

Ever After

A LOVE INSPIRED[®] COLLECTION



IRENE HANNON

A Family To Call Her Own



Irene Hannon

A Family to Call Her Own

Аннотация

When Rebecca Matthews saved an injured stranger, she never realized how her lonely life would be forever changed. For although reporter Zach Wright had been too confused to ask the name of his beautiful Good Samaritan—and despite Rebecca's attempt to remain anonymous—Zach soon discovered his angel of mercy. Like sunlight warming his chilly soul, Rebecca reminded him that true goodness still endured. Zach prayed that God's grace would shine on him once more. For how else could the world-weary loner give Rebecca what her heart most wanted...a family of her own.

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As Rebecca drove carefully through the swirling fog, she stole a glance at her unconscious and unexpected passenger....

Although his color was ashen, his clothes stained and ruffled, she could tell that he was handsome in a rugged sort of way. His strong profile and jaw seemed to speak of character and integrity. Yet there was a worn look about his face—a sort of deep weariness that had nothing to do with his injuries. For some reason Rebecca had the impression that he was a man who had seen it all and now viewed the world with cynicism.

Rebecca's gaze snapped back to the road. She was letting herself get way too fanciful. Looks could be deceiving. She knew that from experience. In a few minutes she'd leave him at the hospital and probably never see this man again.

But oddly enough, the thought didn't give her much comfort....

IRENE HANNON

is an award-winning author who has been a writer for as long as she can remember. She “officially” launched her career at the age of ten, when she was one of the winners in a “complete-the-story” contest conducted by a national children’s magazine. More recently, Irene won the coveted RITA[®] Award for her 2002 Love Inspired book, *Never Say Goodbye*. Irene, who spent many years in an executive corporate communications position with a Fortune 500 company, now devotes herself full-time to her writing career. In her “spare” time, she enjoys performing in community musical theater productions, singing in the church choir, gardening, cooking and spending time with family and friends. She and her husband, Tom—whom she describes as “my own romantic hero”—make their home in Missouri.

A Family To Call Her Own

Irene Hannon



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Anyone who welcomes one little child like this in my name welcomes me.

—Matthew 18:5

To Dorothy Hannon,

my wonderful mother and cherished friend, who gave me Isabel.

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Chapter One

“That’s a lie!” Zach Wright shot to his feet and glared at the managing editor, bristling with rage. He leaned on the desk that separated them, palms flat, eyes flashing. “That’s a lie!” he repeated furiously.

“I’m sure it is,” Ted Larsen replied calmly, not at all intimidated by Zach’s threatening posture. “But are you willing to reveal your sources to prove it isn’t?”

“You know I can’t do that!”

Ted shrugged. “Then we’ve got to play it their way. For now.”

“Why?” Zach demanded hotly. “I’m telling you, this information is solid. I wouldn’t use it if it wasn’t.”

“I know that,” Ted conceded. “But Simmons is getting pressure on this—big-time. They’re threatening to sue.”

“It’s just a scare tactic,” Zach retorted scornfully, waving the excuse aside dismissively with an impatient gesture. “My information is good.”

“You’re probably right about the scare tactic. But it worked. For the moment, anyway. It’s not easy being a lucrative publisher in this day and age, Zach. You know that. Simmons is just being cautious.”

Zach gave a snort of disgust. “I can think of a better word for it.”

“Look, we’ll work this out. I know your information isn’t

falsified. We just have to prove it.” Ted paused, as if carefully weighing his next words, anticipating the reaction. “And until we do, we’re going to kill the series.”

With a muttered oath, Zach turned away in frustration, jamming his hands into his pockets as he strode over to the window and stared out at the city streets. St. Louis could be a beautiful city, he thought. But on this dreary February day it was just plain ugly—the same as his mood. This whole experience was leaving a decidedly bad taste in his mouth. “Whatever happened to printing the truth?” he asked bitterly. “I thought that was our job.”

“It is,” Ted acknowledged. “But Simmons’s job is to keep the paper solvent. He’s not willing to risk a lawsuit.”

“So we just let them get away with it?” He turned back to face the editor, his eyes still blazing. “Ted, the corruption in that office is rampant—misuse of public funds, a rigged bidding process based on nepotism instead of price, blatant bribery—what am I supposed to do, forget about it?”

“No. Just lie low for a while. In fact, why don’t you take some time off? How many weeks have you accumulated, anyway? Five, six?”

“Eight.”

“When was the last time you took a real vacation?”

Zach shook his head impatiently. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe you’re due.”

“I don’t want to take a vacation!” Zach snapped. “I’m not

running away from this story, Ted! I'll stand behind my coverage even if the paper won't!"

"We're not asking you to run away," Ted replied evenly. "Just give it a little time. If you don't want to take some time off, we can assign you to another story while we straighten out this mess."

"Like what?"

Ted pulled a file toward him. "Looks like the St. Genevieve area is going to get hit with another flood. I need somebody down there to cover it."

Zach stared at the editor as if he'd gone crazy. "You're kidding, right?"

Ted adjusted his glasses and looked across the desk at the younger man, the sudden glint of steel in his eyes making Zach wary. Ted had come up through the ranks, done a stint as an investigative reporter himself before taking over the editor job, and his staff respected his skill and integrity. But they also knew that his usual affable, easygoing manner was quite deceptive. He could be unrelenting and as tough as nails when he had to be. And now, as he fixed his razor-sharp eyes on Zach, it was clear that the conversation was over.

"No, Zach, I'm not," he said, his tone edged with iron.

"You're overreacting to this situation, whether you realize it or not. You need some time to decompress. Nobody can maintain the intensity, keep up the pace you set, month after month, year after year, without wearing down. You need a change of scene, a different focus, a fresh perspective. You can do that by taking

the flood coverage assignment—or by taking a vacation. It’s your choice. But those are the only options.”

Zach frowned and took one hand off the wheel to flip on the overhead light, then glanced down at the map lying on the seat next to him. His city beat rarely took him more than a few miles south of town, and this part of the state was totally unfamiliar to him. St. Genevieve must be the next exit, he decided, though it was hard to tell in the dense fog that had reduced visibility to practically zero and obscured most of the highway signs.

Zach tugged at the knot of silk constricting his throat and drew in a relieved breath as the fabric gave way slightly. He didn’t like ties. Never had. But dinner with the publisher was definitely a “tie” occasion. Even though dinner had ended late, he’d wanted to get settled in and start his interviews for the flood piece first thing in the morning.

At least Simmons had had the guts to discuss the situation with him face-to-face, he thought grudgingly. The publisher had assured him that the paper stood behind him, that they had confidence in his reporting. But they’d still pulled the series. And as far as Zach was concerned, actions spoke louder than words.

Zach flexed the muscles in his shoulders and glanced at his watch. Ten o’clock. It had been a long day, he thought. A very long day. And the only good moment had been Ted’s parting words.

“These setbacks happen to all of us, Zach,” he said, laying a hand on the younger man’s shoulder. “Don’t let it get you down.

You're a good reporter. One of the best. We'll work this out."

Ted's compliments were rare, and therefore prized. It had been a satisfying moment for Zach. Maybe the most satisfying in his career for a long time, he realized with sudden insight.

Zach frowned. Maybe he'd just stumbled on the source of the discontent, the restlessness that had plagued him for the last few months. His satisfaction used to come from his work, the feeling that it was making a difference. And that's where it should come from. Not from recognition by his boss. Yet Ted's compliment had given him more satisfaction than any of the work he'd done for the past six months.

Zach remembered his early years as a reporter, when he'd fervently believed that he could make a difference, that his writing could right wrongs and make the world a better place. For the first time in his career he seriously questioned that belief, directly confronting the doubts that he now realized had been growing for quite some time. For fifteen years he'd devoted himself single-mindedly to his work—an insatiable, demanding mistress that took all the passion he had to give. And what did he have to show for his zeal and dedication? A few moments of satisfaction when justice had prevailed. But far more moments of frustration when some scumball short-circuited the system through power, money or influence and walked away, laughing in his face.

And he certainly didn't have financial security. His meager savings were eloquent confirmation of journalism's reputation

as a notoriously low-paying profession. He had no home, unless you could bestow that generous title on the sparsely furnished one-bedroom apartment he'd lived in for years. And he had no personal life.

All he had at the moment was a depressing feeling of emptiness.

As his precise, analytical mind clicked into gear, Zach tried to pinpoint exactly when his passion for tilting at windmills began to ebb. It might have been three years ago, he thought, when his story on corruption in the building industry blew up in his face thanks to a well-crafted smear campaign that didn't quite discredit him but hurt his credibility enough so that no one took his coverage seriously. Or maybe it was the story he did on teenage prostitution last year, when he spent too many depressing nights on the streets with kids who should have been at pep rallies or studying for algebra exams, not hawking their bodies.

But it didn't really matter when he'd stopped believing that what he did made a difference. The fact was he had. Maybe it was burnout, as Ted had hinted. Maybe he did need a break. It might not be a bad idea, after all, to take some time off when this assignment was completed.

But why had he burned out? Not everyone did. Josef certainly hadn't. Zach shook his head as he thought of his idealistic journalism school classmate, back home now in Eastern Europe, fighting the good fight, as he called it, trying to make his country safe for freedom. Josef's vision had never faltered, even in the

face of setbacks and personal danger, and Zach admired him for that. He wished he had more of Josef's conviction and optimism. But he didn't. Not anymore. He'd seen too much and given too much. The well was dry.

Zach thought back to the last time he'd seen Josef. It had been almost eight years since his friend brought his delicate wife, Katrina, to St. Louis for the birth of their daughter. During their six-week stay with Zach, the two men had spent hours talking, debating, sharing. It had been an energizing, invigorating, renewing experience for Zach. Josef, with his serious nature, deep convictions and passionate feelings had always been an inspiration.

Zach recalled one of their last conversations, when he'd asked Josef how he coped with discouragement.

"But, Zachary, I don't get discouraged," his friend replied, clearly taken aback by the question.

Zach looked at him skeptically. "How can you not? Are conditions any better in your country now than when you started? Have you seen any progress?"

"I have not seen much visible evidence of progress, no," Josef admitted. "But we are making inroads," he stated with conviction.

"How do you know?" Zach persisted.

"Faith," Josef replied simply. "In your country, you expect things to get better like this," he said, snapping his fingers.

"Patience is not a virtue in America. But in my country, we

are used to waiting.”

“But for how long?” Zach asked.

Josef shrugged. “Change is slow. But more and more people are on our side, Zachary, and one day there will be freedom for all. Maybe not in my lifetime. But still, I must do my part. Because, my friend, I believe that everything we do does make a difference. It is just that sometimes we do not see the result right away. But no good work is ever lost.”

For a long time after Josef and Katrina returned home, Zach recalled that conversation whenever he became discouraged. It always inspired him. But not tonight. Josef was wrong, Zach thought tiredly, lifting his hand from the wheel long enough to wearily massage his forehead. All his years of personal sacrifice while questing for truth and right hadn't made one bit of difference in the human condition. If anything, crime was worse now than it had been when he was an eager cub reporter, determined to change the world. And that acknowledgment left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Would he feel any different if there had been someone to share his life with, to buoy him up on bad days? he wondered. But his passion had always been directed to his writing, leaving little for anything—or anyone—else. The few relationships he'd indulged in had been brief and sporadic. Either he broke them off when he realized the woman was getting serious, or she did when she realized he wasn't.

As a result there was no one who cared if he ate dinner when

he came home late—or even if he came home at all. His family in Kansas City was too far away to keep tabs on his daily life, and his only regular companion for the past ten years—a cat—eventually had her fill of his bizarre hours and crazy schedule. One night she went out and never came back.

But Josef had found time for love, despite the demands of his work and his precarious existence, Zach admitted. Political conditions were extremely unsettled in his country, and from what Josef said, they were becoming more volatile each day. But he was a man of deep faith, who truly put his trust in the Lord and was at peace with his destiny. With his faith as a foundation, he had the courage to create a family in the midst of chaos, to share his life with the people he loved. While Zach had always looked upon a family as a distraction, Josef looked upon it as an anchor, a source of strength.

And maybe that's why he hadn't burned out, why he still had the energy to carry on the fight for his principles, Zach speculated. His family sustained him, and in the atmosphere of love and goodness and faith that pervaded his home, Josef found strength and hope and inspiration. Maybe the lack of those support mechanisms in his own life was the reason Zach now felt so emotionally and spiritually depleted.

In a way he envied Josef's deep faith. Living with the seedy side of life for so long had shaken Zach's belief in a loving, caring God. Yet without that foundation of faith, he felt oddly adrift. And as for a wife and family—it wasn't that Zach never wanted

those things. It was just that he always told himself there would be plenty of time later. But at thirty-seven, “later” was now, he suddenly realized.

A sign for St. Genevieve loomed out of the mist to his right, abruptly interrupting his reverie, and Zach slowed down. This pea soup would do San Francisco proud, he thought grimly, as he cautiously made his way down the ramp and carefully turned left at the bottom.

As he drove along the two-lane road, visibility was so limited that he actually began to feel somewhat disoriented. It was almost like something in one of those old “Twilight Zone” episodes, he thought. He had the weird sensation that he was the last living thing on earth.

Zach’s gaze momentarily flickered to the rearview mirror, confirming the absence of other cars or signs of life. While he might not be alone in the world, he certainly was alone on the ghostly road.

But not quite as alone as he’d thought, he realized, when his gaze returned once more to the pavement in front of him. A deer suddenly materialized from the mist and, startled by the headlights, bolted directly in his path. With a muttered exclamation, Zach instinctively jerked the wheel sharply.

The deer bounded off safely, but Zach wasn’t so lucky.

As his lightweight, compact car fish-tailed across the unforgiving fog-slicked asphalt, Zach struggled vainly for control. But the vehicle seemed to have a mind of its own,

skidding crazily toward the shoulder. His last thought as the car careened off the edge of the road and plunged down an embankment was that he'd forgotten to buckle his seat belt.

Rebecca Matthews stifled a yawn and reached for the cup of coffee in the holder under the dashboard. She grimaced as the cold liquid sluiced down her throat, but she needed the caffeine. It had been a long day and she was bone weary. She glanced at her watch and groaned. Ten-thirty. Make that a very long day, she amended ruefully. Maybe she should have taken her brother up on his offer when he'd walked her to the car.

"I hate for you to drive home alone, Becca," he'd said with a frown, looking down at her worriedly. "Why don't you spend the night? We have plenty of room."

"Oh, Brad, I'll be fine," she assured him. "I've done this drive alone a hundred times."

"I know. I just wish..." His voice trailed off, and he sighed. "I worry about you being by yourself," he admitted quietly.

Rebecca swallowed past the lump in her throat and forced herself to smile brightly. "Worry should not be on your agenda today, dear brother," she chided him gently, striving for a light tone. "You have too much to be thankful for. Anyway, save your worry for someone who needs it. I'm busy and happy. Honestly."

He seemed about to say something else, but refrained, bending down instead to kiss her forehead. "Okay. But promise you'll be careful."

"I always am. Besides, you know I could make this drive with

my eyes closed,” she kidded him with a smile.

And that’s about what she was doing, she thought grimly as she peered through the dense, swirling mist, brought on by a combination of damp ground and unseasonably warm weather. So much for her plan to just switch on autopilot for the familiar route from St. Louis to St. Genevieve. For the past twenty miles the weather had conspired against her, requiring every ounce of what little energy and concentration she had left just to stay on the road. And unfortunately tomorrow’s schedule wouldn’t bend to accommodate her late-night arrival home. She’d still have to be up no later than six to prepare for the Friday lunch and dinner crowd at her restaurant.

Still, the trip had been worth it, she consoled herself. When Brad called earlier in the day to say they were at the hospital, she’d whipped off her apron and left the restaurant in the capable hands of Rose and Frances. That was twelve hours ago. But if it had been a long day for Rebecca, it had been an even longer one for her sister-in-law, Samantha, who had endured a drawn-out, difficult labor, Rebecca thought sympathetically. And poor Brad had been a wreck. But at seven thirty-five, when Emily Matthews had at last deigned to make her entrance, her parents’ pain and concern had quickly been supplanted by joy.

Rebecca was happy for Sam and Brad. The tragic death of Brad’s first wife seven years before had left him bereft for months, despite his deep, abiding faith and his vocation as a minister. Not only had he lost his closest companion and friend,

but Rachel's death had seemingly destroyed his dreams for a family, as well.

Then Sam had come along, unexpectedly infusing his life with love and laughter and hope. And now they had a child. Tonight, as he'd held Emily tenderly in his arms, Brad had referred to her as "our miracle baby," and they clearly regarded this new addition to their life as a gift from the Lord. Rebecca didn't know the story behind that "miracle" reference, but there obviously was one. So it seemed especially appropriate that Emily had been born today, on Valentine's Day. She truly was a product of Brad and Sam's mutual devotion, and she would bring a new dimension to the love they shared as a couple and the love they would create as a family.

Rebecca sighed. Love—at least the romantic variety—wasn't something she knew much about personally, she reflected sadly. And she probably never would. Regrettably, Valentine's Day had never been a holiday she celebrated. Since opening the restaurant three years ago, she'd had little time to indulge in self-pity or dwell on her loneliness, but Valentine's Day always made her sad. And especially so today, when she'd viewed at such close proximity the circle of love shared by Brad, Sam and their new daughter. It had been very hard to hold back her tears as she cradled the tiny new life in her arms, knowing that it was unlikely she would ever repeat the experience with her own child as a loving husband stood by her side.

At thirty-three, Rebecca was still young enough to have the

children she'd always wanted. That wasn't the problem. The problem was finding a husband with enough patience to deal with her problem. But patience was a virtue that seemed to be in short supply these days. And any man who was remotely interested in her would have to possess an incredible amount of patience.

Rebecca sighed again. She hadn't met a man yet who was willing to date her more than a couple of times without expecting some physical closeness. While Rebecca didn't believe in casual intimacy, she realized that at some stage in a developing relationship kissing and touching were appropriate. And expected.

But Rebecca couldn't handle that. Even if she liked a man, her only emotion when faced with physical contact was fear, not desire. And no man she'd ever met could deal with that. In fact, she'd stopped trying to find one who could. It was easier this way. Less humiliating. Less stressful. But certainly more lonely.

Yet seeing Brad and Sam together these past few months, and now watching them with their new daughter, made Rebecca yearn for the same things for herself. Surely there must be a man out there somewhere who could help her find a way to express the love she'd held captive for so long in her heart, she thought with a brief surge of hope. A man who could dispel her fear, patiently teach her how to respond, fan into life the flame of desire buried deep in her heart.

With sudden resolve she promised herself that if a man came along who seemed worth the effort, she would make one

more attempt to explore a relationship. It wouldn't be easy, she knew. But maybe, with the Lord's help, she could find a way to overcome her fear and create her own circle of love. And if nothing else, it was a wonderful fantasy for Valentine's Day, she thought wistfully.

But right now she'd better focus on reality, not fantasy, she reminded herself firmly. The fog actually seemed to be growing denser—and more dangerous. It might be better to get off the interstate at the first St. Genevieve exit and take the back road into town, she reasoned. At least there would be minimal traffic, and therefore less chance of an accident. She could barely see ten feet in front of her, and the thought that a tractor-trailer truck could be barreling along only a few feet away, unable to clearly see the lane markings and oblivious to the presence of her older-model compact car, was not comforting.

The exit sign loomed out of the mist unexpectedly, and Rebecca automatically flicked on her blinker, realizing the futility of the gesture even as she did so. She took the exit ramp slowly, with a bizarre sense that the world as she knew it had ceased to exist. Carefully she turned onto the deserted secondary road, her headlights barely piercing the gloom as she crept along. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen a car, and as she drove through the swirling mist, an eerie feeling swept over her. She didn't spook easily, but the overwhelming sense of isolation was almost palpable. She knew there were homes scattered along the road, but they weren't visible tonight. She had

no points of reference with which to mark her progress, and she felt disoriented and vulnerable. Worriedly she glanced at her gas tank, reassuring herself that she had plenty of fuel for the last leg of the trip home. This was definitely not the place to get stuck.

Rebecca's gaze flickered back to the road and she gasped as her headlights suddenly illuminated a figure walking slowly along the road, almost directly in front of her car. She swerved sharply to avoid it, then glanced in the rearview mirror in time to catch one final glimpse of the apparition before it was swallowed up in the gloom.

Good heavens, what had she seen? she wondered in alarm, her heart pounding as adrenaline raced through her veins. Surely not a ghost! Of course not, she admonished herself sharply, stifling her overactive imagination. She didn't believe in such nonsense. She forced herself to take several deep, calming breaths and eased back on the accelerator, frowning as she mentally tried to recreate the image that had briefly flashed across her field of vision.

It was a man, she realized, wearing a white dress shirt and a tie, and carrying a suit jacket. Had he been weaving slightly? Or was that just a trick of the swirling fog? she wondered. And why would he be walking along the road at this hour of the night in this weather? Her frown deepened and she lifted her foot off the accelerator even further, slowing the car to a crawl.

There were only a few possible explanations for the man's behavior. Either he was a lunatic, he was drunk or he was in

trouble.

The first two possibilities frightened her. She wasn't equipped to deal with them. Not alone on a deserted road. But if he was in trouble or hurt—she thought about the story of The Good Samaritan, who came to the assistance of the stranger on the road, and bit her lip thoughtfully. There was definitely a parallel here. She couldn't turn her back on someone in trouble. If he needed assistance, she had to provide it. But she wasn't going to take any chances, either. She'd just wait until he appeared and then use her best judgment to determine how to proceed.

Rebecca carefully pulled her car over to the side of the road, double-checked that all her doors were locked and that the windows were tightly rolled up, and waited.

As the minutes ticked slowly by and the man didn't appear, Rebecca began to worry. Perhaps he had become disoriented in the fog and wandered off the pavement. Or maybe he'd fallen into the drainage ditch near the shoulder. Or collapsed in the middle of the road, in the path of oncoming cars. Should she back up and...

Suddenly the man materialized out of the mist immediately to her left, and Rebecca drew a startled breath. He was less than ten feet away, walking right down the center of the road. In the unlikely event that a car appeared, he would be a sitting duck, she realized. But he seemed oblivious to the danger. He also seemed oblivious to her car. In fact, he didn't seem to notice anything. And he was definitely weaving, she realized. His gait

was unsteady, and his head was bowed.

Rebecca lowered her window a mere two inches and called to him. “Excuse me...do you need help?”

The man’s step faltered momentarily, and he raised a hand to his forehead, but after a moment he continued to walk without even looking in her direction.

Rebecca frowned and quickly put the car in gear, following along slowly beside him. She lowered her window a little further and tried calling even more loudly. “Hey, mister!”

The man stopped again, and this time he glanced confusedly in her direction. Rebecca studied his face, and though it was mostly obscured by the billowing wisps of fog, she could tell that he was fairly young. Late thirties, maybe. He was also tall. Probably six feet. And he looked strong. Very strong. Which frightened her. She would be no match for someone of his size, and on this deserted road anything could happen, she thought fearfully.

But suddenly, as the opaque veil between them momentarily lifted, she realized that her fears were unfounded. The man was clearly injured. His face was gray, and there was a long, nasty-looking gash at his hairline. He was obviously in no condition to walk, let alone attack anyone. She’d be willing to bet that at the moment her strength far surpassed his.

Feeling a little less frightened, she lowered her window even more. “What happened?” she called.

“Accident,” he mumbled, gesturing vaguely behind him.

Rebecca hadn’t seen a car, and she looked at him suspiciously.

“What kind of accident?”

“Deer,” he replied, his voice slurred. He didn’t appear to be able to manage answers of more than one word.

Suddenly he started to walk again, but after only two shaky steps his legs buckled and he fell heavily to his knees, palms flat on the pavement.

Without even stopping to consider her own safety, Rebecca unlocked her door and dashed toward him, stopping abruptly when she reached his side to stare down helplessly at his bowed head. What was she supposed to do now? Tentatively she reached down and touched his broad shoulder.

“Look, you can’t stay here,” she told him urgently. “You’re in the middle of the road.”

He ignored her, and in desperation she tugged on his muscular arm. “Please, try to get up. It’s dangerous here. You could be killed,” she pleaded.

Her words finally seemed to penetrate his consciousness, and he tilted his head to look up at her. His brown eyes were clouded and dazed, and he seemed to be having a difficult time focusing.

“Dizzy,” he mumbled.

“Look, I’ll help, okay?” she offered, tugging more forcefully on his arm.

This time he made an effort to stand. And as he struggled to his feet, she realized just how tall he was. At five-five she wasn’t exactly short, but he towered over her by at least six or seven inches. And he was well built. And obviously strong.

A wave of panic washed over her, and for a moment her resolve to help wavered. But when she loosened her grip, he swayed, and she was left with no choice but to guide his arm around her shoulders. Stay calm, she told herself sternly. Think logically. The man is hurt. He does not represent any danger.

She took a deep breath, repeating that mantra over and over again as she slowly guided him to the car. He leaned on her heavily, his breathing labored, and she stole a glance at his face. He looked awful, and she wondered if he might have other injuries besides the deep gash at his hairline. Please, Lord, help me get him to the hospital as quickly as possible, she prayed.

When they reached the car, she propped him against the front of the hood and backed up, eyeing him worriedly. “Stay put, okay?” she said slowly, enunciating every word. “I’m going to unlock the car door.”

Rebecca had no idea if he understood her words—or even if he heard them. In his zombielike state, she doubted whether very much was penetrating his consciousness. She’d just have to work quickly and hope he was able to remain upright until she returned.

She moved rapidly around the car to the driver’s side, and with one lithe movement climbed onto the seat and reached across to unlock the passenger door. She lowered the passenger seat to a semireclining position, then backed out of the car.

The whole maneuver took only a few seconds, but when she emerged, the stranger was trying unsteadily to navigate around

the car on his own. Her heart pounding, she raced toward him, praying that he wouldn't fall before she reached him. She didn't know whether he'd have the strength to stand up again, and she couldn't lift him.

Just as she reached his side he stumbled, wildly flinging out an arm as he tried to regain his balance. Unfortunately, Rebecca was right in the path of his knuckles.

The backhanded blow caught her on the chin, and she stumbled back, grabbing at his arm to keep from falling. But that only threw him more off balance, and before she knew what was happening he fell against her, pinning her to the hood of the car under his body.

Dazed from the blow, aware only that she was suddenly immobilized and at his mercy, Rebecca panicked as a wave of primitive fear swept over her. With a strangled sob, she struggled to get free, writhing beneath the man's weight. But he was heavy. So heavy! She could hardly move. But she had to get free! She had to! Summoning up all her strength, she shoved him far enough away to tear her body from beneath his.

The stranger seemed stunned by her action, and he staggered back, his eyes glazed. He wavered, then dropped to one knee, groaning as he raised his hands to his bowed head.

Still reeling from his blow, Rebecca reached up and gingerly felt her tender chin. Her chest was heaving as she drew in one ragged breath after another, and she braced herself against the hood, not sure her trembling legs would hold her up. In fact, her

whole body was shaking, she realized. As she struggled to control her irrational reaction, she watched the man touch the gash at his hairline, then stare in confusion at the blood dripping from his fingers.

With a sickening jolt, Rebecca realized that the impact of his fall must have opened the cut again, and a pang of guilt swept over her. Dear Lord, what was wrong with her? The man was hurt, for heaven's sake! He was in no condition to attack her even if he wanted to, which was unlikely. He hadn't hit her on purpose. She needed to get a grip.

Rebecca took several more deep breaths, then knelt beside the stranger and scanned his face. Blood was seeping from the gash, his pallor was alarming and his forehead felt clammy to her tentative touch. The man needed medical attention. Immediately. For the first time ever she regretted that she hadn't invested in the cellular phone Brad was always badgering her to get. It would certainly come in handy tonight.

She drew a deep breath and lifted his limp arm, tucking her head underneath. As she draped his arm around her slender shoulders, his hand brushed her bruised chin and she winced. But the condition of her jaw was the least of her problems. She was more worried about getting the stranger upright. Since he probably outweighed her by a good seventy-five pounds, that wasn't going to be easy. But she had to try. She needed to get him into her car before he passed out, which at the moment appeared to be an imminent possibility.

“Okay, can you try to get up?” she asked. “I’ll help. Just lean on me.”

Rebecca made an attempt to rise, but it was like tugging on a dead weight. He didn’t budge.

“Come on, mister, just try. Please!” she pleaded.

This time when she urged him upward he took the cue, struggling to stand as Rebecca tried to assist him. Once he was on his feet he swayed, and she planted her feet solidly, determined to maintain her own footing. She glanced up worriedly, noting the deep grooves of pain etched in his face and the thin, compressed line of his lips. Despite the chilly air there was a thin film of sweat on his brow, and his breathing was labored.

“We’re almost to the door,” she encouraged him, trying to keep the panic out of her voice. “It’s just a few steps. You can make it.”

Half dragging, half pulling, she got him into the car, expelling a shaky breath as she shut the door. She retrieved his suit jacket from the middle of the road where he’d dropped it, tossed it into the back seat, and slid behind the wheel. As she put the car in gear, she glanced over at his semisupine form. She wasn’t even sure at this point if he was conscious. But at least he was still breathing, she thought with relief, noting the even rise and fall of his broad chest.

As she drove carefully through the swirling, silent fog, she stole an occasional glance at her unexpected passenger. Although his color was ashen, his clothes stained and rumpled and his hair

disheveled, she could tell that he was handsome in a rugged sort of way. His dark brown hair was full and slightly longer than stylish, almost brushing his collar in the back but neatly trimmed. Her eyes traced his strong profile and firm jaw, which seemed to speak of character and integrity. Yet there was a worn look about his face—a sort of deep weariness that had nothing to do with his injuries. For some reason she had the impression that he was a man who had seen it all and now viewed the world with skepticism and cynicism. Despite his world-weary appearance, however, there was a feeling of leashed power about him. Even in his present condition he seemed to radiate energy and vitality and...sensuousness.

Rebecca was taken aback by that impression. Yet it was true. The man exuded an almost tangible virility. She stole another glance at him, her eyes lingering for a moment on his firm, strong lips. Her breath stuck in her throat, and she swallowed convulsively, forcing her gaze away from his face and down to his hands. He had nice hands, she thought. They looked...competent. As if they could be gentle or demanding or forceful, depending on the circumstance. The kind of hands that would be equally at home chopping wood—or caressing a woman.

Rebecca's gaze snapped back to the road. She was letting herself get way too fanciful. The man was a stranger! None of her speculations were grounded in reality. For example, just because he looked like he had character and integrity didn't mean he did. Looks could be deceiving. She knew that from experience.

Caution was more prudent than curiosity in a situation like this, she warned herself.

Yet she couldn't help but wonder about him. Why had he been driving on this road alone so late at night? She ventured another quick glance at his left hand. No ring. That didn't mean anything, of course. He might be one of those married men who preferred not to wear a ring. But for some reason she had a feeling he was single—and unattached. A surprising little tingle ran down her spine at that possibility.

Which was silly, she told herself sharply. In a few minutes they'd be at the hospital and, her duty done, she could finally go home and catch a few hours of much-needed sleep. She'd probably never see the man again. And that was just as well. For some reason he unnerved her, even in this semicomatose state. He was just so...male.

Rebecca knew that wasn't a very articulate explanation for her reaction, but it was accurate. His mere presence seemed somehow...dangerous...and threatening. Threatening to what, she wasn't sure. Certainly not her physical safety, not in his present condition. It was more insidious than that. It was almost as if he was a threat to her emotional safety, to her peace of mind. Which made no sense at all. She didn't even know the man. And she never would. In a few minutes she'd leave him at the hospital, and that would be the end of this little adventure.

But oddly enough, that thought didn't give her much comfort. "And you didn't see anything else?" the highway patrolman

asked after Rebecca finished her statement.

She shook her head, wrinkling her nose in distaste at the antiseptic hospital smell. “No. Like I told you, he was just wandering down the road. He mumbled something about a deer and an accident. But I didn’t see a car.”

“Well, we’ll check it out.” He turned to a new page in his notebook. “Now can I get your address and phone number?”

Rebecca frowned. “Why?”

The officer gave her a quizzical look. “If we have any questions later about the statement, we may have to call you. Is that a problem?”

“I’d really rather keep my name out of this.”

“We can mark it confidential, if you prefer. But we do need it for the record.”

Rebecca bit her lip. “He doesn’t have to know, does he?” she asked, nodding toward the examining room where they’d wheeled the stranger.

“No.”

“All right.”

By the time they’d finished filling out the report, the doctor joined them in the waiting area.

“So how is he?” the officer inquired. “Can I talk to him?”

“He’s still pretty groggy. I’m not sure you’ll get much, but you can try if you want to. We’re going to keep him here overnight for observation.”

“But he’ll be okay?” Rebecca queried.

“Looks like it.”

“Is there someone you can notify?”

The doctor nodded. “He gave us the name of a friend in town.”

Rebecca sighed with relief, feeling as if a responsibility had been lifted from her shoulders. She was bone weary, and six o'clock was going to roll around way too soon. “So I can leave?” she asked hopefully.

The doctor looked at the officer, and they both nodded.

“He did ask who brought him here, though,” the doctor told her. “I guess he'd like to thank you. Do you want me to pass along your name?”

Rebecca shook her head emphatically as she reached down to retrieve her purse from the plastic chair. “No.”

The doctor gave her an understanding look. “Okay. We'll just say it was a Good Samaritan. You're probably wise to be cautious. You can't be too careful these days.”

Rebecca nodded. Her earlier flights of fancy about the stranger might have been way off base, but she instinctively knew one thing. This man could disrupt her life. She sensed it with a degree of certainty that startled her. Intuitively she knew she would be a whole lot safer if she just vanished from his life.

And as she stepped outside, disappearing into the fog much as the handsome stranger had appeared out of it less than two hours before, she told herself this was the best way for this bizarre episode to end. She'd just pretend it had never happened. She would put the stranger out of her mind, forget their paths had

ever crossed.

But for some reason she had a feeling that wasn't going to be easy to do.

Chapter Two

“Hi, Ben.”

The rotund man behind the counter turned, wiped his hands on his white apron and smiled at Rebecca as she climbed onto a stool.

“Hi, there. I was beginnin’ to think you were going to skip your coffee again this morning. Missed you yesterday.”

Rebecca crossed her arms on the counter and rolled her eyes. “I barely made it to the restaurant in time to get lunch going,” she admitted ruefully. “I just don’t function well on five hours of sleep. And I don’t feel a whole lot better today.”

Ben looked at her quizzically, his bushy white eyebrows rising. “Late night Thursday?”

“Uh-huh. My brother and his wife had their baby, and I drove up to be with them. I just didn’t expect it to take so long. But babies seem to have their own schedules when it comes to making an entrance,” she noted wryly.

Ben chuckled. “That’s a fact. Everything go okay?”

“Yes. It was a great day—except for driving home in the fog.”

“I heard it was bad,” he sympathized. Suddenly he peered at her chin and leaned closer. “Say, that’s a nasty bruise,” he observed, inspecting the bluish patch of skin on her jaw, clearly visible even under makeup. “What happened?”

Rebecca wrinkled her nose and gingerly touched the tender

spot. “That, my friend, is a long story.”

She was saved from having to explain by the jingling bell on the door, announcing the arrival of another customer. Ben glanced toward the entrance, then poured her a cup of coffee. “This’ll wake you up. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Rebecca took a long, slow sip of the scalding liquid. Ben really did have a knack with coffee, she acknowledged. Of course, she could easily make her own at the restaurant a few doors away. But three years ago, when Ben had been one of the few people to oppose her request for a permit to open a restaurant, she’d gotten into the habit of stopping by every morning. It had taken a lot of talking on her part to convince him that she was no competition, that they would attract a different clientele. But she’d won him over in the end, and now they were the best of friends. Her early trips for coffee, once peace missions, were now simply an enjoyable way to start the day and catch up on town news.

Rebecca glanced affectionately toward the booth where Ben was conversing with another patron, gesturing emphatically over some point. With his bristly white hair framing a swatch of bald head—the fairway, he called it—he could almost pass for Santa Claus. In fact, he played that role every year at a variety of town holiday functions. And he had certainly been good to Rebecca.

By the time he ambled back to the counter, Rebecca’s cup was almost empty, and he reached for the pot to give her a refill. She started to protest, but he waved her objections aside. “I know you usually only indulge in one cup, but you’ll have a busy day

today, bein' Saturday and all. You'll need it." He reached into the toaster oven behind him and plopped a bagel on a plate, adding cream cheese and a pat of butter. "And have this, too. You need to keep up your energy. Running a restaurant is hard work. I know. Although how you manage to stay so skinny in this business is beyond me. Course, I went the other way." He patted his generous stomach and grinned. "Too much sampling, I guess," he said with a wink.

Rebecca smiled. "Thanks, Ben. What would I do without you?"

He waved her comment aside. "You'd get along just fine. You've got those two old busybodies dithering over you all day at the restaurant."

"Now, Ben," she admonished him gently. "You know I could never manage without Rose and Frances. They're a godsend."

With a snort he reached for a damp rag and began polishing the sparkling counter. Rebecca stifled a smile as she took a bite of the bagel. The friendly rivalry for her affections between the two camps—Ben in the diner, Rose and Frances in the restaurant—always amused her. But she was grateful to be blessed with such loyal friends.

"Well, all I can say is, you make the best coffee in town," Rebecca declared to appease him. She knew he was mollified when he handed her the morning paper.

"Here. Take a gander," he said gruffly. "Probably be the only time all day you sit down."

“Thanks, Ben.” Rebecca took the peace offering and scanned the headlines, her attention caught by a story on area flooding. She didn’t even look up when the jangling bell announced a new arrival, at least not until Ben leaned down to give her an update.

“Mark’s here. Got a stranger with him, too.”

Even before she glanced up at the mirror over the grill and saw his reflection, Rebecca knew with uncanny certainty that the stranger with Mark was the man in the fog. She swallowed her last sip of coffee with difficulty, her pulse suddenly accelerating as she peeked above the paper to surreptitiously survey his image. If she’d had any doubts about his identity, the bandage at his hairline immediately confirmed her intuition. And if she’d sensed a power and virility radiating from him Thursday night when he was half-unconscious, today it was at full strength. His attire—worn jeans that sat well on his slim hips, and a dark green cotton shirt that revealed a glimpse of dark brown hair at the open neckline—only enhanced his appeal.

Suddenly Rebecca felt shaky, and though she made an attempt to control her physical reaction to his presence, it proved futile. She didn’t have much time to try, anyway, because Mark immediately walked over to her, the stranger in his wake.

“Hi, Rebecca. Can we join you?”

Rebecca turned slightly at their approach and forced herself to smile at Mark, avoiding the stranger’s eyes as she struggled to find her voice. “Of course.”

Mark climbed onto a stool and gestured toward his

companion. “Rebecca, this is a buddy of mine from way back, Zach Wright. He’s a reporter—for that paper, in fact,” Mark said, leaning over to tap on the section Rebecca was clutching. “He’s here to cover the flood. Zach, Rebecca Matthews.”

Rebecca could no longer avoid looking at the stranger, so she took a deep breath and turned to face him. The last time he’d gazed at her his eyes had been glazed, unfocused and dull with pain. Now they were clear and alert and warm. And disturbing. Her pulse went into overdrive.

Zach held out his hand, and short of being rude, she had no choice but to place hers in his firm grasp. “It’s nice to meet you, Rebecca.” He had a pleasant voice, deep and mellow, with just a touch of huskiness.

“It’s nice to meet you, too.” She tried to think of something else to say, anything, but her mind suddenly went blank. All she could do was stare into his compelling brown eyes.

Zach was equally captivated by the hazel eyes locked on his. Rebecca Matthews was a beautiful woman, with classic high cheekbones accentuated by the French twist hairstyle of her russet-colored hair. Beautiful and, surprisingly, familiar. He somehow sensed that their paths had crossed before. He had a good memory for names and faces—a skill that was essential in his business—and it rarely failed him. But he came up empty on the woman across from him. Although how he could forget someone who looked like Rebecca Matthews was beyond him.

As the seconds lengthened, Zach realized that they were

beginning to draw curious glances, and he reluctantly released her delicate hand with an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry...I don’t mean to stare, but...have we met before?” he asked, his eyes probing, quizzical.

Rebecca debated her answer. Originally she’d planned to keep her role in the stranger’s rescue a secret because he was a stranger. But now that she knew he was a friend of Mark’s, remaining anonymous was less important. She’d known Mark for several years, and if this man was a friend of his, he was okay.

She smiled faintly, and a becoming flush tinted her cheeks. “Sort of. Although given the circumstances I’m not surprised you’re having a hard time placing me. Between the fog and the accident, I’m amazed you remember anything.”

Zach stared at her, the puzzlement in his eyes rapidly giving way to comprehension. “You mean...it was you on the road Thursday night? You were the one who stopped to help and drove me to the hospital?” he asked incredulously.

She nodded and glanced away, reaching for her coffee cup. “Yes.”

Mark stared at Rebecca, then at Zach. “Are you telling me that Rebecca is the angel of mercy you’ve been raving about?”

Rebecca’s startled gaze flew to Zach’s, and he felt his neck redden. But before he could speak, Mark leaned over to examine Rebecca’s chin.

“Wow!” he exclaimed. “I just noticed the bruise! What happened? It looks like somebody slugged you.”

Rebecca's gaze flickered to Zach, then skittered away. "It was an accident," she said with a shrug, dismissing his question.

There was a moment of silence, and when Zach spoke his voice was troubled. "Why do I have a feeling I'm responsible for that?" he said slowly.

Rebecca turned to find him frowning as he studied the purple bruise shading the delicate line of her jaw. She shrugged again, flushing in embarrassment. "It was an accident," she repeated. "You were hurt. You lost your balance, and I was in the way."

He expelled a long breath and ran his fingers through his hair. "I think I owe you a very big thank-you—and a sincere apology," he said quietly, his intense eyes holding hers captive.

Rebecca dismissed his thanks with a shrug. "I'm glad I could help. And this is nothing," she assured him, gesturing vaguely toward her jaw. "So how are you?" she inquired, feeling increasingly self-conscious under Zach's speculative gaze.

"Doing better. Thanks."

"Twelve stitches and a concussion," Mark elaborated. "Go ahead, Zach. Sit down," he suggested, indicating the stool next to Rebecca.

Zach hesitated, sensing that for some reason his presence was disruptive to the woman beside him, but she smiled politely.

"Please do," she seconded. "I have to leave, anyway." She drained her cup in one long gulp and slid to the ground. "I hope you recover quickly," she said, forcing herself to meet his magnetic eyes.

“Thanks.” He grinned disarmingly, once more extending his hand, and again she was left with no choice but to take it. As he enfolded her slender fingers in his firm grip, her heart began to bang painfully against her chest, so strongly she was almost afraid he would be able to feel it through the vibrating tips of her fingers. His eyes held hers—curious, questioning, warm... and interested. Which did nothing to slow her metabolism.

“Thanks again for Thursday night.” His voice was still shaded by that appealing, husky timbre. “I’m not sure what would have happened if you hadn’t come along. I’m just sorry about that.” His gaze flickered down to her jaw, and he started to reach up as if to touch the bruise. Rebecca’s breath caught in her throat and her heart stopped, but suddenly he dropped his hand, shoving it into the pocket of his jeans instead. Rebecca’s pulse kicked back in, then raced on.

“Anyway, I just want you to know that I don’t usually go around hitting women,” he assured her, his voice even more husky than before.

She cleared her throat, hoping her own voice wouldn’t desert her. “I’m sure you don’t. I’m just glad you’re okay.” Carefully she withdrew her hand, and with an effort she tore her gaze from his to look at Mark. “See you later.”

“You bet.”

“Ben, thanks for the coffee.”

“Anytime.”

And then she fled.

Zach planted his hands on his hips and watched her leave, a slight frown marring his brow. Clearly she'd wanted to escape from his presence as quickly as possible. But why? It wasn't that she was unfriendly. She just seemed...well, skittish. He reached up and rubbed the back of his neck with one hand. He couldn't recall ever meeting anyone quite like Rebecca Matthews. She was poised and polished, yet she seemed somehow...untouched. Vulnerable. Fragile. Without hard edges or pretense. She radiated an almost innate goodness, an old-fashioned air of shy sweetness. Those weren't qualities he'd run into often, and he was intrigued—and captivated.

He turned thoughtfully and straddled the stool next to Mark, who was watching him with amused interest.

“Forget it, pal,” Mark warned with a grin.

“Forget what?” Zach asked coolly, reaching for the mug of coffee Ben placed on the counter.

Mark chuckled. “I’ve seen that look before. Had it once myself. Just don’t get your hopes up. Rebecca’s great—but she has no interest in romance.”

“Are you speaking from personal experience?”

“Of course! Do you think a single woman who looks like her could come to a small town like this and not be pursued by every eligible man in the county? But she wasn’t interested. Period. In anyone. So I didn’t take it personally. We all had to settle for being just friends.”

“Hmm.”

“‘Hmm’ what?”

“‘Hmm’ as in, that’s interesting but I’m not in the market, anyway.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Right,” Zach repeated firmly. “As my boss told me, I need some time to decompress.”

Mark grinned. “I can think of worse ways.”

Zach chuckled. “Speaking of which, when do I get to meet your elusive fiancée?”

Mark smiled. “How about dinner tomorrow night?”

“Sounds great.”

“Listen, do you mind if I run next door for a minute while you finish your coffee? Then I’ll give you the ten-cent tour.”

“No problem.”

Mark slid off the stool. “Ben will keep you company while I’m gone, right Ben?”

“Sure.” A moment later the door jangled to indicate Mark’s departure, and Ben ambled over to remove his cup, wiping the counter as he spoke. “Nice girl, Rebecca,” he said conversationally.

“Seems to be,” Zach agreed.

“Make a good wife for somebody,” Ben commented nonchalantly.

“From what Mark says, the lady’s not interested in romance,” Zach replied, taking a leisurely sip of his coffee.

Ben snorted. “Well, if you ask me, she just hasn’t met the right

man yet.”

Zach had a knack for discreetly ferreting out large amounts of information without people realizing just how much they were divulging. It came in handy in his job—and in situations like this.

By the time he left the diner he knew quite a bit about Rebecca Matthews. She'd moved to St. Genevieve three years before to open her restaurant, “Rebecca’s,” which was becoming quite popular with both locals and St. Louisans, who often came to the quaint town for weekend getaways. She'd even been written up a few times in area papers—his own included, if Ben's information was accurate. A graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, she'd worked in a couple of prestigious restaurants before striking out on her own. She came from the small town of Jersey, in southern Missouri, where her father still lived. Her brother, Brad—a minister—and his wife, Sam, made their home in St. Louis. She'd been returning from there Thursday night after the birth of their daughter. As far as Zach could tell from Ben's ramblings, Rebecca never dated. And she was apparently doted over by two maiden sisters who worked at her restaurant.

As Mark and Zach started off on their tour a few minutes later, Mark pointed out Rebecca's restaurant. It was a modest building in the historic district, identified only by a discreet awning that displayed the name.

“Rebecca really is a wonderful chef,” Mark told him. “The food's great. You'll have to try it while you're here.”

“Uh-huh,” Zach replied noncommittally. As a matter of fact,

he intended to become a regular customer. And not because of the food.

“Rose, have you seen the tube of whipped cream with the star tip?” Rebecca called, her voice muffled as she stuck her head into the restaurant’s huge refrigerator.

Rose glanced at the work counter, where the tube lay in clear sight right next to the torte Rebecca was decorating. It was exactly where she’d laid it moments before. Rose glanced at Frances across the counter, and her sister shrugged, mystified. Rebecca was extremely organized, and they’d never seen her flustered. Until this morning.

“It’s right here, dear,” Rose said, pointing to the tube as Rebecca turned.

“Oh. Well. I guess my brain just isn’t in gear this morning. I haven’t quite caught up on my sleep since Thursday night,” she explained lamely, warm color suffusing her face.

“Frances and I will just finish up in the dining room and leave you in peace to work your magic on that cake,” Rose replied, motioning for her sister to follow.

“All right.” Rebecca distractedly wiped her hands on her apron and glanced around the kitchen. “Now where did I put that spatula?” she mumbled.

Rose ushered Frances out of the kitchen, and the two older women looked at each other quizzically. With their white hair pulled neatly back into identical soft, motherly buns, the sisters could almost pass for twins, although Rose was the older by two

years and stood three inches taller than Frances.

“What do you make of it?” Frances whispered, her voice tinged with concern.

Rose shook her head, frowning. “I don’t know,” she said slowly, clearly puzzled.

“She almost put cinnamon in the quiche this morning, too,” Frances informed her sister worriedly.

Rose considered that for a moment, and then her face grew thoughtful. “Unless...”

“Unless what?” Frances prompted.

“Unless it’s a man,” Rose replied reverently.

“A man?” Frances repeated, her eyes widening.

“Yes,” Rose declared, nodding vigorously, becoming more certain by the moment. “I’d bet my prize-winning recipe for pickle relish that there’s a man behind this!”

“You mean our Rebecca’s got herself a man?” Frances said incredulously.

“How else would you explain what’s been happening this morning? Have you ever seen her so disorganized or absentminded?”

Frances shook her head. “No.”

“Then there you have it! There’s a man behind this, all right,” Rose asserted.

“But who?” Frances asked, bewildered.

Rose sighed, her brow knitted in concentration. “I don’t know. But maybe that old buzzard, Ben, does. She had coffee there this

morning.”

“He won’t tell us anything,” Frances lamented, shaking her head regretfully.

“He will if you drop by with a piece of that torte this afternoon,” Rose declared conspiratorially. “He has a sweet spot for you, anyway.”

Frances smoothed back her hair and sniffed, pretending indifference. “Well, I suppose I could try.”

“It couldn’t hurt,” Rose agreed.

“So what did you find out?” Rose asked eagerly when Frances returned from her mission later in the day, empty plate in hand.

Frances looked around carefully to make sure they were alone, then leaned close. “There was a stranger in there this morning with Mark,” she reported in a hushed voice. “Name of Zach. His car went off the road in the fog, and Rebecca drove him to the hospital. He’s a reporter from St. Louis, here to cover the flood. Ben says there was enough electricity flying between the two of them to run his toaster without even plugging it in. Said this Zach seemed like a real nice gentleman.”

Rose gave a satisfied nod. “Good job, Frances.”

Suddenly the front door of the restaurant opened, and both women straightened up guiltily. A young man carrying a large vase covered with green florist tissue entered the shop and made his way toward them.

“I have a delivery for Rebecca Matthews,” he informed the sisters, consulting the card attached to the tissue.

"I'll get her," Rose offered eagerly, bustling toward the kitchen. She opened the door and stuck her head inside.

"Rebecca, there's a delivery here for you."

Rebecca looked up from the soup she was stirring on the stove and frowned. "All our delivery people know to come around back."

"It's not that kind of delivery," Rose replied, her eyes dancing.

Rebecca's frown deepened. "What do you—" But Rose was already gone. Rebecca sighed. She was having a hard enough time concentrating today without all these interruptions, she thought irritably as she pushed through the swinging door.

She stopped abruptly when she saw the young man standing there with what was obviously a vase of flowers, Rose and Frances flanking him on each side like bodyguards.

"Rebecca Matthews?" the boy asked.

"Yes."

"These are for you." He walked over and handed the vase to her. Then, jingling his keys and humming under his breath, he headed back out the front door while Rebecca stared, dumbfounded, at the flowers in her arms.

"Well, aren't you going to open them?" Frances prompted her. "Don't you want to know who they're from?"

Rebecca already knew who they were from. There was no other possibility. Carefully, her heart hammering in her chest, she set the vase down on a convenient table and tore off the green paper to reveal a dozen long-stemmed yellow roses artfully

arranged with fern and baby's breath.

"Oh, my!" Frances breathed in awe, reaching out to delicately touch a petal, as if trying to assure herself the roses were real. "Aren't they beautiful?"

"Here's the card, dear," Rose informed Rebecca, extracting it from the flowers and holding it out encouragingly.

Rebecca took it gingerly, suddenly finding it difficult to breathe. She tore open the envelope carefully and slid the card out, taking a deep breath before scanning the message.

"Please accept these with my thanks and apology. It was a memorable encounter. Zach."

For some reason Rebecca suspected that the "encounter" he was referring to had occurred this morning, not Thursday night, and that thought sent a tingle down her spine.

"Well?" Rose prompted.

Rebecca looked up blankly. She'd totally forgotten her audience. "It's just from someone I did a favor for," she explained vaguely, her voice a bit breathless.

"It must have been some favor," Frances commented.

"Yellow roses. Now that's interesting," Rose mused.

Rebecca looked at her curiously. "What do you mean?"

"The language of flowers, dear," Rose replied matter-of-factly. "Yellow roses mean 'I'll never forget you.'"

Rebecca's face flamed and she lowered her head, tucking the note into her apron pocket. "I doubt whether anyone knows that these days," she remarked, striving for an offhanded tone. "It's

just a coincidence.”

“Maybe,” Rose replied, her eyes twinkling. “And then again, maybe not.”

“Well, I don’t have time to speculate about flower messages,” Rebecca declared briskly. “There’s too much to do.” She picked up the vase and, without a backward look, headed for the kitchen.

The two sisters watched until the door swung shut behind her. Then Frances turned to Rose.

“Do you think they’re from him?” she asked eagerly.

“Absolutely. Who else would be sending Rebecca flowers?”

“So our Rebecca really does have a beau,” Frances breathed in awe.

“Looks that way,” Rose affirmed. “Now let’s just hope she gives him a chance.”

“Rebecca, some friends of yours are here,” Frances announced as she came bustling into the kitchen to pick up the salad course. “That nice couple from St. Louis.”

“Nick and Laura?” Rebecca said in surprise, turning from the stove where she was stirring the sauce for chicken Madeira. Normally she checked the reservations, but she simply hadn’t had time today.

“Mmm-hmm,” Frances confirmed.

“Tell them I’ll stop by and say hello at dessert, would you?” Rebecca asked over her shoulder.

“Of course.”

Rebecca smiled as she added some lemon juice to the sauce.

She didn't get to see her childhood friend often enough. Laura's business as a landscape architect was booming, and her free time was pretty much devoted to Nick, "the man of her dreams," as she called him. And Rebecca couldn't blame her. Nick Sinclair would make any woman's heart beat faster. Rebecca didn't know much about Laura's first marriage, but apparently there had been serious problems of some sort. Serious enough that Brad, who was not only Laura's friend but her minister, had once told Rebecca that he doubted whether Laura would ever remarry. But then along came Nick, who somehow convinced Laura to take a second chance on love.

Rebecca was happy for her. She remembered that even as children, Laura, who was several years older than Rebecca, had always taken it upon herself to watch out for her younger friend and make sure she was included in the games and activities. Rebecca never forgot her kindness, and she was truly happy that Laura had found her own Prince Charming. And she also had Laura to thank for getting Sam and her brother together. If Sam hadn't been Laura's maid of honor, Sam and Brad might never have found each other. The Lord really did work in mysterious—and wondrous—ways, Rebecca reflected with a smile.

An hour later, as Rebecca put the finishing touches on the chocolate mousse with zabaglione, she was glad once again that she limited dinner service to a single seating on Friday and Saturday nights. Until she could afford to hire another chef, one seating was all she could manage. And when she had a full house

—as she did more and more often lately—she was a zombie by Saturday night. But it was satisfying to know that her efforts were paying dividends, and not a day went by that she didn't give thanks for her success.

Rebecca stepped back and surveyed the forty servings of dessert, nodding in approval. They were picture-perfect. She shrugged out of her apron, and as Rose and Frances entered the kitchen with two of the high school students who helped out on weekends, she picked up two servings of dessert and stepped into the dining room. Her gaze immediately went to Nick and Laura's "special" table, the same one they'd sat at on their first visit, in the early stage of their relationship. They always asked for it when they made reservations.

As she joined them, Nick rose and pulled out a chair for her. "Thanks," she said with a smile. "But I'm not staying long. I don't like to intrude on my guests' dinner."

"Oh, Rebecca, we want to visit a little," Laura assured her. "We hardly ever get to see you anymore."

"Life is busy. What can I say?" she replied with a grin. "And I'm not complaining. In this business, busy is good."

"Mmm, I can see why you're busy, with desserts like these," Laura complimented her, closing her eyes as she savored the rich, creamy confection.

"I'll second that," Nick added appreciatively.

"It's a good thing we don't come here too often, though, or my figure would certainly suffer. Not that it will matter soon,

anyway,” Laura said, smiling tenderly at Nick, who took her hand in a gentle clasp, his eyes warm and caressing as he gazed at her.

Rebecca glanced from one to the other as suspicion turned to certainty. “Does that mean what I think it does?” she asked with a smile.

Laura looked back at Rebecca, her eyes shining. “Yes,” she replied softly. “Our first little one is on the way.”

Rebecca reached over and took Laura’s free hand. “I’m so happy for you,” she told her sincerely, her gaze encompassing them both. “When’s the big day?”

“October 4, according to the doctor. It seems like such a long way off, but I know the time will fly. And I can’t wait to decorate the nursery!”

Rebecca felt her throat constrict at the glow of happiness on Laura’s face, and she blinked rapidly. She was thrilled for Laura, of course. Just as she had been for Sam. But once again, being in the presence of such a committed, loving couple only served to remind her of her own solitary life. She forced herself to smile, and with one final squeeze of Laura’s hand, she stood up. She needed to escape to the kitchen, take a moment to compose herself.

“Well, I’ll leave you two alone to celebrate. You obviously have lots of exciting things to discuss.”

Nick stood up, as well, and took Rebecca’s hand. “It was wonderful seeing you again,” he said warmly. “And the food, as always, was superb.”

“Thank you, Nick.”

“Keep in touch, okay, Rebecca?” Laura requested.

“Of course. And if nothing else, I’m sure I’ll get regular updates from Brad and Sam. Good luck, Laura. I’ll keep you in my prayers.”

“Thanks, Becka,” Laura replied warmly, reverting to her friend’s childhood nickname.

Rebecca turned away and walked unseeingly toward the kitchen, struggling to hold her tears at bay, berating herself for indulging in such blatant self-pity. She had so much to be thankful for. It was wrong to feel sorry for herself. Just because she’d never found someone who had the key to unlock her heart didn’t mean...

“Hello, Rebecca.”

Rebecca stopped abruptly and glanced toward the voice that had haunted her dreams for the past week. Zach Wright was sitting alone at a secluded corner table. She swallowed and brushed her hand across her eyes before moving toward him, trying to compose herself and discreetly erase evidence of her teary state. Which was difficult to do when her respiration had suddenly gone berserk and her eyes still felt misty.

Zach watched Rebecca approach, his discerning eyes missing nothing as they raked over her face. She was upset. Almost in tears, in fact, although she was struggling mightily to conceal that fact. He’d watched her interacting with the couple at the table across the room, and she’d been smiling and happy then. Their

parting had been warm and amicable, as well. But something had prompted this sudden change of mood. He rose as she approached, and indicated the extra chair.

“Could you join me for coffee?”

Rebecca ran her damp palms down the front of her simple, tailored black skirt, trying to still the erratic beating of her heart. Now she was doubly sorry she hadn't taken the time to check the names on the reservation list. It would have been nice to have some warning of Zach's presence. She knew he'd come in for lunch several times since arriving a week ago, but she'd gone out of her way to avoid him, much to the dismay of Rose and Frances. The simple fact was he made her nervous.

Rebecca knew, instinctively, that Zach was way out of her league in the arena of man/woman relationships. Smooth, fast, a man of strong passions—those were the words that came to mind when she thought of him. And she simply wasn't equipped to deal with someone like that. Especially not now, when her emotions were so near the surface. She'd just have to find an excuse of some sort to decline his offer.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice sounding shaky even to her ears. “But there's so much to do in the kitchen that—”

“Nonsense, my dear,” Rose declared briskly, pausing to refill Zach's coffee cup as she bustled by. “Everything is under control. You sit down and have some coffee with this nice young man. You've been on your feet all day.”

Rebecca looked at Rose in dismay, then turned to find Zach

watching her expectantly.

“I won’t take up much of your time,” he promised with an engaging smile.

Rebecca sighed. She might as well give in. Rose had invalidated her best excuse to decline his invitation, and nothing else came to mind. “All right. For a few minutes.”

Rose waved to Frances, who hurried over to place a cup of coffee in front of Rebecca. “Now isn’t this cozy?” she asked with a satisfied smile.

Rebecca gave the hovering sisters a withering look, but they seemed oblivious.

“If you need anything else, you just let us know,” Rose told Zach.

Zach watched them depart, then turned to Rebecca. “They seem very nice,” he remarked, his eyes glinting with amusement.

“Oh, they are. Just a little too motherly at times,” Rebecca replied wryly. “For two women who have been single all their life, they take an inordinate interest in my—” She started to say “love life,” but caught herself, a flush creeping across her cheeks as she gazed at Zach. She had the uncomfortable feeling that he knew exactly what she was going to say, but at least he didn’t pursue it.

“Well, I like them,” he declared. “But I do feel a little guilty. I didn’t mean to railroad you into having coffee with me. I hoped you might want to, but I have a feeling I may have caught you at a bad time.” He paused and stirred his coffee, frowning slightly. “I

hope you won't think I'm being too personal, but you seemed... upset...when I stopped you. I thought maybe you had some bad news from that couple over there." He nodded toward Nick and Laura.

"Oh, no, not at all," Rebecca assured him. "Just the opposite, in fact." She gazed back at her friends, who seemed oblivious to their surroundings as they sat close together, talking and laughing softly. "I just found out they're expecting their first child, and I'm very happy for them."

"I see." Zach thought there was more to it than that, but he wasn't going to push. Rebecca struck him as a very private person who might easily back off if she felt he was encroaching on her turf.

When her gaze returned to his she found him studying her speculatively, and she dropped her eyes self-consciously, tracing the rim of her coffee cup with one finger. "I'd like to thank you for the flowers," she said softly. "They were beautiful. But it wasn't necessary."

"I wanted to do it. You took a risk, stopping to help a stranger, and I appreciate that. Besides, I still feel badly about the bruised jaw. Sending flowers was the least I could do."

Frances was walking by at just that moment, and she stopped in her tracks. "So those beautiful roses were from you!" she exclaimed. "Rebecca just loved them! She even kept one to dry."

"Frances!" Rebecca rebuked the older woman, blushing furiously.

“Oh, my, I guess I shouldn’t have said anything, should I?” Frances murmured contritely. “You’re always supposed to keep the gentleman guessing, aren’t you? Well, I’ll just leave before I put my foot in my mouth again.”

Zach chuckled as he watched her hurry off. “I see what you mean about the sisters,” he acknowledged.

“Listen, I’m really sorry about that,” Rebecca apologized, her face flaming. “Just because a man sends me flowers and then asks me to have coffee, they’re jumping to all sorts of conclusions. Most of which are wrong.”

Zach took a sip of his coffee, carefully set the cup down and leveled a direct look at her. “Are they?”

Rebecca stared at him. “What...what do you mean?” she asked, her voice quavering.

Before she could anticipate his intent he leaned forward and laid his hand over hers. “Exactly what you think I mean,” he said evenly.

Rebecca swallowed with difficulty. She’d never met a man quite this...frank...about his interest. It was just as she suspected. He was fast moving...and smooth. “Look, Zach, I... I don’t date, if that’s what you’re after.”

“That’s exactly what I’m after,” he confirmed. “Why don’t you date?”

For a lot of reasons, she thought silently. None of which she wanted to go into, especially with a man she hardly knew. “I just don’t.”

“Well, I’m not the kind of guy who gives up easily. Do you mind if I keep trying to convince you to make an exception in my case?”

Rebecca glanced down at the strong, tanned hand, flecked with dark brown hair, that covered hers. She’d like to get to know him better, actually. There was something about him that she found appealing. But despite the promise she’d made to herself on Valentine’s Day—to allow the possibility of romance into her life—she wasn’t yet ready to deal with someone of Zach’s determination and almost tangible virility. It frightened her. Besides, getting involved with a man who was just passing through wasn’t at all wise. She could be too easily hurt.

“You’ll be wasting your time,” she told him with a soft sigh, keeping her eyes downcast.

Zach squeezed her hand, then leaned back and picked up his cup. “Well, I must admit that this isn’t exactly great for my ego. You avoid me whenever I come in for lunch, and you won’t go out with me. Don’t you like me, Rebecca?”

“You seem nice,” she hedged.

“‘Seem.’ An interesting choice of words,” he mused. “Do I detect a note of caution in that comment?”

She shrugged. “You know what they say. A woman can’t be too careful these days.”

“Unfortunately, that’s true.” He paused and took a sip of his coffee. He sensed there was more behind Rebecca’s wariness than mere caution, and he was determined to get the whole

story before he gave up on her. “Well, we could bring along a chaperone. How about Rose or Frances?”

Rebecca smiled despite herself. “Now that would be something, wouldn’t it?”

“Hey, if it makes you more comfortable, I’m game.”

For a minute she was actually tempted. But the fact remained that soon he would be returning to his life in St. Louis, and while St. Genevieve wasn’t that far away in distance, she suspected that once enmeshed in his life in the city, it would seem like another planet to Zach. He would forget the small town—and the woman named Rebecca who had simply provided a pleasant diversion while he was stuck there.

Regretfully she shook her head. “I don’t think so, Zach.”

He looked at her, letting a few moments of silence pass before he spoke. “I’d still like to keep trying.”

“Why?” she asked curiously. The man certainly didn’t discourage easily, she’d give him that.

“Because I find you attractive. Appealing. Interesting. And very intriguing. And I’d like to get to know you better. So...do you mind if I keep at this for a while?”

Rebecca couldn’t help but be flattered—and a little overwhelmed—by his compliments and his determination. “Does it matter if I do?” she asked faintly.

He looked surprised. “Of course. I’m not into harassing women. If you want me out of your life, I’ll be gone. But I think there’s a spark between us. I sure feel it, and I suspect you do, too,

whether you're willing to admit it or not," he said frankly. "I'd like to see where it leads. And I'd like to keep trying to convince you to do the same."

This was her chance. She could just tell him to get lost, and he would. He'd said as much. And she suspected he would honor his promise. She opened her mouth to decline his pursuit, but to her surprise different words came out instead. "I just hope you're not disappointed."

Zach smiled, and though his posture had seemed relaxed throughout their conversation, she could feel an almost palpable easing of tension. "I'll consider that a green light. And as for being disappointed—well, let's just say I'm not worried."

"Maybe you should consider it a yellow light," Rebecca countered, "as in 'proceed with caution.'"

"Okay, a yellow light then," he said, laughing.

Rebecca looked into his warm and insightful eyes, and felt her heart stop, then rush on. Zach said he wasn't worried. And she believed him. She just wished she could say the same about herself.

Chapter Three

Zach turned up his collar and took another sip of steaming coffee from the paper cup. The Red Cross tent offered an oasis of light but only marginal protection from the cold drizzle and bone-chilling wind that sliced through the darkness. It had been raining steadily for the past three days, and the river was rising ominously, edging precariously close to danger levels. An urgent call had gone out two days ago for volunteer sandbaggers, and it seemed just about everyone in town had turned out to help with the hard, messy work. Zach had interviewed a number of volunteers as well as National Guard and Red Cross spokespeople, and he was just about to call it a night.

But though he was tired and cold, he was also impressed by the spirit of generosity and selflessness he'd discovered during his ten days in the small community. Having dealt for so long with the selfish, unethical side of human nature, he'd almost forgotten there was a generous, moral side. His experience in St. Genevieve had certainly given his faith in humanity a much-needed boost.

Zach drained his cup, then turned to toss it into a trash container, colliding with a passing volunteer in the process. His hand instinctively shot out to steady the middle-aged man, who was wearing horn-rimmed glasses.

"Sorry about that," Zach said contritely.

The man waved aside the apology. "I'm sure it was my fault.

These glasses are so fogged up and wet I can hardly see where I'm going." He took them off and carefully wiped them on a handkerchief, then reset them on his nose and grinned at Zach. "That'll help—for about two minutes."

Zach's mouth twisted into a wry smile of acknowledgment. "Nasty night."

The man looked out into the darkness and nodded. "It sure is. I just hope we can keep up with the river." He turned back to Zach and held out his hand. "I'm Phil Carr. English teacher at the high school."

Zach returned the man's firm grip. "Zach Wright from St. Louis. I'm a reporter, here to cover the flood."

"Oh, yes, Mark Holt mentioned your name."

"You know Mark?"

Phil smiled. "This is a small town. I know a lot of people. Besides, Mark lives down the street from me." He hesitated and looked at Zach earnestly. "I was actually hoping I might run into you."

Zach's eyebrows rose quizzically. "Why is that?"

"Well, I hope you won't think this is too much of an imposition, and I'll understand if you can't do it, but I teach composition and it would be a real treat to have a reporter from St. Louis talk to one of the classes. Do you think you might be able to spare an hour or two before you head back?"

Zach considered the unexpected invitation thoughtfully. He hadn't done anything like that for a long time, and his classroom

skills were probably pretty rusty. But it might be fun. “Sure. As a matter of fact, I’ve always been interested in teaching. I even double majored in college—journalism and education. I just couldn’t make up my mind between the two. But I got a good newspaper offer when I graduated, so that sealed my fate. It would actually be nice to get into a classroom again,” he mused, warming to the idea as he spoke.

“Great! I’ll give you a call. Are you staying in town?”

“Yeah. Let me jot down the information for you.” Zach scribbled the name of his motel, as well as his work number on a piece of paper and handed it to Phil. “If I’m not at the motel, just leave me a voice mail at the office.”

“I’ll do that. And thanks again. The kids will really enjoy this.” He tucked the slip of paper carefully into his pocket and rubbed his hands together. “Well, back to the trenches,” he said with a smile.

Zach watched him leave, then turned to survey the scene once more. The ranks were thinning a bit, but it was nine o’clock, after all. Most of these people had put in a full day at work and would have to do the same tomorrow. It was really amazing, he thought. The vast majority of the volunteers weren’t personally threatened by the flood, yet they were still willing to help out, even under these miserable conditions. He almost felt guilty for heading back to his warm, dry motel room. But he did have to put this story together and E-mail it to the paper, so he still had a long night ahead of him.

Zach stepped out from under the tent and slowly made his way past the line of sandbaggers, shivering despite his sheepskin-lined jacket. The cold rain was already working its way insidiously down his neck, and his boots made loud sucking sounds as he trudged through the mud. He glanced again at the tired faces as he passed. Sandbagging was backbreaking work, as he'd come to learn in the past couple of days, yet people of all ages and sexes were here to help, from high-schoolers to grandfathers to—

Zach stopped abruptly and stared at a slight figure up ahead in one of the sandbag lines. He could swear that was—

“Zach!”

With an effort Zach pulled his gaze away from the figure and turned. “Hi, Mark.”

“Working late?”

“Yeah. But I’m about to call it a night. Listen, tell me I’m wrong, but—” he glanced back with a frown toward the figure that had caught his attention “—is that...”

“Rebecca?” Mark finished. “Yeah. She’s been helping every spare minute since the call went out for sandbaggers. I’ve been trying to convince her to go home for the last hour. I even offered her a ride, but she said she wanted to stay.”

“How long has she been here?”

Mark shrugged. “I don’t know. But she was here when I showed up three hours ago.”

Zach felt a muscle clench in his jaw, and he jammed his

hands into his pockets. “She must be frozen. Not to mention exhausted.”

“Well, why don’t you try to convince her to leave?” Mark suggested. “Maybe you’ll have better luck. I sure didn’t get anywhere. Say, Joe!” he called to a figure in the distance.

“Wait up! Zach, I’ll see you later.”

Zach watched Mark disappear into the darkness, then looked back at Rebecca. Her motions were robotlike, as if she was operating on adrenaline and nothing else. Which was probably the case, he thought grimly. She was too delicate for this type of heavy work, anyway. Couldn’t whoever was in charge see that? In sudden decision, without stopping to consider how his actions might be interpreted, he strode over and laid his hand on her shoulder.

She turned, her eyes dull with fatigue, and frowned up at him in confusion. “Zach?”

One searching sweep of her face was all it took for Zach to assess her physical condition—absolute exhaustion—and he glanced around, signaling to a passing National Guard member who held a clipboard.

“Zach, what is it?” Rebecca asked, her voice so scratchy and hoarse it was barely recognizable.

“Hang on a sec, okay?” he replied curtly.

The uniformed man joined them, and Zach nodded toward Rebecca. “Do you have someone who can fill in here? She’s had all she can take,” he said tersely.

The National Guard member gave Rebecca a quick but discerning glance and nodded. “No problem.” He turned and scanned the group on the sidelines, motioning to another uniformed Guard member. “Dave, take over here for a while, okay?” he called.

Zach took Rebecca’s arm and gently drew her away from the line. Her legs felt stiff and shaky when she tried to walk, and she stumbled, grateful that Zach reached out to steady her, his hands firm on her shoulders. But why was he bothering her, when there was so much urgent work to do? She looked up at him, still frowning. “What are you doing?” she demanded.

“You’re going home, Rebecca.”

She stared at him, and even through the haze of her fatigue she was aware of the rigid set of his jaw and the steely determination in his eyes. On one hand, she was touched by his concern. More than touched, actually. No man had ever taken such an active interest in her well-being. On the other hand, she wasn’t accustomed to being ordered around. Even if it was for her own good. She straightened her shoulders and glared at him. “Excuse me?”

Zach saw the sudden, stubborn tilt of her chin, heard the indignant tone in her voice, and sighed. Wrong move, buddy, he admonished himself. Rebecca was not the type to respond to high-handed tactics. And he wasn’t the type to employ them—socially, at least. But for some reason, seeing Rebecca cold and tired and wet had awakened a sort of primal, protective

urge in him, and he'd reacted instinctively. And obviously inappropriately. Giving orders was clearly not the way to convince her to go home.

A sudden harsh gust of wind tugged several strands of wet hair out of Rebecca's French twist and whipped them across her face, and a visible shudder ran through her body as she reached up to brush them aside. Before she could lower her hand Zach captured it in a firm grip, silently stripping off her wet glove and cocooning her fingers between his palms. Her hand felt like ice, and a spasm once more tightened his jaw. He took a deep, steadying breath, and when he spoke he made an effort to keep his tone gentle and reasonable, though neither of those emotions accurately reflected his mood at the moment.

"Rebecca, Mark says you've been out here at least three hours. You're chilled to the bone, you're wet and you're exhausted. You need to go home where it's warm and dry and get some rest. You won't help anyone if you stay here till you get sick."

Rebecca looked into Zach's concerned eyes, and her protest died in her throat. She couldn't argue with his logic. And he was right about her physical condition. Her legs were shaky, her back was stiff, and her hands and feet were numb with cold. She'd put in a full day at the restaurant, and she had to be up at six tomorrow. It probably made sense for her to call it a night.

With a deep, weary sigh she gave in, her shoulders suddenly sagging. "I guess you're right," she admitted, her voice flat and lifeless with fatigue as she brushed a hand tiredly across her eyes.

“Mark said he’d give me a lift a little while ago. I just need to find him.”

“I’ll take you home, Rebecca.”

Her eyes flew to his in surprise. “You?”

“I was leaving, anyway. In a town this size, your place can’t be that far out of my way.”

Rebecca never took the risk of putting herself in a situation where she was alone with a man she barely knew. But Zach was a respected journalist. He was a friend of Mark’s. Ben liked him. So did Rose and Frances. Surely a simple ride home would be safe. Besides, she was just too tired to worry about it tonight. She felt strange—unsteady and shaky—and she knew that if she didn’t sit down soon, she was going to fall down.

Zach watched her face, prepared to argue the point if she protested. Under normal circumstances he knew she’d flatly refuse his offer of a ride. But in her state of near collapse he hoped that instead of trying to analyze his motives, she would simply accept them at face value. He cared about her and simply wanted her safe and warm and rested. It was as simple as that. He wasn’t sure himself why he cared so much about a woman he hardly knew. But he did.

He watched her face, trying to anticipate her response, but before he could come to any conclusions she surprised him by acquiescing.

“All right, Zach. Thank you,” she accepted wearily.

He felt a tension he hadn’t even realized was there ease in his

shoulders, and silently he took her elbow and guided her toward his car. The fact that she didn't protest this protective gesture told him more eloquently than words that she was about ready to drop. He could sense that every step was an effort for her, and when she stumbled a couple of times on the uneven ground he was tempted to just pick her up and carry her. But he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that the lady definitely wouldn't put up with that. A hand at her elbow was one thing. Holding her in his arms was another—even though the idea was suddenly immensely appealing, he realized. In fact, he'd like to do a whole lot more than that. But he quickly—and firmly—reined in his wayward thoughts. Now was not the time to indulge in romantic fantasies.

When they reached his car he pulled open the passenger door, but Rebecca hesitated, glancing down at her muddy, wet clothes and shoes. “Zach, I'll m-mess your c-car up,” she protested, trying unsuccessfully to keep her teeth from chattering.

“Don't worry about it,” he said shortly, dismissing her concern as he urged her gently into the car.

But she held back stubbornly, resisting his efforts. “Don't you have a blanket or a towel in the trunk that I can sit on?”

He gave her an exasperated look. The last thing he cared about at the moment was soiled upholstery. After all his car had been through in the past ten days, a little dirt wasn't going to hurt anything. But rather than argue the point, he left her standing by the door to quickly rummage through the trunk, emerging a moment later with a rug he kept handy for tire changes.

Wordlessly he laid it over the passenger seat, and Rebecca finally slid into the car. Collapsed was actually a better word, Zach thought grimly, as he shut the door and strode around to the passenger side. She was all in.

She somehow summoned up the energy to direct him to her apartment, and within a few minutes they pulled up in front of her building.

“I appreciate the l-lift, Zach,” she said, her teeth still chattering as she reached for the handle.

“I’ll walk you to your door.”

She thought about protesting, but by the set of his jaw she knew it would be useless. Besides, she was too tired to argue anymore.

He took her elbow again for the short walk, and this time the protective gesture registered in her consciousness—and also tugged at her heart. Rebecca wasn’t sure why Zach continued to bother with her. He’d made no secret about wanting to date her, true, but she’d given him virtually no encouragement. Yet still he’d taken the time to see her home tonight, and she somehow sensed that for whatever reason, he cared about her well-being.

Her door was sheltered by a small porch, barely large enough to accommodate the two of them, and Rebecca was acutely aware of Zach’s presence just a breath behind her as she withdrew the key from the pocket of her coat. Her numb fingers fumbled as she attempted to insert it in the lock, and it slipped from her fingers, clattering to the concrete.

With a weary sigh, she started to bend down, but Zach restrained her with a preemptive hand on her shoulder, retrieving the key himself in one smooth swoop. Then he reached past her to insert it in the lock, his other hand still resting lightly on her shoulder. He was only a whisper away now, and Rebecca caught the scent of his distinctive aftershave as he leaned close. When his arm brushed her chest, a surge of yearning unexpectedly swept over her, and she drew in a sharp breath.

Zach turned to her immediately, his concerned eyes probing her face. “Are you all right?” he asked with a frown.

She nodded jerkily, not trusting her voice.

He looked at her appraisingly, noting that she’d wrapped her arms tightly around her body in a protective gesture that said, “Stay away.” But, surprisingly enough, her unguarded eyes said something entirely different. They reflected a combination of emotions—longing, fear, uncertainty, confusion, yearning. He doubted whether she realized just how eloquent they were. Rebecca definitely did not have a poker face. She wore her emotions too close to the surface, and her eyes were a window to her soul, communicating clearly what was in her heart.

Zach wanted to respond to the longing he saw, wanted to reach out and gather her into his arms, but he stifled the urge and drew in an unsteady breath. His self-control had never been taxed as much as it was around this woman, who brought out a protective instinct in him that he thought had died years ago. She was the kind of woman who should be cherished and loved and always

treated gently, in keeping with her gentle nature.

Unfortunately, Zach didn't have much experience dealing with women like that. Suddenly, desperately, he wished he did, wished he knew how to make Rebecca relax with him, to trust him, to give it a chance. He honestly didn't know where a relationship with her might lead. The physical attraction was definitely there. And maybe that's all there was. But he didn't think so. His gut told him there could be a whole lot more, and he'd learned to trust his instincts. They ought to explore their attraction. But first he had to convince her of that.

However, now was not the time. She was cold, aching, tired and wet. What she needed was a dry, warm bed. And rest. And peace of mind. Which—unfortunately—was his cue to exit.

Rebecca was caught in the spell of Zach's magnetic eyes as they held hers captive. He had wonderful eyes, she thought. Trustworthy. Caring. Insightful. Vibrant. Passionate. Very definitely passionate, she realized with a start. She might want rest. He clearly wanted something else—something she couldn't give. Certainly not now. And maybe never. The simple fact was, Zach was a man of intense passions. Rebecca knew that as surely as she knew her reaction to passion. And the two were not a promising combination, she thought bleakly.

Zach saw the sudden melancholy steal into Rebecca's eyes, and without stopping to consider the consequences he slowly reached over and laid his hand against her cheek, brushing his thumb gently over her soft, silky skin. He felt her quivering

beneath his touch, but she didn't pull away as he'd half expected. She just stared up at him with wide, vulnerable eyes.

Get out of here before you do something you'll regret, an inner voice ordered. Now!

"Take a hot bath, okay?" he suggested.

"Okay," she whispered.

"And get some rest."

"I will."

It would be so easy to just pull her close, to taste her lips, to demonstrate the depth of his attraction to her. It was what he wanted to do. Even with her hair in disarray and darkened by dampness, her classic features tinged with fatigue and wiped free of makeup, wearing mud-caked boots and an oversize parka, she did more for his libido than any woman he'd ever met. It didn't make any sense. And if he was confused, she surely would be, too.

Zach didn't usually waste time analyzing his reaction to a woman. He just listened to his hormones and went after what he wanted. But he knew instinctively that Rebecca wouldn't respond to his usual direct approach. And he also recognized that tonight was not the time to explore their attraction. She was too tired and too vulnerable.

Regretfully, summoning up the last reserves of his self-control, he let his hand drop from her cheek and removed his other hand from her shoulder. "Good night, Rebecca."

"G-good night. And thank you."

He hesitated one more second, then, with a last lingering sweep of her face, he turned and strode away into the rain.

Rebecca rose on one arm to peer at the bedside clock, reading the digital display with a groan. One in the morning! She thumped her pillow and flopped onto her back, cringing as her aching muscles protested the abrupt movement. After the last couple of days of backbreaking work she needed rest desperately, but sleep was proving to be elusive tonight. Her sore muscles were just making it too difficult to get comfortable.

But so were thoughts of Zach, she admitted. Tonight she was sure he had been thinking about kissing her. But then, in her exhausted state, maybe she'd misread his eyes. It wasn't as if she had a whole lot of experience to draw on. But there had definitely been...vibrations, she thought, for lack of a better word. Surely she wasn't mistaken about that. Yet, in the end, he'd simply walked away.

Rebecca stared at the dark ceiling and tried to think logically. Despite his restraint earlier in the evening, she knew he was interested. He'd made no secret of the fact. He'd been angling for a date ever since their "official" meeting in the diner. She'd put him off, but he didn't seem discouraged. Just more determined. Which made her nervous.

But what made her even more nervous was her interest in him.

Rebecca closed her eyes and drew a deep, quivering breath. She didn't want to be interested in Zach. She didn't want to feel nervous and unsettled every time she was in his presence. She

didn't want to wait anxiously every day to see if he'd stop in for lunch so she could at least catch a glimpse of him. But she was and she did. And that scared her. Because she knew that deep in her subconscious she was starting to consider going out with him.

It wasn't that she didn't want to date him. She did. She found him attractive, was flattered by his attention, impressed by his apparent character and integrity. But she was so afraid of what would happen if he... A choked sob cut off her thought in mid-sentence. She didn't have to wonder what would happen. She knew. Physical closeness freaked her out. Period. She'd embarrass both of them. He might even be angry. She didn't know him well enough to be able to judge his reaction. But based on past experience with other men, it wouldn't be pretty. No, dating Zach would be a mistake.

Besides, she consoled herself, he'd be leaving soon. This was just a temporary beat for him. He was a city man, used to lights and action and excitement. And he sure wouldn't find those in St. Genevieve. She was better off sticking to her original decision.

But if that was true, then why didn't she feel better off? she cried silently.

Zach typed in the final line of his story, then leaned back and wearily massaged his temple. It had been a long, cold, wet night, and it had taken him what seemed like hours to warm up after he dropped Rebecca off. But at least he had a good story to show for his discomfort, he thought in satisfaction. It uplifted. It reaffirmed. It found goodness even in the midst of chaos and

tragedy. It was the kind of story Josef would like, he realized suddenly, a faint smile touching his lips as he thought of his friend.

Zach pulled out his wallet and flipped through the plastic holders, stopping at one that contained a photo taken at Isabel's christening, nearly eight years before. Josef and Katrina had insisted that Zach be the godfather, though he'd protested that the honor should go to a relative. He still remembered Josef's response to his reaction.

"Sometimes ties of the heart are the strongest of all, stronger even than blood, Zachary. You are my best friend, and you would honor us by becoming part of our family in this way."

And so, of course Zach had agreed. He recalled clearly the day the picture was taken. It was right before Zach and Katrina went home, an unseasonably warm late-May afternoon even for St. Louis. They asked him to hold Isabel for the picture, and then stood on either side of him while the minister snapped the photo. Zach had no experience with babies and was almost afraid to grasp the tiny, fragile bit of life, with her flailing arms and kicking legs. But Josef laughingly assured him that Isabel wouldn't break, and in fact she lay quietly in his arms as the picture was taken, staring up at him solemnly with big blue eyes.

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