in my room again," he said. "He was sitting at the desk, writing a letter. Can I watch TV? There's a nice HD setup in that room next to the front door. A computer, too, with a big, flat-screen monitor."

Sierra knew about the fancy electronics, since she'd explored the house after Travis left. "You can watch TV for an hour," she said. "Hands off the computer, though. It doesn't belong to us."

Liam's shoulders slumped slightly. "I know how to use a computer, Mom," he said. "We had them at school."

Between rent, food and medical bills, Sierra had never been able to scrape together the money for a PC of their own. She'd used the one in the office of the bar she worked in, back in Florida. That was how Meg had first contacted her. "We'll get one," she said, "as soon as I find another job."

"My mailbox is probably full," Liam replied, unappeased. "All the kids in the Geek Program were going to write to me."

Sierra, in the midst of putting a package of frozen chicken breasts into the microwave to thaw, felt as though she'd been poked with a sharp stick. "Don't call it the Geek Program, please," she said.

Liam shrugged one shoulder. "Everybody else does."

"Go watch TV."

He went.

A rap sounded at the back door, and Sierra peered through the glass, since it was dark out, to see Travis standing on the back porch.

"Come in," she called, and headed for the sink to wash her hands.

Travis entered, carrying a fragrant bag of take-out food in one hand. The collar of his coat was raised against the cold, his hat brim pulled low over his eyes.

"Fried chicken," he said, lifting the bag as evidence.

Sierra paused, shut off the faucet, dried her hands. The timer on the microwave dinged. "I was about to cook," she said.

Travis grinned. "Good thing I got to you in time," he answered. "If you're anything like your sister, you shouldn't be allowed to get near a stove."

If you're anything like your sister.

The words saddened Sierra, settled bleak and heavy over her heart. She didn't know whether she was like her sister or not; until Meg had e-mailed her a smiling picture a few weeks ago, she wouldn't have recognized her on the street.

"Did I say something wrong?" Travis asked.

"No," Sierra said quickly. "It was—thoughtful of you to bring the chicken."

Liam must have heard Travis's voice, because he came pounding into the room, all smiles.

"Hey, Travis," he said.

"Hey, cowpoke," Travis replied.

"The computer's making a dinging noise," Liam reported.

Travis smiled, set the bag of chicken on the counter but made no move to take off his hat and coat. "Meg's got it set to do that, so she'll remember to check her e-mail when she's here," he said.

"Mom won't let me log on," Liam told him.

Travis glanced at Sierra, turned to Liam again. "Rules are rules, cowpoke," he said.

"Rules bite," Liam said.

"Ninety-five percent of the time," Travis agreed.

Liam recovered quickly. "Are you going to stay and eat with us?"

Travis shook his head. "I'd like that a lot, but I'm expected somewhere else for supper," he answered.

Liam looked sorely disappointed.

Sierra wondered where that "somewhere else" was, and with whom Travis would be sharing a meal, and was irritated with herself. It was none of her business, and besides, she didn't care what he did or who he did it with anyway. Not the least little bit.

"Maybe another time," Travis said.

Liam sighed and retreated to the study and his allotted hour of television.

"You shouldn't have," Sierra said, indicating their supper with a nod.

"It's your first night here," Travis answered, opening the door to leave. "Seemed like the neighborly thing to do."

"Thank you," Sierra said, but he'd already closed the door between them.

Travis started up his truck, just in case Sierra was listening for the engine, drove it around behind the barn and parked. After stopping to check on Baldy and the three other horses in his care, he shrugged down into the collar of his coat and slogged to his trailer.

The quarters were close, smaller than the closet off his master bedroom at home in Flagstaff, but he didn't need much space. He had a bed, kitchen facilities, a bathroom and a place for his laptop. It was enough.

More than Brody was ever going to have.

He took off his hat and coat and tossed them on to the built-in, padded bench that passed for a couch. He tried not to think about Brody, and in the daytime, he stayed busy enough to succeed. At night, it was another matter. There just wasn't enough to do after dark, especially out here in the boonies, once he'd nuked a frozen dinner and watched the news.

He thought about Sierra and the boy, in there in the big house, eating the chicken and fixings he'd picked up in the deli at the one and only supermarket in Indian Rock. He'd never intended to join them, since they'd just arrived and were settling in, but he could picture himself sitting down at that long table in the kitchen, just the same.

He rooted through his refrigerator, something he had to crouch to do, and chose between Salisbury steak, Salisbury steak and Salisbury steak.

While the sectioned plastic plate was whirling round and round in the lilliputian microwave that came with the trailer, he made coffee and remembered his last visit from Rance McKettrick. Widowed, Rance lived alone in the house his legendary ancestor, Rafe, had built for his wife, Emmeline, and their children, back in the 1880s. He had two daughters, whom he largely ignored.

"This place is just a fancy coffin," Rance had observed, in his blunt way, when he'd stepped into the trailer. "Brody's the one that's dead, Trav, not you."

Travis rubbed his eyes with a thumb and forefinger. Brody was dead, all right. No getting around that. Seventeen, with everything to live for, and he'd blown himself up in the back room of a slum house in Phoenix, making meth.

He looked into the window over the sink, saw his own reflection.

Turned away.

His cell phone rang, and he considered letting voice mail pick up, but couldn't make himself do it. If he'd answered the night Brody called...

He fished the thing out, snapped it open and said, "Reid."

"Whatever happened to 'hello'?" Meg asked.

The bell on the microwave rang, and Travis reached in to retrieve his supper, burned his hand and cursed.

She laughed. "Better and better."

"I'm not in the mood for banter, Meg," he replied, turning on the water with his free hand and then switching to shove his scorched fingers into the flow.

"You never are," she said.

"The horses are fine."

"I know. You would have called me if they weren't."

"Then what do you want?"

"My, my, we are testy tonight. I called, you big grouch, to ask about my sister and my nephew. Are they okay? How do they look? Sierra is so private, she's almost standoffish."

"You can say that again."

"Thank you, but in the interest of brevity, I won't."

"Since when do you give a damn about brevity?" Travis inquired, but he was grinning by then.

Once again Meg laughed. Once again Travis wished he'd been able to fall in love with her. They'd tried, the two of them, to get something going, on more than one occasion. Meg wanted a baby, and he wanted not to be alone, so it made sense. The trouble was, it hadn't worked.

There was no chemistry.

There was no passion.

They were never going to be anything more than what they were—the best of friends. He was mostly resigned to that, but in lonely moments, he ached for things to be different.

“Tell me about my sister,” Meg insisted.

“She's pretty,” Travis said. Real pretty, added a voice in his mind. “She's proud, and overprotective as hell of the kid.”

“Liam has asthma,” Meg said quietly. “According to Sierra, he nearly died of it a couple of times.”

Travis forgot his burned fingers, his Salisbury steak and his private sorrow. “What?”

Meg let out a long breath. “That's the only reason Sierra's willing to have anything to do with Mom and me. Mom put her on the company health plan and arranged for Liam to see a specialist in Flagstaff on a regular basis. In return, Sierra had to agree to spend a year on the ranch.”

Travis stood still, absorbing it all. “Why here?” he asked. “Why not with you and Eve in San Antonio?”

“Mom and I would love that,” Meg said, “but Sierra needs...distance. Time to get used to us.”

“Time to get used to two McKettrick women. So we're talking, say, the year 2050, give or take a decade?”

“Very funny. Sierra is a McKettrick woman, remember? She's up to the challenge.”

“She is definitely a McKettrick,” Travis agreed ruefully. And very definitely a woman. “How did you find her?”

“Mom tracked her and Hank down when Sierra was little,” Meg answered.

Travis dropped on to the edge of his bed, which was unmade. The sheets were getting musty, and every night, the pizza crumbs rubbed his hide raw. One of these days he was going to haul off and change them.

““Tracked her down?””

“Yes,” Meg said, with a sigh. “I guess I didn't tell you about that part.”

“I guess you didn't.” Travis had known about the kidnapping, how Sierra's father had taken off with her the day the divorce papers were served, and that the two of them had ended up in Mexico. “Eve knew, and she still didn't lift a finger to get her own daughter back?”

“Mom had her reasons,” Meg answered, withdrawing a little.

“Oh, well, then,” Travis retorted, “that clears everything up. What reason could she possibly have?”

“It's not my place to say, Trav,” Meg told him sadly. “Mom and Sierra have to work it all through first, and it might be a while before Sierra's ready to listen.”

Travis sighed, shoved a hand through his hair. “You're right,” he conceded.

Meg brightened again, but there was a brittleness about her that revealed more than she probably wanted Travis to know, close as they were. “So,” she said, “what would you say Mom's chances are? Of reconnecting with Sierra, I mean?”

“The truth?”

“The truth,” Meg said, without enthusiasm.

“Zero to zip. Sierra's been pleasant enough to me, but she's as stubborn as any McKettrick that ever drew breath, and that's saying something.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“You said you wanted the truth.”

“How can you be so sure Mom won't be able to get through to her?”

“It’s just a hunch,” Travis said.

Meg was quiet. Travis was famous for his hunches. Too bad he hadn’t paid attention to the one that said his little brother was in big trouble, and that Travis ought to drop everything and look for Brody until he found him.

“Look, maybe I’m wrong,” he added.

“What’s your real impression of Sierra, Travis?”

He took his time answering. “She’s independent to a fault. She’s built a wall around herself and the kid, and she’s not about to let anybody get too close. She’s jumpy, too. If it wasn’t for Liam, and the fact that she probably doesn’t have two nickels to rub together, she definitely wouldn’t be on the Triple M.”

“Damn,” Meg said. “We knew she was poor, but—”

“Her car gave out in the driveway as soon as she pulled in. I took a peek under the hood, and believe me, the best mechanic on the planet couldn’t resurrect that heap.”

“She can drive my Blazer.”

“That might take some convincing on your part. This is not a woman who wants to be obliged. It’s probably all she can do not to grab the kid and hop on the next bus to nowhere.”

“This is depressing,” Meg said.

Travis got up off the bed, peeled back the plastic covering his dinner, and poked warily at the faux meat with the tip of one finger. Talk about depressing.

“Hey,” he said. “Look on the bright side. She’s here, isn’t she? She’s on the Triple M. It’s a start.”

“Take care of her, Travis.”

“As if she’d go along with that.”

“Do it for me.”

“Oh, please.”

Meg paused, took aim, and scored a bull’s-eye. “Then do it for Liam.”

Chapter Four

1919

Doss left the house after supper, ostensibly to look in on the livestock one last time before heading upstairs to bed, leaving the dishwashing to Tobias and Hannah. He stood still in the dooryard, raising the collar of his coat against the wicked cold. Stars speckled the dark, wintry sky.

In those moments he missed Gabe with a piercing intensity that might have bent him double, if he wasn't McKettrick proud. That was what his mother called the quality, anyhow. In the privacy of his own mind, Doss named it stubbornness.

Thinking of his ma made his pa come to mind, too. He missed them almost as sorely as he did Gabe. His uncles, Rafe and Kade and Jeb, along with their wives, were all down south, around Phoenix, where the weather was more hospitable to their aging bones. Their sons, to a man, were still in the army, even though the war was over, waiting to be mustered out. Their daughters had all married, every one of them keeping the McKettrick name, and lived in places as far-flung as Boston, New York and San Francisco.

There was hardly a McKettrick left on the place, save himself and Hannah and Tobias. It deepened Doss's loneliness, knowing that. He wished everybody would just come back home, where they belonged, but it would have been easier to herd wild barn cats than that bunch.

Doss looked back toward the house. Saw the lantern glowing at the kitchen window. Smiled.

The moment he'd gone outside, Hannah must have switched off the bulb. She worried about running short of things, he'd noticed, even though she'd come from a prosperous family, and certainly married into one.

His throat tightened. He knew she'd been different before he brought Gabe home in a pine box, but then, they all had. Gabe's going left a hole in the fabric of what it meant to be a McKettrick, and not a tidy one, stitched at the edges. Rather, it was a jagged tear, and judging by the raw newness of his own grief, Doss had little hope of it ever mending.

Time heals, his mother had told him after they'd laid Gabe in the ground up there on the hill, with his Grandpa Angus and those that had passed after him, but she'd had tears in her eyes as she said it. As for his pa, well, he'd stood a long time by the grave. Stood there until Rafe and Kade and Jeb brought him away.

Doss thrust out a sigh, remembering. "Gabe," he said, under his breath, "Hannah says it's wrong of me, but I still wish it had been me instead of you."

He'd have given anything for an answer, but wherever Gabe was, he was busy doing other things. Maybe they had fishing holes up there in the sky, or cattle to round up and drive to market.

"Take care of Hannah and my boy," Gabe had told him, in that army infirmary, when they both knew there would be no turning the illness around. "Promise me, Doss."

Doss had swallowed hard and made that promise, but it was a hard one to keep. Hannah didn't seem to want taking care of, and every morning when Doss woke up, he was afraid this would be the day she'd decide to go back to her own people, up in Montana, and stay gone for good.

The back door opened, startling Doss out of his musings. He hesitated for a moment, then tramped in the direction of the barn, trying to look like a man bent on a purpose.

Hannah caught up, bundled into a shawl and carrying a lighted lantern in one hand.

"I think I'm going mad," she blurted out.

Doss stopped, looked down at her in puzzled concern. "It's the grief, Hannah," he told her gruffly. "It will pass."

"You don't believe that any more than I do," Hannah challenged, catching up with herself. The snow was deep and getting deeper, and the wind bit straight through to the marrow.

Doss moved to the windward side, to be a buffer for her. "I've got to believe it," he said. "Feeling this bad forever doesn't bear thinking about."

"I put the teapot away," Hannah said, her breath coming in puffs of white, "I know I put it away. But I must have gotten it out again, without knowing or remembering, and that scares me, Doss. That really scares me."

They reached the barn. Doss took the lantern from her and hauled open one of the big doors one-handed. It wasn't easy, since the snow had drifted, even in the short time since he'd left off feeding and watering the horses and the milk cow and that cussed mule Seesaw. The critter was a son of Doss's mother's mule, who'd borne the same name, and he was a son of something else, too.

"Maybe you're a mite forgetful these days," Doss said, once he'd gotten her inside, out of the cold. The familiar smells and sounds of the darkened barn were a solace to him—he came there often, even when he didn't have work to do, which was seldom. On a ranch, there was always work to do—wood to chop, harnesses to mend, animals to look after. "That doesn't mean you're not sane, Hannah."

Don't say it, he pleaded silently. Don't say you might as well take Tobias and head for Montana.

It was a selfish thought, Doss knew. In Montana, Hannah could live a city life again. No riding a mule five miles to fetch the mail. No breaking the ice on the water troughs on winter mornings, so the cattle and horses could drink. No feeding chickens and dressing like a man.

If Hannah left the Triple M, Doss didn't know what he'd do. First and foremost, he'd have to break his promise to Gabe, by default if not directly, but there was more to it than that. A lot more.

"There's something else, too," Hannah confided.

To keep himself busy, Doss went from stall to stall, looking in on sleepy horses, each one confounded and blinking in the light of his lantern. He was giving Hannah space, enough distance to get out whatever it was she wanted to say.

"What?" he asked, when she didn't speak again right away.

"Tobias. He just told me—he told me—"

Doss looked back, saw Hannah standing in the moonlit doorway, rimmed in silver, with one hand pressed to her mouth.

He went back to her. Set the lantern aside and took her by the shoulders. "What did he tell you, Hannah?"

"Doss, he's seeing things."

He tensed on the inside. Would have shoved a hand through his hair in agitation if he hadn't been wearing a hat and his ears weren't bound to freeze if he took it off. "What kind of things?"

"A boy." She took hold of his arm, and her grip was strong for such a small woman. It did curious things to him, feeling her fingers on him, even through the combined thickness of his coat and shirt. "Doss, Tobias says he saw a boy in his room."

Doss looked around. There was nothing but bleak, frozen land for miles around. "That's impossible," he said.

"You've got to talk to him."

"Oh, I'll talk to him, all right." Doss started for the house, so fixed on getting to Tobias that he forgot all about keeping Hannah sheltered from the wind. She had to lift her skirts to keep pace with him.

Present Day

"Tell me about the boy you saw in your room," Sierra said, when they'd eaten their fill of fried chicken, macaroni salad, mashed potatoes with gravy, and corn on the cob.

Liam's gaze was clear as he regarded her from his side of the long table. "He's a ghost," he replied, and waited, visibly expecting the statement to be refuted.

"Maybe an imaginary playmate?" Sierra ventured. Liam was a lonely little boy; their lifestyle had seen to that. After her father had died, drunk himself to death in a back-street cantina in San

Miguel, the two of them had wandered like gypsies. San Diego. North Carolina, Georgia, and finally Florida.

“There’s nothing imaginary about him,” Liam said staunchly. “He wears funny clothes, like those kids on those old-time shows on TV. He’s a ghost, Mom. Face it.”

“Liam—”

“You never believe anything I tell you!”

“I believe everything you tell me,” Sierra insisted evenly. “But you’ve got to admit, this is a stretch.” Again she thought of the teapot. Again she pushed the recollection aside.

“I never lie, Mom.”

She moved to pat his hand, but he pulled back. The set of his jaw was stubborn, and his gaze drilled into her, full of challenge. She tried again. “I know you don’t lie, Liam. But you’re in a strange new place and you miss your friends and—”

“And you won’t even let me see if they sent me e-mails!” he cried.

Sierra sighed, rested her elbows on the tabletop and rubbed her temples with the fingertips of both hands. “Okay,” she relented. “You can log on to the Internet. Just be careful, because that computer is expensive, and we can’t afford to replace it.”

Suddenly Liam’s face was alight. “I won’t break it,” he promised, with exuberance.

Sierra wondered if he’d just scammed her, if the whole boy-in-the-bedroom thing was a trick to get what he wanted.

In the next instant she was ashamed. Liam was direct to a fault. He believed he’d seen another child in his empty bedroom. She’d call his new doctor in Flagstaff in the morning, talk to the woman, see what a qualified professional made of the whole thing. She offered a silent prayer that her car would start, too, because the doctor was going to want to see Liam, pronto.

Meanwhile, Liam got to his feet and scrambled out of the room.

Sierra cleared away the supper mess, then followed him, as casually as she could, to the room at the front of the house.

He was already online.

“Just what I thought!” he crowed. “My mailbox is bulging.”

The TV was still on, a narrator dolefully describing the effects of a second ice age, due any minute. Run for the hills. Sierra shut it off.

“Hey,” Liam objected. “I was listening to that.”

Sierra approached the computer. “You’re only seven,” she said. “You shouldn’t be worrying about the fate of the planet.”

“Somebody’s got to,” Liam replied, without looking at her. “Your generation is doing a lousy job.” He was staring, as if mesmerized, into the computer screen. Its bluish-gray light flickered on the lenses of his glasses, making his eyes disappear. “Look! The whole Geek Group wrote to me!”

“I asked you not to—”

“Okay,” Liam sighed, without looking at her. “The brilliant children in the gifted program are engaging in communication.”

“That’s better,” Sierra said, sparing a smile.

“You’ve got a few e-mails waiting yourself,” Liam announced. He was already replying to the cybermissives, his small fingers ranging deftly over the keyboard. He’d skipped the hunt-and-peck method entirely, as had all the other kids in his class. Using a computer came naturally to Liam, almost as if he’d been born knowing how, and she knew this was a common phenomenon, which gave her some comfort.

“I’ll read them later,” Sierra answered. She didn’t have that many friends, so most of her messages were probably sales pitches of the penis-enlargement variety. How had she gotten on that kind of list? It wasn’t as if she visited porn sites or ordered battery-operated boyfriends online.

“They get to watch a real rocket launch!” Liam cried, without a trace of envy. “Wow!”

“Wow indeed,” Sierra said, looking around the room. According to Meg, it had originally been a study. Old books lined the walls on sturdy shelves, and there was a natural rock fireplace, too, with a fire already laid.

Sierra found a match on the mantelpiece, struck it and lit the blaze.

A chime sounded from the computer.

“Aunt Meg just IM’d you,” Liam said.

Where had he gotten this “Aunt Meg” thing? He’d never even met the woman in person, let alone established a relationship with her. “IM’d?” she asked.

“Instant Message,” Liam translated. “Guess you’d better check it out. Just make it quick, because I’ve still got a pile of mail to answer.”

Smiling again, Sierra took the chair Liam so reluctantly surrendered and read the message from Meg.

Travis tells me your car died. Use my Blazer. The keys are in the sugar bowl beside the teapot.

Sierra’s pride kicked in. Thanks, she replied, at a fraction of Liam’s typing speed, but I probably won’t need it. My car is just... She paused. Her car was just what? Old? tired, she finished, inspired.

The Blazer won’t run when I come back if somebody doesn’t charge up the battery. It’s been sitting too long, Meg responded quickly. She must have been as fast with a keyboard as Liam.

Is Travis going to report on everything I do? Sierra wrote. She made so many mistakes, she had to retype the message before hitting Send, and that galled her.

Yes, Meg wrote. Because I plan to nag every last detail out of him.

Sierra sighed. It won’t be that interesting, she answered, taking her time so she wouldn’t have to revise. She was out of practice, and if she hoped to land anything better than a waitressing job in Indian Rock, she’d better polish her computer skills.

Meg sent a smiley face, followed by, Good night, Sis. (I’ve always wanted to say that.)

Sierra bit her lower lip. Good night, she tapped out, and rose from the chair with a glance at the clock on the mantel above the now-snapping fire.

Why had she lit it? She was exhausted, and now she would either have to throw water on the flames or wait until they died down. The first method, of course, would make a terrible mess, so that was out.

“Hurry up and finish what you’re doing,” she told Liam, who had plopped in the chair again the moment Sierra got out of it. “Half an hour till bedtime.”

“I had a nap,” Liam reminded her, typing simultaneously.

“Finish,” Sierra repeated. With that, she left the study, climbed the stairs and went into Liam’s room to get his favorite pajamas from one of the suitcases. She meant to put them in the clothes dryer for a few minutes, warm them up.

Something drew her to the window, though. She looked down, saw that the lights were on in Travis’s trailer and his truck was parked nearby. Evidently, he hadn’t stayed long in town, or wherever he’d gone.

Why did it please her so much, knowing that?

1919

Hannah stood in the doorway of Tobias’s room, watching her boy sleep. He looked so peaceful, lying there, but she knew he had bad dreams sometimes. Just the night before, in the wee small hours, he’d crawled into bed beside her, snuggled as close as his little-boy pride would allow, and whispered earnestly that she oughtn’t die anytime soon.

She’d been so choked up, she could barely speak.

Now she wanted to wake him, hold him tight in her arms, protect him from whatever it was in his mind that made him see little boys that weren’t there.

He was lonely, that was all. He needed to be around other children. Way out here, he went to a one-room school, when it wasn't closed on account of snow, with only seven other pupils, all of whom were older than he was.

Maybe she should take him home to Montana. He had cousins there. They'd live in town, too, where there were shops and a library and even a moving-picture theater. He could ride his bicycle, come spring, and play baseball with other boys.

Hannah's throat ached. Gabe had wanted his son raised here, on the Triple M. Wanted him to grow up the way he had, rough-and-tumble, riding horses, rounding up stray cattle, part of the land. Of course, Gabe hadn't expected to die young—he'd meant to come home, so he and Hannah could fill that big house with children. Tobias would have had plenty of company then.

A tear slipped down Hannah's cheek, and she swatted it away. Straightened her spine.

Gabe was gone, and there weren't going to be any more children.

She heard Doss climbing the stairs, and wanted to move out of the doorway. He thought she was too fussy, always hovering over Tobias. Always trying to protect him.

How could a man understand what it meant to bear and nurture a child?

Hannah closed her eyes and stayed where she was.

Doss stopped behind her, uncertain. She could feel that, along with the heat and sturdy substance of his body.

"Leave the child to sleep, Hannah," he said quietly.

She nodded, closed Tobias's door gently and turned to face Doss there in the darkened hallway. He carried a book under one arm and an unlit lantern in his other hand.

"It's because he's lonesome," she said.

Doss clearly knew she was referring to Tobias's hallucination. "Kids make up playmates," he told her. "And being lonesome is a part of life. It's a valley a person has to go through, not something to run away from."

No McKettrick ever ran from anything. Doss didn't have to say it, and neither did she. But she wasn't a McKettrick, not by blood. Oh, she still wrote the word, whenever she had to sign something, but she'd stopped owning the name the day they put Gabe in the ground.

She wasn't sure why. He'd been so proud of it, like all the rest of them were.

"Do you ever wish you could live someplace else?" Hannah heard herself say.

"No," Doss said, so quickly and with such gravity that Hannah almost believed he'd been reading her mind. "I belong right here."

"But the others—your uncles and cousins—they didn't stay...."

"Ask any one of them where home is," Doss answered, "and they'll tell you it's the Triple M."

Hannah started to speak, then held her tongue. Nodded. "Good night, Doss," she said.

He inclined his head and went on to his own room, shut himself away.

Hannah stood alone in the dark for a long time.

She'd been so happy on the Triple M when Gabe was alive, and even after he'd gone into the army, because she'd never once doubted that he'd return. Come walking up the path with a duffel bag over one shoulder, whistling. She'd rehearsed that day a thousand times in her mind—pictured herself running to meet him, throwing herself into his arms.

It was never going to happen.

Without him, she might as well have been alone on the barren landscape of the moon.

Her eyes filled.

She walked slowly to the end of the hall, into the room where Gabe had brought her on their wedding night. He'd been conceived and born in the big bed there, just as Tobias had. As so many other babes would have been, if only Gabe had lived.

Hannah didn't undress after she closed the door behind her. She didn't let her hair down and brush it, like usual, or wash her face at the basin on the bureau.

Instead, she sat down in Lorelei's rocking chair and waited. Just waited.

For what, she did not know.

Present Day

After Liam had gone to bed, Sierra went back downstairs to the computer and scanned her e-mail. When she spotted Allie Douglas-Fletcher's return address, she wished she'd waited until morning. She was always stronger in the mornings.

Allie was Adam's twin sister. Liam's aunt. After Adam was murdered, while on assignment in South America, Allie had been inconsolable, and she'd developed an unhealthy fixation for her brother's child.

After taking a deep breath and releasing it slowly, Sierra opened the message. Typically, there was no preamble. Allie got right to the point.

The guest house is ready for you and Liam. You know Adam would want his son to grow up right here in San Diego, Sierra. Tim and I can give Liam everything—a real home, a family, an education, the very best medical care. We're willing to make a place for you, too, obviously. If you won't come home, at least tell us you arrived safely in Arizona.

Sierra sat, wooden, staring at the stark plea on the screen. Although Allie and Adam had been raised in relative poverty, both of them had done well in life. Adam had been a photojournalist for a major magazine; he and Sierra had met when he did a piece on San Miguel.

Allie ran her own fund-raising firm, and her husband was a neurosurgeon. They had everything—except what they wanted most. Children.

You can't have Liam, Sierra cried, in the silence of her heart. He's mine.

She flexed her fingers, sighed, and hit Reply. Allie was a good person, just as Adam had been, for all that he'd told Sierra a lie that shook the foundations of the universe. Adam's sister sincerely believed she and the doctor could do a better job of raising Liam than Sierra could, and maybe they were right. They had money. They had social status.

Tears burned in Sierra's eyes.

Liam is well. We're safe on the Triple M, and for the time being, we're staying put.

It was all she could bring herself to say.

She hit Send and logged off the computer.

The fire was still flourishing on the hearth. She got up, crossed the room, pushed the screen aside to jab at the burning wood with a poker. It only made the flames burn more vigorously.

She kicked off her shoes, curled up in the big leather chair and pulled a knitted afghan around her to wait for the fire to die down.

The old clock on the mantel tick-tocked, the sound loud and steady and almost hypnotic.

Sierra yawned. Closed her eyes. Opened them again.

She thought about turning the TV back on, just for the sound of human voices, but dismissed the idea. She was so tired, she was going to need all her energy just to go upstairs and tumble into bed. There was none to spare for fiddling with the television set.

Again, she closed her eyes.

Again, she opened them.

She wondered if the lights were still on in Travis's trailer.

Closed her eyes.

Was dragged down into a heavy, fitful sleep.

She knew right away that she was dreaming, and yet it was so real.

She heard the clock ticking.

She felt the warmth of the fire.

But she was standing in the ranch house kitchen, and it was different, in subtle ways, from the room she knew.

She was different.

Her eyes were shut, and yet she could see clearly.

A bare light bulb dangled overhead, giving off a dim but determined glow.

She looked down at herself, the dream-Sierra, and felt a wrench of surprise.

She was wearing a long woolen skirt. Her hands were smaller—chapped and work worn—someone else's hands.

“I'm dreaming,” she insisted to herself, but it didn't help.

She stared around the kitchen. The teapot sat on the counter.

“Now what's that doing there?” asked this other Sierra. “I know I put it away. I know for sure I did.”

Sierra struggled to wake up. It was too intense, this dream. She was in some other woman's body, not her own. It was sinewy and strong, this body. She felt the heartbeat, the breath going in and out. Felt the weight of long hair, pinned to the back of her head in a loose chignon.

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