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Shirley Hailstock

Summer on Kendall Farm



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Homes, and families, aren't restored overnight Jason Kendall grew up being treated like the poor relation he was. And after a devastating betrayal, he fled under a cloud of scandal. Now he needs a place to raise his four-year-old adopted son, and Kendall Farm is the only home he's ever known. The problem is, his old homestead has a new owner. Kelly Ashton sank every last cent into restoring the Maryland horse farm. Hiring the handsome engineer would be a huge mistake. But after five years away, Jace, the prodigal son, is back. To fight for his little boy's future. And Kelly could lose the home she loves...unless she and the single father can create a new one together.

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"We've been here before," Kelly said.

Jace stepped back and reached down to help her. "Yes, we have."

As she stood, her hands went to his shoulders and his caught her around the waist. Jace didn't release her immediately. Kelly looked up at him, her hands still on his shoulders.

"And we decided you wouldn't confuse me."

"Not we," he said. "You decided."

Jace drew her closer to him. His head dipped and he kissed her. She didn't try to stop him. His mouth was sweet on hers. It had been a long time since someone had held her like this. In his arms, Kelly felt safe. She let herself relax.

She would let herself enjoy the special moment, for now.

[Dear Reader,](#)

Kendall Farm is close to my heart. The place is fictitious, but in my mind it's as real as my own home. Like our heroine, Kelly, I know every inch of the farm and the grounds. Jace's family has owned it for generations. He popped into my consciousness, riding on horseback, and insisted that I tell his story. He hasn't had a wonderful life, but now he has an adopted son, Ari, and he's willing to sacrifice everything for the child.

Coming home to Kendall Farm, and discovering the place has been sold and the new owner is refusing to return it to the family, Jace can think of nothing except running. But not this time. This time he finds something worth staying for.

Happy endings,

Shirley Hailstock

Summer on Kendall Farm

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SHIRLEY HAILSTOCK began her writing life as a lover of reading. She likes nothing better than to find a quiet corner where she can get lost in a book, explore new worlds and visit places she never expected to see. As an author, she can not only visit those places, but she can be the heroine of her own stories. The author of over thirty novels and novellas, including her electronic editions, Shirley has received numerous awards, including the Waldenbooks Bestselling Romance Award and

the RT Book Reviews Career Achievement Award. Shirley's books have appeared on BlackBoard, Essence and Library Journal bestseller lists. She is a past president of Romance Writers of America.

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To my sister Marilyn, forever in my heart.

[Contents](#)

[Cover](#)

[Back Cover Text](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Dear Reader](#)

[Title Page](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Dedication](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[Copyright](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

SWEAT TRICKLED DOWN Jason Kendall's neck. It had been years since he'd fled this same road, the wind behind his Corvette creating a small hurricane as he vowed to never set foot on his family's property again. Coming back to Windsor Heights, a town forty miles west of Baltimore, wasn't easy and the closer he got to the farm, the harder it was to hold the memories at bay.

Rain pelted the car windows like large splats of paint falling from the sky. Wiper blades flipped back and forth, clearing the windshield a second at a time, giving Jace a glimpse of a road that appeared smaller than he remembered. It was a long tree-lined ribbon without lights that led to the house at Kendall Farm. Jace had thought of it as the big house when he lived there. The Kendall, as it was known by the locals, was a world unto itself, but it was a world that was stuck in time. His half brother, Sheldon, made sure of that.

Thinking of Sheldon, Jace almost laughed. Wouldn't he be surprised to find the family's black sheep on his doorstep?

Jason Kendall had grown up here. Maybe grown up was too strong a term for what had happened to him. He supposed he could say it was the place that made him into the man he was today. He was

proud, resourceful, cynical and steadfast. Although maturity had curbed his urge to throw a punch as a solution to an argument, he was always ready to stand his ground.

The Kendall was what the farm had been called since the end of the Civil War when Jameson Kendall returned from the conflict to find himself the lone survivor of his family, the others having succumbed to disease or died on the battlefield. It took him five years of hard work to bring it back to a profitable enterprise. As it passed from generation to generation, it had been well maintained but virtually unchanged.

Peering through the rain-soaked window, Jace tried to spot the house. He'd last seen the imposing structure five years earlier, vowing with every fiber of his being that he wouldn't ever return.

But here he was, driving up the narrow road, returning not as the Prodigal son, but still as a son, even if he was illegitimate and merely tolerated. He had a reason for coming back and it outweighed his emotions.

Would the place be the same? Rain obscured his vision, along with the column of trees that lined the driveway. So much had changed in his life in the intervening years. He was more responsible. And he wasn't as angry, yet no one would call him humble.

He hadn't let Sheldon know he was coming. Why should he? Jace frowned. The Kendall was as much his as it was his half brother's, even if their father had referred to Jace in his will as a distant relative. How distant were direct genes? The same blood that flowed through Sheldon's veins flowed through Jace's, "tainted" though it might be.

Jace gripped the steering wheel strongly enough to crush the hard plastic. What would Sheldon say when he saw him? Would he throw him off the property now that he was the sole owner? Jace didn't put it past his brother. The two had never been real brothers, even saying they were friends would be a stretch, but underneath that tough exterior, Jace had the feeling Sheldon wasn't totally indifferent to him. He was simply his father's son.

When the jumbo jet had set down at Dulles Airport, it had been daylight outside. But quickly the light had gone, giving way to the dark, rainy sky. Lightning flashed and in that instant, Jace saw the house. Unconsciously his foot eased off the accelerator and the car rolled to a gentle stop. Windshield wipers tossed water back and forth as Jace stared at the white house that shimmered through the raindrops.

The house grew larger as he approached it. The six-thousand-square-foot structure had sat on five hundred acres for over a century. The other five hundred that comprised the original property boundary was sold during the Depression, but the majority was still intact. Jace remembered times when all six bedrooms had been filled with guests, when the ballroom was bright with music and he couldn't wait to get to the horses in the back stables.

The road ended in a semicircle in front of the house. For a moment Jace only looked at it. Age didn't show on the old homestead. The pristine white color he remembered was as fresh and new as if the paint job had been completed yesterday. The five-bar fence he'd climb over as a boy was as strong as it had been when he sat atop a horse and raced the wind. The giant lawn, manicured and welcoming even in the darkness, led to the front door.

He let out a relieved breath. Looking over his shoulder, Jace checked on Ari, his four-year-old son sleeping in the backseat. Jace smiled, thinking Ari could sleep through a war. It was because of him that Jace was here. Ari needed a quiet, private place and better medical care than he was getting in South America. So Jace was back on American soil.

He got out of the car. Instead of climbing the front stairs, he stood looking at the house, oblivious of the water drenching him. He could smell freshly cut grass with the faint hint of horseflesh over the rain. He hadn't ridden in years, but he remembered sitting in the saddle and racing across the grounds with Sheldon shouting at him to slow down. Not that his half brother was concerned about him. He didn't want the horse to suffer a fall.

A smile came easily to Jace. Yet he never thought he'd miss the Kendall. But he had. It wasn't his brother or father that he missed, but the grooms, the horses, the races and the few people he'd become friends with in town. He missed riding, challenging the wind as he edged the horses faster and faster. He missed jumping fences and even the splash of dirty water and flying debris that hit him in the face. He missed the silent rush of exhilaration for that tiny space of time when both he and his steed were airborne. Knowing there would be a reprimand at the end of the ride didn't stop Jace.

Rain smacked his head and shoulders, soaking through his clothes, breaking the memory that held him in place. Quickly, he moved around the car and lifted the still-sleeping Ari onto his shoulder. Taking the wide steps up to the porch, he carried the boy and stopped in front of the century-old door. Jace reached into his pocket and pulled out a key ring he hadn't done more than glance at in ages. He pushed a gold-colored key into the lock. It resisted his effort to turn.

Shifting Ari, Jace tried again, and again the key would not line up with the inside tumblers and release the lock. "Well, it's been five years," he said aloud. He supposed Sheldon had changed the locks in that time. Stepping back, he rang the doorbell. Inside he heard the soft sound of it chiming. Behind him thunder and lightning cut the sky in quick succession.

Peering through the side windows, he noted that other things had changed, too. The runner that led from the door through to the kitchen at the back was gone. A new floor of polished oak gleamed in the semidarkness.

Jace waited several seconds before ringing the bell again. Ari weighed about forty pounds, but he was getting heavy. It was well after midnight and maybe Sheldon and Laura were asleep. If his brother was following their father's method of housekeeping, any help they had would have left hours ago.

Suddenly, a light went on inside the foyer. Jace squinted as the one above his head illuminated at virtually the same moment. Ari squirmed, turning his face toward Jace's neck. Resettling himself, he was asleep without even opening his eyes.

"May I help you?" a voice said through the heavy door.

"You could open the door." Jace peered through the beveled glass trying to see whether it was Laura or someone else.

"Who are you?" she asked. "And what do you want?"

"I'm Jason Kendall and I live here."

There was a long pause before Jace heard the door locks clicking and finally the oval-glass door was pulled open. The light from both the porch and the foyer fell on the woman standing before him. Jace gasped.

"Laura," he whispered, taking a step backward. He thought he was prepared to see her again, but he wasn't.

"I'm not Laura."

Jace stared at her face. He frowned. She wasn't Laura. He blinked several times. This woman only looked slightly like her. Her hair was red with unkempt tendrils that had come loose from the braid that disappeared down her back. Laura, on the other hand, never had a lock of hair out of place.

The young woman appeared weary and tired, wearing exercise pants and a sweatshirt that came to her knees. "I'm Kelly Ashton. You'd better come out of the rain."

Stepping inside the door was like going back in time. Even though much of what he saw was different, the faint aroma of furniture polish triggered memories he thought were long dead.

Jace brushed passed her and walked several feet into the foyer. The only sounds he heard were his own footsteps as he crossed the floor. The place could have been empty. "Who are you?" he asked as he went into the living room and laid Ari on the sofa. He stood up, taking in the decor of the room. It was completely changed. Laura had probably redecorated. Jace could smell the remnants of a fire that was smoldering in the grate. Even though it was May, the nights in Maryland at this elevation

could be nippy. Pulling an afghan that was lying on the back of the sofa over the boy, he turned to examine the woman standing in the doorway.

“Well?” he asked.

“Well what? I told you my name is Kelly Ashton and I live here now.”

“You what? Where is Sheldon? Has Laura divorced him? Taken him for all she could get?” Jace could hear the cynicism in his voice. Try as he might, he couldn’t remove it when it came to the topic of Laura.

There was silence for a long moment. Then Kelly shook her head.

Jace could see she was a little nervous. He didn’t understand why. Who was she? “So, where is my brother?” Jace grimaced. Saying Sheldon’s name always left a bad taste in his mouth.

“I think we’d better talk.” She stepped back, indicating they should go to another room. Checking Ari one more time, he left his son and followed her.

She went through to the kitchen and pulled open the refrigerator. Without asking, she made him a roast beef sandwich and poured a large glass of orange juice. Jace hadn’t realized how hungry he was until she set the food in front of him. Taking a seat at a huge table that hadn’t been there five years ago, he took a bite of the sandwich.

“I don’t know where your brother is,” she began.

“Then why are you living in our house?” Jace asked between mouthfuls.

“It’s no longer your house,” she said quietly.

“Excuse me?” He stopped eating, nearly choking on the orange juice.

“I own the Kendall. I bought it a couple of years ago.”

“What?” he shouted.

“The house was in receivership and I—”

“What’s receivership?” he interrupted.

“There were liens against it. Unpaid taxes. Your brother couldn’t afford to keep up. He was forced to sell.”

“He can’t do that.” The words burst from Jace.

The woman delivering them sat calmly across from him. She waited a moment, giving him time to calm down.

“I know this is difficult for you to hear. You’ve been away a long time.”

“I’m fine,” he said, finishing the sandwich before standing up.

“I was told the property was for sale and I bought it.”

“Just like that?”

“Not quite. It took a while to pull my assets together, but I managed.”

Jace noticed her eyes were fiery, but her voice remained steady. She was good at holding her emotions in check.

“Where is my brother?” Jace heard the anger in his voice. He and Sheldon had never been on the best of terms, but he had no business selling the house without at least consulting Jace.

“I don’t know,” she said, and Jace realized he’d asked the question before.

He tried to remember her name. The red hair made him think of Laura. It came to him. *Kelly*.

“There was no reason for him to be involved in the closing. The state had already taken the house and grounds. I don’t know where he went once the sale was complete. I heard rumors that he moved out of the state.”

Jace hung his head. The pressure of the past few days suddenly came down on him. He and Ari had left Colombia in the midst of political and social turmoil. Ari had asthma and Jace’s jobs were often in places that aggravated his condition. He’d watched the child struggling to breathe and knew the child needed better medical care. But the other reason for them to leave Tumaco was the drug war that had broken out nearby. For their own protection, it was time to go. Jace made the decision in a rush of packing, discarding furniture and settling his job. Soon he and Ari had boarded a plane

and flown to Mexico. Then on to Washington, DC, where he rented a car and ended their journey at the Kendall. Jace had assumed he could bring the boy home despite his brother's treatment of Jace. He assumed he and his son would have a place to stay.

What would happen to them now? Ari had already lost his mother. He was too young to remember her or her sacrifice to save him. Jace formally adopted the boy, going through a well-run program that advocated for children. He was the only parent Ari had ever known.

Jace thought of his own mother. It had been a long while since he remembered her. She made sacrifices for him, loved him unconditionally, the way he'd come to love Ari. Losing her was painful. It took years of grieving before he could think of her without tears.

He couldn't go to the home they'd had before he came to live at the Kendall. There was nothing there. They'd lived in an apartment in Albany, New York. When his father came to get him, he'd thrown out everything in the apartment. All Jace saved were a few pictures and the jewelry the hospital returned to him. In this he and Ari were nearly the same. Jace had a photo of Ari's mother that he'd taken from the apartment where she had lived.

Ari had no memory of his mother and Jace didn't know if knowing or not knowing was better. He supposed time would tell.

Jace didn't have that much money. Most of it had been spent getting him and Ari to the States. He'd counted on everything at the Kendall being the same. It couldn't be true, he told himself. Sheldon couldn't have sold the house without telling him. Even with the way things were left between them, Jace should have been told. Maybe he could have helped. He couldn't, but Sheldon didn't know that and he never asked.

"What about Laura? Do you know anything about her?" Jace changed the subject.

Jace assumed Kelly's hesitation meant that she knew the history behind Laura and himself. At least she knew the rumors.

"I'm s-sorry to be the one to tell you this," Kelly stuttered. "But I'm afraid she died two years ago."

Jace was stunned. Numbness took over his body. He needed someplace to go. Pacing in the spacious kitchen didn't seem far enough away from the news. He didn't think of Laura often, but he never imagined her dead. Before deciding to come home, Jace had basically folded up the memories of his former time at the Kendall and placed them in a safe corner of his mind, never to be revisited. But life wouldn't let him keep that promise to himself. The memories had been opened as he watched Ari limp across the floor of their tiny apartment in Colombia. Ari loved to climb. Two weeks ago he was running through some trees when he tripped and twisted his foot. The limp was better than it had been. In another few weeks hopefully it would be gone. He looked thin and pale. Jace made the decision to return to Maryland once the shootings started in their neighborhood, and in so doing, to bring Laura and his brother back into his life.

Laura had been perfect for Jace, or so he thought. And that should have been his first clue that life was never going to end with happily-ever-after. But Jason Kendall was too blinded by Laura's beauty to see that their relationship was already skidding.

It was a wonderful wedding. The bride wore white and had the appropriate amount of mist in her eyes. The groom beamed and the best man—well the best man sat in the audience, witnessing the nuptials between his brother and his former fiancée, feeling like every eye in the huge church wasn't on the bride and groom, but trained with pity on him.

Tucking his hands behind his back, Jace stared at the darkness outside the windows. It was like looking through a time portal, viewing the day he'd met Laura Whitmore and how that had altered the course of his future.

He closed his eyes, failing to block it out.

"Hullo," she had said. It was the first word she'd uttered and it had that deep, sexy sound of a 1930s screen star. He was Jason then. He wouldn't be called Jace for several years. Twenty years old,

as green as they come, and just out of college, Jace was ready to conquer the world. Laura looked as if she'd recently stepped off the pages of a fashion magazine—tall, willowy, with dark red hair that shadowed one side of her face and dipped over her shoulder playing hide and seek with one of her breasts.

Jason had been peering at the sky as he headed for the concession stand. The Firebirds had just flown overhead and most of the patrons of the fall air show were watching their aerial exercises. Unaware that he was close to someone, Jason and Laura collided. Instinctively, his hands came out to steady her. He felt her curves and the softness of her waist. No woman had ever claimed his attention as instantly as she had. He could feel his breath catch and electricity snake through his fingers and up his arms.

“Hello.” He only managed to get the one word out, because his eyes were too busy taking in a face more lovely than any he'd seen before. Her eyes were on him, too. Admiring. He shifted his position and glanced away, not wanting her to read the thoughts that were dominant in his head. He probably apologized for walking into her, but no memory of the exchange came to him.

Jason introduced himself then and took the hand Laura offered. And that's where it had begun.

“Have you ever wanted to fly one of those?” she asked later as they'd strolled about the grounds, inspecting the planes on the airfield. She sipped from a bottle of water that hung from a strap over her shoulder.

“What guy hasn't?” Jason answered. “To control all that power and have the freedom of the sky, it's a dream come true.”

Dream come true. Today Jace sneered at the irony of the phrase. He thought Laura was the beginning and end of everything he'd searched for in life. From then on, even though she lived in the District of Columbia, and had worked as a researcher for the Air Force for the past two years and he lived in Maryland, a few hours from her, he pursued her.

For them, everything seemed to fit. Neither could see beyond the other, at least he thought that was true for both of them, until that night six weeks after they met, when he brought her home to introduce her to his family. Little did he know that a simple dinner with them would be another turning point in his life. That the fabric of a relationship Jason would have sworn couldn't be ripped, was shredded.

That was the night Laura met Sheldon.

Looking back on it, Jace should have realized. His fire with her had flashed fast and burned bright, but it couldn't match the inferno that surrounded her and his older sibling.

Jason stayed around until their wedding, most of it he couldn't remember the next day or any day since. They left for their honeymoon and he left for parts unknown. He still wasn't sure to this day where he went or what happened to him. Six months later he emerged from a bottle of vodka on the seedy side of some town near Athens in Greece. With no money, no friends and only the sour taste of stale liquor in his mouth, he headed out to find work.

He looked like a homeless drunk. He *was* a homeless drunk. His clothes were dirty and torn and he had difficulty speaking the language. Eventually, Jason found a church, a place where he got a meal. His stomach had growled all day and as soon as he entered the dimly lit shelter and smelled the coffee, he thought he'd gone to heaven.

He speculated how long it had been since he'd eaten. If he ate anything, would it stay down? Sitting at a plain wooden table he ate a little rice and lamb and had another cup of the heavy mud-like coffee.

Jason kept his head down, speaking to no one and likewise no one spoke to him. The coffee was a bottomless cup and it seemed his thirst was unquenchable. He drank so much of the stuff that he thought it would have cured him for a lifetime of ever drinking the liquid again. But later, he discovered an acquired taste for it.

That night he slept in an alley and in the morning, nudged by a not-so-friendly constable, continued his search for a job. He washed up in the sea and, turning his only shirt inside out, did the best he could to look presentable. He got hired washing dishes for half the usual rate, but he couldn't be picky. Meals came with his wages. It wasn't much, but enough to pay for a room for the night and a hot shower. After a week, Jace signed on to a freighter. He didn't care where it was going, east or west didn't matter. Eventually he would get back to the States. What he hadn't expected was to end up fighting for his life in the middle of a South American drug war. But that's where he found Ari. And for the child's sake he would do it all again.

But there was one thing he would never do again. No woman would ever make him feel the way Laura had. She was dead and so was anything that surrounded his feelings for her or any other woman.

"When did she die?" he asked, coming out of the years that bound his old life to this one.

"She died just before your brother lost the house."

Kelly's voice was soft and kind. He wasn't sure he deserved her consideration given how he'd landed here with Ari.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"When I left she was so active, so alive."

"You might talk to some of her friends. I didn't know them."

Jace walked to the window. He looked out on the darkness. "I didn't expect this," he said, more to himself than to Kelly. "I'm not sure what we do now." He turned back to her. "Do you mind if I just rest awhile before making any decisions?"

CHAPTER TWO

A THOUSAND THINGS went through Kelly's mind as she watched Jason Kendall staring through the window. She'd seen all the signs before. He was carrying a torch for his brother's wife. Kelly had lived in Windsor Heights all her life, except for the five years she'd spent in New York after college. She'd heard conflicting versions of the story about Jason Kendall and his brother's wife. You couldn't live in Windsor Heights and not be fascinated by the people living at the Kendall, especially when they were acting less than perfect. And with Jason that was the norm.

Kelly had seen Jason at infrequent times. He always seemed to be away. Kelly doubted he would recognize her.

"What about the child?" she asked. The boy he'd carried in was small and dark, with no resemblance to Jace that she could see in the few seconds she'd glanced at his sleeping figure. "What's his name?"

"Ari. Short for Aristotle."

"Greek," she smiled. "How long have you two been traveling?"

"A couple of days," Jace said. "And he's not Greek."

She stood up. She admitted she shouldn't do this, but she was going to. If Jace had been alone, she'd send him to the nearest hotel, but she couldn't have him waking up a child and taking him out in the rain. And she did know him. If knowing his reputation and living within spitting distance of his home counted for anything, then she did know him. Almost.

"I can offer you a bed for the night. Tomorrow you'll need to make other arrangements."

He didn't say anything, only stared at her.

Kelly couldn't figure out what he was thinking. She felt a little strange. This had been his house before it was hers, but it *was* hers now. And none of the Kendalls had any claim on it.

Maybe Jace wanted to leave right now. Though he obviously didn't know where his brother was, maybe he had friends in Windsor Heights he could go to. The hour was late, and from what she'd discerned no one knew he was coming back tonight.

"Thank you," he finally said. "We'd appreciate that."

Kelly moved when he spoke. Starting for the living room, she glanced over her shoulder to see him following her.

“If you have pajamas for him, you should get them. I’ll take him to one of the guest rooms.” She stopped, realizing Jason didn’t know where the guest rooms were. When he lived here they might not have been guest rooms.

“I’ll find you,” he said, understanding her thoughts.

Kelly stopped at the door to the living room and watched as Jace continued to the foyer. She went inside and kneeled in front of the boy. He was still asleep, his body curled into a fetal position. She watched him, trying to determine if there was any resemblance to the man she’d just spent time with in her kitchen. Although Ari was a beautiful child, again she found no features common to him and Jason Kendall. Lifting the child and the afghan Jason had covered him with, she found him lighter in weight than she thought he should be, but still heavy for her. She tried to put him on her shoulder, how Jace had held him, but he slipped down her body and she nearly sat him back on the sofa.

“Here, let me,” Jace said, coming to her rescue. In two strides he was by her side and taking the small bundle from her arms. He had set a small suitcase on the floor. It took a moment for them to exchange arms and legs. Kelly smelled the rain on Jace. The need to lean in closer and inhale deeply caught her off guard. Quickly, she lifted the suitcase, giving herself something to do to ward off the possibility that she might let her mind go where it wanted to. She turned and led them up the stairs, walking faster than usual.

She hadn’t thought about Jace in a while. All her energy was used up renovating the house and grounds. There were nights when she’d walk about the property and remember seeing him recklessly riding a horse over the jumping course. The old horse-racing track was farther away from the main house. Kelly thought Jace used it to annoy his brother.

He’d changed a lot. When she opened the door she would not have known him if he hadn’t given his name. The boyish good looks had been replaced with a rugged worldliness and an unhappiness that seemed to ooze from his pores. His body was solid, however. She’d felt that when he’d taken Ari from her grasp. His skin was tanned so he must have been outside a lot. The one thing he still had was the intensity that she had recognized as a teenager when she hung on the back fence and watched him ride.

Reaching the smallest guest room, Kelly switched on the light as she went inside. Rushing to the bed, she pulled the covers back and Jason laid the boy on the sheets. As Jason reached for the suitcase, she stepped out of his way and then left the two of them alone.

He came out of the room several minutes later. Kelly had checked the adjoining room to make sure it was clean and there were towels in the bathroom.

“You can sleep in this room,” she directed him.

“That’s all right. I’ll sleep here with Ari.”

“The two rooms are connected through the bathroom,” she told him. “It’s more comfortable in there. If Ari wakes up and calls for you, you’ll be close by. I’m sure, after such a long time traveling, you want someplace comfortable to sleep.”

“As tired as I am, I could sleep standing up,” he said in a road-weary voice.

“That won’t be necessary,” she told him with a smile. “Good night.”

Kelly left him. She turned to go back downstairs. It was late and she needed to turn off the lights and go to bed herself.

“Kelly,” Jason called.

She paused and turned.

“Thank you,” he finally said.

Kelly didn’t want to look at him. Her emotions were involved. Though clearly, to find out that he’d lost both his home and the woman he once loved in the same day was pushing him to the limit. It was a lot for anyone to handle.

“Good night,” was all Kelly could think to say. “It’s only one night,” Kelly whispered to herself. She owned the house now and no matter what stories she’d heard about Jason Kendall and how his father and brother had treated him, it was only *one* night.

* * *

SUNSHINE BLAZED THROUGH the huge windows that looked out on the back lawn. Kelly opened her eyes and squinted at the brightness. After all the rain the night before, the light seemed especially brilliant. She loved waking to sunshine and always left the drapes open. But it wasn’t the light that woke her today. The feeling of being watched encroached upon her sleep.

She was startled to see Ari’s eyes, barely higher than the coverlet, peering at her.

“Am I dead?” he asked.

Kelly blinked, pushing herself up on her elbows to see his entire face.

“Ari, why would you think you’re dead?”

“Everything is so white. And you’re an angel. Only an angel would know my name,” he answered in childlike logic.

Kelly looked at her bedroom. The cover was white, the rug was white and the walls were white. The totally white room had splashes of color in the throw pillows, and gold accents that Kelly had used to decorate the space. “Well, thank you,” she said. “But I am not an angel.”

“This is what the priest said heaven was like, except...” He trailed off.

“Except what?” Kelly prompted.

“Except for your wings.” He tried to look behind her as if she was hiding her angel wings within the folds of the bed cover.

Kelly laughed. “You’re not dead, Ari.”

He frowned and looked around the room, up at the ceiling, at her bed, and then back at her. “This isn’t heaven?”

“This is my bedroom.”

“All by yourself?” His eyes opened wide.

“I’m afraid so.”

“Wow!” he said. “Is my room for only me?” He pointed to himself as his boy-soprano voice went up hopefully at the end of the sentence.

Kelly sat fully up. She couldn’t tell the child he wouldn’t be staying. She’d only given Jason Kendall and his son a room for the night. Today they had to go.

“Where’s your father?” she asked instead of answering his question.

“I don’t know. Is he dead, too?”

“Ari, you’re not dead and neither is your dad.”

“What is this place? My dad said we were coming to his old house. This doesn’t look like a old house.”

Kelly stopped herself from correcting the boy’s grammar. “Actually, this is a very old house. It was built a long time ago.”

“Before I was born?”

Kelly smiled. “Before your father was born,” she told him. “People will want to come and see it when it’s complete. A lot of work has been done to make it look like it did back then.”

“Did you do it?”

She smiled. She’d forgotten that kids ask a lot of questions. “Yes, Ari, I did a lot of it.” Pushing her arms into the robe that matched her nightgown, she asked, “Are you hungry?”

He quickly began bobbing his head up and down.

“Good, then you can’t be dead. Because dead people don’t get hungry.”

He seemed to be weighing the truthfulness of that in his four-year-old mind. After a moment he nodded and she guessed he agreed with her.

“How about we go and get something to eat?” Kelly didn’t wait for an answer. She offered her hand and he took it. The two went downstairs to the kitchen.

“Wow,” he said again as they entered the spacious kitchen. “I never saw a room this big.”

Kelly was getting a picture of how they must have lived. Their home was probably a lot smaller in comparison. The house at the Kendall, constructed in 1860 by Caldwell Kendall on land that was a bequest upon his marrying a nearby landowner’s daughter, couldn’t be called a farmhouse. It wasn’t a purely serviceable structure. The Kendall was built to display the grandeur of the time.

The place had been magnificent when Kelly was a little girl. What it looked like when she bought it was another story. Slowly she was trying to give it back that glory. But it was expensive and she was having to find alternative means to keep it solvent.

“Do you like waffles?” she asked.

“What’s waffles?”

It was her turn to be surprised. “You’ve never had a waffle? Well, today is your lucky day.”

Kelly was used to fending for herself. She hadn’t grown up in the shadow of the luxury that was the Kendall. Her home was a small house a few miles away. Losing her mother when she was ten, she was raised by her father. He’d worked as a groom at a nearby farm, making barely enough money to make ends meet. Most of his money he drank before getting home. When he did come home, she’d take whatever she could find to buy food. Consequently, Kelly learned to make meals from practically nothing. And she never wasted anything.

She had a maternal grandmother living in Arizona and several cousins she’d heard of, but never seen. After her own mother died, she was too young to think of going to live with her grandmother and her father hadn’t begun to drink yet. By the time Kelly was old enough to think of leaving, she felt her father needed her. They’d fallen into a routine. While she couldn’t keep him from drinking, there was a weird stability to their relationship.

The Kendall had a part-time cook and housekeeper. The housekeeper came once a week and did the heavy cleaning. It was Kelly’s plan to increase her hours when the Kendall was self-sustaining.

“Can I pour now?” Ari asked after she’d stirred the mix.

“Ari, you speak English really well, how did that happen?”

“My dad taught me.”

Kelly smiled. Close enough, she thought.

While it had taken Kelly nearly six months to repair and replace the kitchen, she could say it was now properly christened. A fine coat of flour blanketed the surface of the granite counter and part of the floor. The waffle iron had burned sap oozing over the sides. And Kelly’s white angelic nightgown and robe were stained down the front with grape juice. Ari didn’t fair well, either. The grape stains on his pajamas trailed from neck to toe and his bronze-colored hands were white with flour.

“It’s my turn to pour,” Ari insisted.

“You bet it is,” Kelly told him. “But you have to be careful because this is very hot.” She pointed to the waffle iron.

“I can do it,” he assured her.

“All right. Are you ready?”

“Ready,” he said with a big smile on his face.

Kelly handed him a small mixing bowl with just enough batter to fill the waffle iron.

“Evenly,” she whispered. He made wide circles with the bowl, spreading the batter over the iron and watching it melt together to cover the surface.

“Now close the top,” she instructed.

He handed her the bowl and the two of them lowered the hot lid.

“Good,” she said. While they waited, Kelly finished the bacon and eggs and poured herself a cup of coffee. She hazarded to give Ari another cup of grape juice, only this time she found a cup and fashioned a top. Ari opened the waffle iron and, while the shape of the iron was circular, she flipped

the strangely shaped trapezoid onto a plate. At the table seconds later, Ari dug into his breakfast. With his mouth full, he said, "I like it. Can we have these every day?"

There was that permanent question again. Ari thought he was here for good. Jason had told him they were coming here, coming home. Only he didn't know about the sale. This wasn't their home and Kelly couldn't take them in. She was having a hard enough time getting the place back on its feet.

Ari took another bite of the syrupy confection. "I like it," he said again. He put another forkful of food in his mouth then stopped and lowered his fork. He put his hands in his lap, looking down as if he shouldn't be enjoying his meal.

"Is something wrong?" Kelly asked.

"Is my dad going to eat with us?"

"I'm sure he's still asleep," Kelly said. Jason had been dead on his feet last night and it was well past one o'clock when she'd shown him the room where he could sleep.

"He always eats breakfast with me," Ari said.

"We could wake him up, but he's very tired," Kelly told him. "Do you think you can eat with me? Just this once?"

He cocked his head in a questioning manner and considered her offer. "He's been tired before, but he always ate with me."

"How about this," Kelly asked. "When he wakes up, you can eat with him again?"

Ari smiled. Apparently, she'd hit upon the perfect solution. "I guess that's all right." Picking up his fork, he resumed his meal.

Kelly figured it would be lunchtime before Jason opened his eyes. She'd let him sleep. Ari was a delightful child. He had dark curly hair and eyes that were practically black. He was thin and limped slightly when he walked. Without a resemblance to Jace, Kelly thought Ari must look like his mother.

She wondered where his mother was now. Suddenly a terrible thought occurred to her. Suppose Jason had kidnapped his son and brought him here without the mother's consent? After all, he'd shown up in the middle of the night without a place to stay and with a child. This could be trouble, she thought. And she'd had enough of that to last a lifetime.

* * *

THAT WAS THE best dream Jace had ever had. He and Ari played on a hill. They were safe. He knew nothing would happen to them there. Father and son ran, jumped and rolled over the ground. Jace heard his son laughing. He didn't wheeze or limp, but hung on tightly when Jace swung him around in circles. Waking, he held on to the image for a moment longer.

Opening his eyes was a shock.

He didn't know where he was. Sitting up in bed, his thoughts rushed to Ari. Where was he? Then it came back to him. Jace remembered.

He was home.

Pushing the covers aside, he went to the bathroom's connecting door and into the room where Ari slept. The boy was gone. The bed had been made and other than the suitcase sitting open on a bench at the end of the bed, there was no sign that his son had ever been in this room.

Jace didn't think about his appearance until he was halfway to the door. He turned around and ran back to the guest room. This wasn't his room. When he lived here, this had been a guest room, but it didn't connect to the room next door and neither of them had been decorated as they were now. Where he'd slept, the walls were a light blue. The bedding on the four-poster was mainly white, but picked up the same blue wall color in subtle stripes. Jace remembered it with gray walls and heavy furniture.

Ari's room was a light green with white molding. His bedding was yellow and the boy required a step stool to reach the mattress. Formerly, the walls had been white and the bed smaller than the queen-size that sat there now.

Pushing his legs into his pants, Jace glanced out the window and stopped. Ari was outside.

With Kelly.

They were playing with a ball. He was teaching her soccer moves. Jace stared as his son bounced the ball off his knees and feet. Then he offered the ball to Kelly and she tried to imitate his moves. Jace laughed. It was hilarious to watch her. She showed no signs of embarrassment by being shown up by a four-year-old. Her hair bounced in the morning light. Copper highlights flickered, changing color with every movement of her head. When the ball fell to the ground and Kelly missed it, she ran after it. Ari limped after her. She tripped and fell. Ari went down with her. They both laughed. Jace laughed, too.

They looked good together. Ari had asthma, but he wasn't coughing or wheezing and he didn't look as if his breath was labored. Jace felt relief. This confirmed it was the correct decision to bring the boy here. Although now that they didn't have a place to stay and Jace had no job, their lives were in flux. Jace had to stay strong for them both; he'd figure something out.

First he had to find them a place to stay. This was no longer the Kendall Farm he had known. Coming back here, specifically, had been a mistake. Jace had hoped things would change.

And they had.

But not in his favor.

CHAPTER THREE

"DAD," ARI SHOUTED and took off running across the back porch. He threw open the screen door and launched himself into the kitchen. Even though he favored his left leg, Jace caught him as he propelled himself into his arms. The momentum of the ball of energy turned Jace completely around. "We waited a long time," Ari said. "You were asleep. Kelly said you were tired." He glanced at her, wobbling precariously in Jace's arms. "We let you sleep. But we already ate. Two times." He put up two fingers, running on with his explanation of their day.

"That's all right, sport." Jace kissed the boy on the top of his head. He looked at Kelly, who'd come into the kitchen behind Ari. "Thank you," he said. "I didn't intend to sleep the day away."

She smiled. Jace thought she looked familiar when he saw that smile and tried to recall if he'd ever seen her before.

"We were outside playing," Ari informed him. "I showed Kelly how to play soccer. She's not very good." He frowned, shaking his head, his expression very serious. "She needs to practice." He pronounced the words very precisely.

Kelly laughed, raising her hand to cover her mouth. Something about the gesture grabbed Jace's attention. A tiny trickle of awareness seeped inside him.

"Good morning." He openly admired her. She was dressed in a short-sleeved T-shirt that stopped at her waist. It was met by a pair of light blue shorts that showed off her long legs. Jace found his eyes traveling the distance from the running shoes on her feet to the hair she'd let fall behind her shoulders.

"It's not morning, Dad," Ari said and tugged on his arm. Jace realized his son had repeated the sentence.

"I know," he commented and with a kiss to his forehead set him on his feet.

Kelly opened the refrigerator and pulled out two drink bottles of orange juice. "Can you drink from the bottle?" she asked Ari.

"Yes," he said reaching for it.

She loosened the top. Jace heard the snap as the seal was broken. She handed it to Ari.

"Why don't you go and drink that on the porch?" Jace suggested.

Ari moved out the back door and Jace waited until his son was seated on the porch steps before addressing Kelly. She, too, was watching Ari. He didn't know how to begin to say what he needed to say.

"He's a wonderful child," she said.

“I’m very proud of him.” He could tell she had questions about Ari. It was obvious by Ari’s black eyes and curly dark hair that none of Jace’s features were present in him. “Go ahead, ask.”

“Ask what?”

“Ask about Ari’s adoption,” he said.

“He’s adopted?”

Jace saw her shoulders drop as if she were relieved. “Does that make a difference?” He raised his eyebrows skeptically.

She came up in front of the counter that separated them. “I’m ashamed to admit what I was thinking.”

“And what was that?” Jace braced himself for some prejudicial comment. He’d seen people react to the two of them before.

“You don’t recognize me, do you?”

“What?” He didn’t follow her thought patterns.

She shook her head quickly. “Of course, you wouldn’t. I used to live a couple of miles from here.”

“You did?” Was that why he felt he’d seen her before?

“In Short Hills,” she told him.

Suddenly, it dawned on him what and where Short Hill was. It was a poor area, run-down, with low-income housing and a lot of crime, a place where people double-and triple-locked doors that a good puff of wind could blow down. Anyone with an address there was immediately judged as a drunk or criminal. Jace now understood her logic. She wasn’t judging Ari’s paternity.

“I used to come by here on my way home from school,” Kelly said. “I saw you a few times, but of course, your reputation was known even in Short Hills.”

He swallowed, remembering the rebellious young man he’d once been. He had good reason, but there was no need to burden her with it. “I’m no longer that person.”

“I understand. I’m a different person from the little girl who used to live in Short Hills. When I left there, I moved to New York. If Short Hills didn’t teach me self-protection, the city did.

“I thought you’d kidnapped Ari and fled Colombia. And that I was now harboring a fugitive.”

Jace stared at her for a long moment. Then a bubble of laughter pushed into this throat and he smiled. Unable to stop it, the laughter poured from him. She smiled a little in response, but didn’t join him in the merriment that gripped him. He didn’t tell her what he’d been thinking.

“I suppose, from your point of view, it might look like that.” He could hardly get the sentence out. It was absurd that he’d kidnapped Ari. Ari came into his life due to crazy circumstances and there was nothing else he could do short of abandoning the child.

Adopting a child wasn’t ever his first instinct, though now that he had Ari, he hated being apart from him, even for a moment.

“Well, what was it like then?”

She was a hard cookie, Jace thought. Sure she had grown up in a rough area, but he bet he could match her experience for experience. Jace shook his head.

“I have all our important papers in the car. I’ll get them if you want to see them.”

He turned to go.

“That won’t be necessary,” she said, halting him in his tracks. “Does he know?” She glanced at Ari, still sitting outside.

“He knows. He doesn’t remember his parents. His father abandoned them when Ari was born. His mother worked in a cocaine factory.”

Kelly gasped.

Jace watched her. “I didn’t know her, didn’t know there was a cocaine factory until later. I’d seen her once or twice, but we’d never spoken.”

Just as she’d done last night, she opened the refrigerator and pulled out the makings of a meal.

“Would you like breakfast or lunch?” she asked.

“You don’t have to cook for me.”

“I know,” she said. “But you’ve traveled for two days and slept for the better part of another, I assume you’re hungry.”

“Isn’t there a cook, a housekeeper? When my father was alive, there was a full staff to take care of the place.”

“Things have changed,” she said flatly. “Now, breakfast or lunch?”

“I think we need to talk,” he said.

“Lunch,” she answered.

Unlike last night, when she’d made him a sandwich, today she pulled a tray out of the refrigerator and popped it into the oven. Then she forked spaghetti onto a plate, added sauce and placed it in the microwave.

“Ari, time to wash your hands.” She called him from the screen door. Her voice was soft and sweet and again Jace thought there was something familiar about her. He chalked it up to the red hair and pushed the thought aside.

Opening the oven door, she pulled out the tray, which he could see now contained garlic bread. The bell rang on the microwave signaling it had completed its flash-heating of food. Soon the three of them were seated at the table with piping hot garlic bread, salads and steaming plates of pasta.

Ari ate hungrily, shoveling food into his mouth as if he hadn’t eaten in days.

“Slow down, Ari,” Jace cautioned.

“This is really good,” he said, swallowing an amount that was too large for his mouth. “It’s nothing like yours.”

Kelly laughed. “I guess we both get insulted today.”

“Can I say that?” Ari looked at Jace.

“Say what?”

“Insulted? Is it a bad word?”

“It’s not a bad word, but you need to know when to use it,” Jace explained. “So for now, don’t say it.”

With a nod, he went back to his meal. Jace looked up at Kelly. Her gaze was soft as she stared at him. Jace had seen those eyes before. He glanced down at his food. What he had to tell her was hard enough. With her looking at him like that, it was too much.

“Dad, this isn’t a hotel, is it?” Ari’s mind jumped like lightning from subject to subject. “It doesn’t look like the other hotel.”

“This isn’t a hotel, Ari.”

“Our apartment at home wasn’t this old.”

“No. It wasn’t. This house is very old, constructed so long ago, even I wasn’t around when it was built.”

Ari continued eating. Kelly liked their banter, but she didn’t join in the conversation.

Ari finished eating and quickly stood up. “May I go?” he asked. “I want to play some more.”

Jace looked at Kelly. She nodded.

“Stay close to the house,” he said. “This is a big farm. I don’t want you getting lost.”

“I won’t,” he said and rushed out the door and down the back steps. Jace could see he was happy here. He was still in the explorer mode. Everything was new, different and exciting for him. He hadn’t had time to get homesick yet.

“I apologize,” Kelly said.

“For what?” Jace brought his attention back to her.

“For my thoughts. Obviously, you and Ari have a special relationship. And he’s not a kidnapped child.”

“Apology accepted.”

“Now, you wanted to talk about something,” she said. She crossed her arms on the end of the table and gave him her full attention. “Talk.”

“I want my home back.”

* * *

KELLY HAD DEALT with difficult clients before. She’d worked for a marketing firm in New York City and everyone at the firm thought they were more important than anyone else. Among other things, she’d learned to steel her features. She remained where she was, refusing to show how upset she was over Jace’s statement. His eyes were clear and there was no joke in his comment. He was serious.

“I’m afraid that is not an option,” she said calmly. “The house was sold and the deed duly recorded. You can check the county records if you wish. The courthouse is—” She didn’t get any further.

“I know where the courthouse is,” he snapped.

“Don’t speak to me like that, Jason.” She intentionally used his given name, hoping it brought her point home. “I bought this property free and clear. Your brother had run it into the ground, selling off anything and everything he could. He hadn’t paid the taxes in more years than your son is old. I came along and saved it. And I am spending everything I can beg, borrow or steal to make it a going operation. So don’t come in here and tell me you’re planning to force me out. It isn’t going to happen.” She took a breath. “I offered you one night’s lodging. Well, you’ve had it. You can pack your things and move on. You are no longer welcome here.”

Kelly stood up and took her coffee cup to the sink.

“Kelly. You misunderstood me.”

She turned around. Jace was now standing within feet of where she was.

“Your words seemed pretty clear to me.” Kelly understood that he was back-peddling. What did he expect her reaction to be? Should she just curl up and let him take away everything she’d done in the past two years? She was preparing to open the house to the public and take income from the tours. Sometime in the future, she’d bring back the horses and build a racetrack. Every penny she had was invested in this farm. She had to succeed. Failure was not an option. Not this time.

“I’d like to keep an eye on Ari. Would you mind if we took a walk outside?”

“Okay.”

Falling in step, they began to walk, going to the back porch and watching Ari as he played hide and seek with the open barn door.

“Is he all right over there?” Jace asked.

Kelly heard the fatherly concern in his voice. She thought of her own father. With all his faults, he loved his daughter.

“We’ve already renovated the barn.”

“We?”

“My cousin and her husband and I do most of the work. It’s hard and we’re slow, but it saves us a lot of labor costs.”

“You and two other people are working the Kendall?”

She spread her hands. “We’re all there is.” The barn had been in particularly bad condition when Kelly had taken over the property. An engineering study told her it was structurally sound. The house was livable, although it needed a lot of upgrading. Kelly moved in and asked her cousin and her husband to help her out with the renovations. Drew, her cousin’s husband, owned a construction company and she was indebted to him for life.

“Tell me how you came to buy the Kendall?” he asked.

“The cousin who helps me, Mira, and her husband, Drew, let me know about the property before the for sale sign went up. He knew I always loved it. I immediately called and arranged to tour the place.” She glanced at Jace. Jace had his gaze on his son. “It didn’t matter what state it was in. I was determined to make it mine.”

“Why?”

Kelly surveyed the area. The May weather had turned the grass emerald green. She remembered when it was high enough to hide her five-foot-five frame and coarse enough to leave cuts and bruises on her arms and legs. Now she could look clear across the vista.

“I grew up not far from here.”

“Short Hills, you said.”

“When I was still in school I used to get off the school bus and climb onto the fence just to watch the horses.”

Jace snapped his fingers. “The redhead,” he said. “I saw you there a few times. You were only a child.”

She was older than she looked, but she didn’t say that.

“You weren’t here often,” she said.

He frowned, but waited for her to continue.

“I know your dad sent you to boarding school. I thought it must be a wonderful place to go to school, but I didn’t see how you could bear to leave the Kendall.”

“It wasn’t my choice,” he admitted.

Kelly knew that. Gossip spread easily around Windsor Heights then and now. Some she’d met since buying the Kendall had told her stories of the Kendall family. It wasn’t always pleasant.

“You haven’t told me why you love it here,” Jace said.

Her throat closed and she had to swallow the emotion that rose in her. “I’ve always felt I was part of this land. And that this is where I was supposed to be. When I bought it, it needed a lot of work. And I mean a lot. But I loved doing it. I loved seeing it come back to the glory it once had. I want to make it into a showplace. And every floor I restore, every nail I use to repair something is part of me going into the history of this place.”

“But you’re not a Kendall.”

The words hurt for some reason. She would never be a Kendall. “That’s true, but...I belong here. I feel it. I suppose it was because I grew up so close to the place. The Kendall had survived war and depression, and I wanted to be a survivor, too, in my own way.” Things were often out of sorts in her own home. The Kendall was her anchor.

“Why haven’t you changed its name then? You’ve been here two years.”

She shook her head, still smiling. “It wouldn’t be the same. For over a century this has been the Kendall. Changing a name would change the nature of the place.”

“Do you know where my brother is?” He abruptly switched subjects.

“I haven’t seen him. In fact, I never saw him. The entire transaction was completed between the bank and the county. Your brother wasn’t ever required to be there.”

“Why didn’t he pay the taxes? Sheldon loved being the lord of the manor.”

“I don’t know. People in town said it was mismanagement. Given the state of the property when I showed up, it wouldn’t be hard to believe.”

“It wasn’t necessary to the sale,” Jace said, and Kelly heard the censure in his voice.

“It wasn’t my business,” she told him. “I didn’t force your brother to get into trouble with his finances and there was no reason why I should help him if that’s what you’re implying.”

“Ari, don’t do that,” Jace shouted. He was on his feet, ready to run and aid his son if necessary.

Kelly quickly followed Jace’s gaze to where the child stood. His foot was in midair as if he’d been paralyzed by the urgency in Jace’s voice. Ari had been about to climb a ladder propped up on the side of the barn. It wouldn’t take much for Ari to tumble over.

“I should think you’d be glad someone who really cares about the Kendall bought it,” she said. “It could have gone to a developer who would raze the house and subdivide it into apartments or condos.”

She left him then and went into the house. She had work to do and she was grossly behind getting started.

* * *

THIS WAS NOT the homecoming Jace expected.

Rushing forward, he headed for Ari. When the boy saw him coming, he took off and ran for him. His weak leg dragged a little behind, but Ari compensated. Already Jace thought he was doing better. He hadn't had a problem with his asthma today; surely Kelly would have told him if Ari had had restricted breathing.

"Dad, can we go in the barn?" he asked, instinctively taking his hand and pulling him in that direction.

"Let's go look at where the horses used to live," Jace said.

"Wow! Horses!"

The barn was a few hundred feet from the house. While the weather last night had been wet, the grass under their feet was already dry. Jace thought the silence was eerie. Back in his day, he should have heard the horses by now.

Jace pulled the barn door open all the way, waiting a moment for his eyes to adjust before stepping into the dim light. Ari scampered forward, eager to see.

The faint scent of horse manure and cleanser permeated the air. Jace frowned as anger stole over him. The horses had been his sanctuary. How dare Sheldon let the Kendall fall apart to the point where there were no horses here.

Their great-great-grandfather had provided for the upkeep of the house by investing in and training horses, race horses especially. Evidently, he was very good at it since he forged a legacy that had continued for generations. It was Sheldon's legacy and Jace's, too—no matter what his father thought—to keep it alive by offering the best in boarding and rearing horses. And now they were gone.

"Where are the horses, Dad? Are they all in Texas?"

Ari had no concept of the size of the United States. Texas could have been on the other side of the barn as far as he knew. He'd seen horses on television and the logic of a four-year-old jumped to explain.

"I don't know where they are, Ari."

"We'll have to ask Kelly," he said positively. "She will know."

Jace doubted that.

* * *

KELLY MASSAGED HER temples as she studied father and son from her office window. They disappeared around the side of the horse barn. She knew Jace loved horses. He'd ride as if the devil himself was after him, but then he'd spend an hour in the barn, making sure to cool down the treasured animal.

Eventually, she wanted to have horses boarding here, and if possible, expand the operation even further. Some day she planned on having allowance races run here, and eventually move up to stakes races. But she had other things to do with the small amount of money she still had in her account.

Telling herself she'd deal with Jace later, she pulled her hair into a long ponytail and went to the library. It was the last unfinished room in the house. It needed to be painted and decorated.

With all the prep work done, it was time to put the paint on the walls. Kelly scrubbed her roller up and down in the pan to prevent drips and raised it to the wall. The soft blue transformed the space. She liked it already. The steady action gave her time to think.

What was she going to do with Jason Kendall and his son? And why did she believe it was her duty to do anything? Jace was a grown man. He had to be nearing thirty by now. He seemed to be responsible, at least where Ari was concerned. She'd given them one night only. He should be searching for a new place to stay, instead of hanging out at an estate he never owned. His own father mustn't have thought much of him to do that to him. That was the rumor Kelly had heard. She'd felt

sorry for Jace at the time. She realized that as a kid she'd been caught up in how things looked around here. That just because the Kendalls had a lovely house and lovely horses, didn't mean their family was any less troubled than hers. It occurred to her that there were some old files and family photos she'd moved into the attic, since the sale of the property had included all of the furnishings.

It was as if Sheldon had walked away with only the clothes on his back. She supposed she should give those items to Jace.

The blue wall looked beautiful. She stepped back, analyzed her work. Smiling, she thought when the books were brought back into the room, it would be a welcome place to sit and read.

Kelly dropped her shoulders. She felt an allegiance to Jace, although that made no sense. She hadn't known him well while they were growing up, but he was a Kendall. And this had been his home once.

Maybe she should give him a job. The place could use his help. He could stay until he found a place of his own.

Stepping back, she said, "Yes, that works." Though her eyes were on the wall, she was talking about Jace.

"Kelll-ly!"

She heard Ari's sweet voice calling her name.

"Down here," she hollered.

She heard footsteps running toward the room. The door was already open for ventilation. Ari found her and rushed forward.

"Don't run," she told him, lifting a hand to catch him.

Too late. His little body sailed across the drop cloth. His feet came out from under him and he slipped, momentum carrying him several feet before he stopped.

Jace was on his heels behind him. Kelly grabbed the paint tray and held it still. Then she faced Jace.

"Are you all right?" she asked the child.

Ari looked up. "That was fun. Can I do it again?"

Jace let out the breath he must have been holding. "No, you cannot," he said.

Kelly, who was on her knees, sat back on her legs. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Ari nodded.

Jace looked at the walls and immediately took in the one Kelly had been working on. "Did he do any damage?"

"I don't think so. But he might have a bruise tomorrow on his legs. There's hardwood under this tarp."

Jace examined Ari, pulling his pant leg aside and looking at him.

"Dad," Ari protested and pulled his clothes back. "Not in front of her." His voice was a stage whisper.

Kelly turned her head. "I won't look. I promise."

"I think you'll live," Jace said several seconds later.

"Where are the horses?" Ari asked.

Subject changes were no problem for four-year-olds Kelly was finding.

"We went to the horse barn," Jace explained. "It's empty."

"Well, Ari, the former owner sold the horses in an attempt to pay off the debt on the Kendall."

Jace's jaw clenched. She understood his frustration. Since arriving here, everything he thought he knew was gone, starting with Laura. And although Kelly had nothing to do with any of it, she could see that this proud man was hurting.

"What are we gonna do now, Dad?" Ari, unaware of any of the adults' feelings, was ready for the next adventure.

"Ari, would you like to see some pictures of horses?" she asked.

“Wow, yeah.”

“They’re on the table in the big living room down the hall. Do you remember where that is?”

He looked at his dad as if Jace might deny the chance to him. Jace nodded.

“Yes. I remember.” Ari started to move, but Jace restrained him.

“Walk,” his father said.

The little boy walked out of the room with both adults watching him.

“I have a proposal for you,” she told Jace.

“What is it?”

She saw him stiffen. “You’re an engineer?”

He nodded.

“What kind of engineer?”

“Civil,” he said, his voice almost a challenge.

“Does that mean you know about bridges and roads, things like that?”

“It does. I also know about water lines and—”

“How about construction?” she interrupted.

“Some.”

“I’d like to offer you a job.”

“What?”

“Do you have one? Someplace to go? I thought your showing up here last night was the last stop on a long journey.”

“It was,” he said. “What kind of job?”

“As an engineer, of sorts. Although, I can’t pay you what an engineer probably makes, I can offer room and board for you and Ari and a small wage. You can consider it temporary until you find something better.”

He mulled that over for a moment. “What do I do?”

“You help me get the rest of this property in shape.”

He looked around the library. The ceiling and trim work had been done. She was making headway on the walls. The shelves were gleaming white and leaning against a door on the other side of the room.

“It looks like you have everything under control.” His gaze swept back to her.

“Don’t go by the condition of the house. I have some serious issues that need attention.”

“Like what?”

“Irrigation, for one. You said you knew about water. I want to make sure there’s proper runoff and drainage for the pastures and build safer pathways around the grounds.”

“You expecting a lot of visitors?”

“Yes, hopefully,” she said. “What about it? Will you take the job?”

“Dad!” Ari came bounding back, running fast and hard. He stopped just before careening into Jace. “Can I get my own horse?”

Jace turned and looked at Kelly. “Maybe,” he said.

CHAPTER FOUR

WINDSOR HEIGHTS WASN’T exactly on the cutting edge of the twenty-first century, though as Jason drove into town he noticed how different the place looked. Because he had often been away for long periods of time with boarding school, college and working, Jace’s trips back to the Kendall made him more able to see the changes as sweeping rather than subtle. First, the number of cars on the street alone could cause a traffic jam. As far as he knew, there had never been a traffic jam in Windsor Heights. There were new stores along Main Street. He saw that the old dress shop had had a facelift. The bookstore was gone, replaced by an office supply store. The bank, however, was in the same place and while it was five years older, it appeared as new as it had been when it was built.

Jace opened its heavy door and walked through. Nothing here was different. The loan office was in the same place and Jace went directly toward it.

“Jason! Jason Kendall.” Someone called his name. “Is that you? I can’t believe it. I haven’t seen you in years.”

A man behind a glass wall stood up and came out, his hand outstretched. Jace took it, recognizing him only after he was already pumping his hand.

“Kurt Mallard,” Jace said, grateful to find someone he’d once known. “Who would have thought?”

“Come on in and sit down a minute. Tell me what brings you back to Windsor Heights?”

Jace noticed his door had Kurt Mallard, Loan Officer printed on it in small black letters.

“My home,” he said. Jace took a seat. “I’m here about the Kendall.”

Kurt frowned. “It’s a shame about that.” Then his face cleared and the frown was replaced with a smile.

“But it seems the new owner is working miracles restoring it. Have you met her yet?”

Jace didn’t get to answer.

Kurt continued, “She’s a beauty. Got flaming red hair. When she’s in here and the sun shines through that window...” He pointed to a window outside the office “It’s like fire.”

“I’ve met her,” Jace cut in.

Kurt chuckled and cleared away some papers on his desk.

“So you’re the loan officer,” Jace pointed out.

“Never thought I’d make it, did you?”

Kurt had been the other bad boy of Windsor Heights. While the two of them rarely cut up together, Jace knew of him, his antics and the gang he ran around with. None of them were people Jace cared to be associated with. Kurt was on the school’s football team and many people looked the other way at the things he did for that reason. Jace was the prep school kid, the rich kid, the one who lived in the big house. He wasn’t welcome by even the bullies of the area. After that Jace lost track of Kurt. But now Kurt worked at the bank and Jace’s family no longer owned the big house. That privilege was held by a determined redhead unafraid to get her hands dirty.

“Kurt, I’m here for a loan,” Jace said, opting for the cold, hard truth.

Kurt shifted in his chair. “Okay,” he said. “What’s the loan for?”

“I want to buy the Kendall.”

Kurt smiled warmly. “This is great. I’m glad Ms. Ashton is willing to sell it back to you. After all, the Kendall should be owned by a Kendall.” He laughed a hearty sound.

“Well, there’s a slight issue there.”

“What’s the problem?”

“I only got back into town last night. I have a little money, but I’d need a big mortgage.”

Kurt leaned forward. “So far, that seems like something we might be able to work out.” He reached sideways and pulled a packet of documents out of a vertical file stand.

“The only collateral I have is my name.”

Jace watched him visibly recoil.

“Has Ms. Ashton agreed to allow you to take over the mortgage?”

Jace shook his head.

“Does she even know you’re here?”

Again he shook his head.

“I’m afraid I’m not going to be able to help you, Jason. Besides having no collateral and no agreement from the owner to sell, currently you’re unemployed, I assume. The bank requires at least that you have a job in order for me to approve a loan. I’m afraid even filling out the paperwork will be of no use.” He looked at the packet on his desk.

“I do have a job,” Jace said.

“Where?”

“It’s at the Kendall.”

“You have a job at the Kendall?” The eyebrows went up.

Jace nodded.

“How long have you worked there?”

“I only got back yesterday.”

“So you begin tomorrow?” Kurt asked.

“Yes, tomorrow.”

“That’s not going to be long enough. For a mortgage, which you don’t qualify for, we need several pieces of paperwork, including your last three check stubs. I’m sorry Jace.”

“I have those. I worked in South America.”

“Good. What did you do there?”

“I’m an engineer. I worked on a water pipeline.”

“Do you own any property?”

Jace shook his head.

Kurt frowned. “I can give you the paperwork. It will tell you what we require, but without a willingness to sell from Ms. Ashton, it’s likely a waste of time.”

Jace stood up. “Thanks anyway,” he said. Jace knew it would be a problem getting money, but he had to try. His son’s well-being was at stake. He shook hands with Kurt and left.

Out on the street, Jace went to his car and got in. He didn’t start the engine. He sat thinking, wanting to come up with something he could do to get his house back. Kurt had said he was a Kendall and a Kendall should own the property that had been in his family since the Civil War. With the way he’d been treated, sometimes even he wondered why the house meant so much to him. It shouldn’t. But it did.

When he left years ago, angry at the world and everything in it, he wanted nothing but to get as far from the Kendall as he could. But running away didn’t take the place out of him. He missed it, missed the horses and the riding. He missed the familiarity of it, even the safety. While his father and brother weren’t model parent and sibling, he had enough distractions to ignore their influence on him. And he did what he liked.

Yet when he was in South America he longed for the Kendall. He told himself Ari was the reason for his return and that was the truth, but it wasn’t the whole truth. Jace had been stumbling around the world, trying to forget, but it was useless. He missed home, wanted to go back. Ari was only the catalyst he used to make the decision.

And now he was here. And everything was different. He was back, but he wasn’t home. He was still the stable boy, trying to win over the new lady of the manor.

* * *

SHELDON PULLED THE door of his beach bungalow closed. He was headed to the dock to complete a day’s work. He squinted at the bright sunshine. Then he heard the laughter. He knew it was in his mind because it was Laura’s laugh, her sound. He thought of the photo of her in a frame next to his bed. Her picture was the only thing he’d kept from the Kendall.

She was gone now. Sheldon wanted to remember her only as she’d been in the photo, smiling, dressed in a beautiful gown and standing on the staircase at the Kendall. Their lives were tangled, twined together like the never-ending root system of the common mangrove tree.

After he and Laura married, Jason took off. Neither he nor Laura spoke of him. It became a silent, wordless rule.

Sheldon always wondered why his father never thought of Jason as a son. Not wanting to risk the old man’s wrath, Sheldon hadn’t asked for a reason. Laura felt it was a sore point with Sheldon, since initially she had come to the Kendall with Jason, and Sheldon, following his father’s lead, had almost nothing to do with him, either. It’s as if he didn’t exist in their world. But that world had disappeared.

Sheldon went back to work. He bent down and scraped. The barnacles fell off the hull and onto the tarp he'd placed on the wharf. He thought of Laura. She'd been the light of his life. Everything he did and thought revolved around her. He'd been a better man with Laura.

After Laura died, Sheldon had no fight left in him. He couldn't do anything, couldn't concentrate on anything, especially the Kendall. When he came out of his grief enough to notice the farm, things had fallen apart. He didn't know how much time had gone by exactly. It was too late when he tried to save the place. He knew it wouldn't work anyway. He wasn't a good manager. He wasn't his father. And he no longer had Laura to help him. The farm had been failing for years, but he'd hidden the information from Laura. If he'd told her maybe they could have saved the place, but his life was built on bad decisions.

And treating Jason as if he didn't belong and wasn't part of the family was one of them.

"Mr. Kendall," a familiar voice spoke to him.

Sheldon looked up. "Good morning," he said. Audrey Thompson stood in front of him. She was a small woman, slightly overweight. He was fifty-one and he estimated she, too, was probably in her early fifties. She spoke to him daily when she walked along the marina. It was part of her exercise program she told him. Audrey was raising her grandson. Her daughter, a single mom, died after her car was struck by a drunk driver when the child was six. He was nine now.

"You're out in the heat, I see," Sheldon said.

"The North Carolina sunshine can be unforgiving. The camp bus was a little late, and I had to get to the post office. How are you this morning?"

She asked the same question every day he saw her, which was usually Monday through Friday. "I'm managing," he answered her as he always did.

She waved then and kept walking. Sheldon watched her go. He was impressed with how she doted on her grandson. She was patient and caring. Sheldon had often seen them along the water. Audrey mentioned she was a schoolteacher and had the summer off, so she had the days to tell the boy about the sky, the clouds, the sea, sea creatures, the sand. Sheldon even heard her explaining how glass was made from sand. He was surprised to learn the process himself.

It was amazing the things he didn't know and had never been interested in before. But what was more amazing was watching the way she treated her grandson with kindness and love. His father had never treated either him or Jason with the sort of care Audrey bestowed on her grandson. Sheldon had been cloistered in his father's narrow-minded world. Sheldon was glad to see how other people lived and how they looked after one another.

When noon came, Sheldon knocked off for lunch and headed home. Along the beach were a series of cheap but cheerful bungalows that could barely be called houses, but that's what they were for some of the lower-income families in the community. Sheldon lived in one of these cottages that he rented from a man in town. The summer was sweltering, but this past winter, when he'd arrived in Meadesville, and taken the cottage, the winds had blown in off the Atlantic and swirled around the estuary freezing his fingers and feet. He longed for his warm bed back in Maryland. But that was no longer his and would never be again. Sheldon didn't want to see the place where he had been born and raised go to strangers. He wondered what it was like now. When he'd left the Kendall, the main house was no longer the pristine white color with black shutters it had been before his father died. When Sheldon was locked out the grass was overgrown, the paint was peeling and there were several leaks needing repair. The barn was empty and Sheldon owed thousands of dollars for feed, repairs and services. He had every cent he owned—\$208.76—in his pocket when he was evicted.

That hadn't taken him far and he found himself doing things only Jason would do. He hated Jason more than. Irrationally, he knew his predicament wasn't Jason's fault, but Jason would think nothing of hitchhiking, digging ditches, working on road crews or taking refuge at a homeless shelter. It was beneath Sheldon. He thought he would never do anything like that.

But he had.

He'd done that and more. When he couldn't find a soup kitchen, when he was too far from anyplace, when he had no more money, he scoured trash cans, looking for anything to eat to stay alive. Now he had a job and a place to live. His pay was a little more than minimum wage. He had no savings and usually cooked and ate his own meals—simple ones, nothing fancy. His bathroom had no mirror in it, so he didn't always know what he looked like, but the last time he saw a reflection in a store window, he seemed identical to his father if his father was a fiftysomething vagrant. He had a beard and unkempt hair. He'd lost at least forty pounds and wore thrift-store finds.

He no longer resented Jason. Jason was a survivor. He would adapt, do what was necessary to get back on his feet. Sheldon used his brother, no longer thinking of him as a half brother, as an inspiration. Every time he wanted to quit the menial job, he considered what Jason would do. Jason would stick it out. He'd perform the tasks at an exemplary level until he raised enough money to move on. Then he'd go to the next job. Sheldon was a Kendall, and while Jason was also a Kendall, his half brother had a tougher bloodline on his mother's side. It had made him strong. Surely Sheldon could at least do half of what Jason would do.

Again, he stopped to look over the marina and speculate where Jason might be. Had leaving the farm destroyed any love he had for the Kendall? Would he ever return? Sheldon was hardly in a place to know. He didn't ever expect to see the Kendall again himself. Knowing it was no longer in his family, yet being nearby, would be too much for him. He'd disappointed his father and the generations of Kendalls that had come before him.

He would not go back.

In his bungalow, Sheldon set a small pot in which he'd dumped a can of soup on the burner and waited for it to heat. Even though the temperature outside was nearing the century mark, he lunched on soup and bread, saving his dinner for the larger meal of the day. Tonight he was having canned chili with rice.

Sheldon ate leisurely and alone. When he finished, he cleaned his dishes, set them in the drainer for use later and took a quick shower. He changed clothes and headed back to the cabin cruiser he was working on.

"Whatcha doing?" Christian Mitchell, Audrey's grandson asked.

Sheldon looked down to find the nine-year-old standing next to him. He wore gray shorts and a white shirt with an anchor on the breast pocket. His feet were in deck shoes and no socks. Sheldon had met the boy several times and he always came to talk to him. While Sheldon wasn't used to small children, he thought Christian missed male company.

"Cleaning the bottom of the boat," Sheldon told him.

"How'd it get dirty?" he asked.

"These things are in the water and they see the boat and they want to make it their home."

"So?"

"They slow the boat down when it's sailing and you know how much we all like speed."

Christian smiled. He'd seen Christian on his bicycle and knew if his grandmother found him riding in places this far from their home, she'd ban any use of the two-wheeler.

"If we don't get the barnacles off, they'll eat right through and then the boat will leak. We can't have that happening."

Christian was shaking his head slowly from left to right. "Then the boat would sink. And if they couldn't swim, they could drown," the child said.

"That's right."

"Can you sail?" Christian asked.

"No," Sheldon told him. As far as his work was concerned, he hoisted the boat out of the water and worked on it while it was either in dry dock or he'd swing it over the wharf and work on it there. He was doing that today.

"How come you work on boats then?" Christian asked.

“A man’s gotta eat,” he said.

“You eat these?” The child’s face squinched up as he peered at the barnacles on the tarp and his expression was that of horror.

“No, I don’t eat these,” Sheldon mimicked with a laugh.

The child looked relieved. “They’re ugly,” he said.

“That they are,” he agreed. He glanced farther down the marina and then by the row of houses leading away from the area. He didn’t see Audrey. “Does your grandmother know you’re here?”

Christian stared at the ground, but didn’t say anything at first. “I told her I was going to play video games.”

“Here, by the water?”

He nodded, but Sheldon could see there was little belief in the gesture.

“And what did she say?”

“She told me to be home in time to eat.”

“And that’s all she said?”

He nodded.

Sheldon stopped working and stooped down to Christian’s level. “I know you like the boats, Christian,” he said. “I know you like coming here, but your grandmother could be very worried if she can’t find you where you’re supposed to be. Do you understand?”

He nodded again, but still refused to make eye contact with Sheldon.

“Tell you what.”

The boy looked up as if he was about to get a reprieve.

“Why don’t you go tell her where you are. And if she says it’s all right, you can come back.”

Christian smiled. He ran off, calling his grandmother.

Sheldon watched him go. He smiled after the boy, his gangly legs trying to keep up with his growing body. At least there was one person who liked Sheldon for who he was. Christian didn’t mind being around him. He didn’t look at Sheldon’s clothes, his beard or where he lived and judge him as someone unworthy of his attention.

Suddenly Sheldon remembered Jason. He was about Christian’s age when he came to live with them. Had Jason been as innocent and in need of love and acceptance as Christian when he came to the Kendall?

* * *

HOW HAD ALL this happened, Jace asked himself. How could Sheldon let the house and the horses go? He knew his brother loved the Kendall. Had the years changed him? Jace needed to know. He needed to understand what motivated Sheldon to give up and walk away, leaving everything he owned behind.

Why hadn’t Sheldon tried to contact him? Of course, Jace had left angry over Laura, but when things had gotten so bad that Sheldon needed money, why didn’t he at least call him? Sheldon could have tracked him down. Yet, just as his brother ignored him when he was present, he also cut him out of what he might have been able to provide to keep the farm in the family. As distant as Sheldon thought Jace was, the two still shared a bloodline and a heritage.

Questions, Jace thought. Since he’d arrived at the Kendall that rainy night all he had were questions and no answers. He was going to have to face facts and find his brother. Sheldon held the key to whatever was going on.

Jace wasn’t even sure if Sheldon was still alive. His search for his brother, who was older than Jace by more than two decades, would have to start at square one. It wouldn’t be easy. Yet someone had to know what had happened to him. Kelly said she thought he’d left the state. Why would he do that? He’d lived his entire life in Maryland. At the Kendall. Obviously, he had friends, business acquaintances elsewhere, maybe he’d gone to one of them? Jace wished he’d known his brother better, it would give him a clue now as to where to look.

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