

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love[™] Inspired[®]

The Doctor's Family

New York Times Bestselling Author

LENORA WORTH

ROCKY MOUNTAIN HEIRS



Lenora Worth

The Doctor's Family

Аннотация

Family, Clayton Style Raising four-year-old triplets and an abandoned teenager, single mother Arabella Clayton Michaels has her hands full. She loves everything about her big family in tiny Clayton, Colorado. But when a Denver surgeon arrives with the news that her beloved teenager is his long-lost niece, Arabella worries she'll lose the girl—and much more. Jonathan Turner's harrowing past makes her want to open her heart to him. But will the handsome doctor accept a bigger ready-made family than either dreamed was possible?

Содержание

Chapter One	8
Chapter Two	21
Chapter Three	37
Chapter Four	51
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	63

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

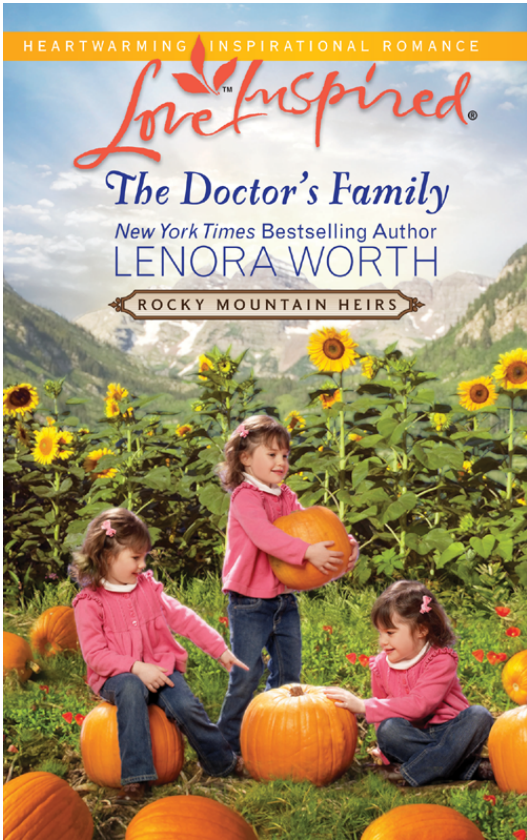
Love Inspired[®]

The Doctor's Family

New York Times Bestselling Author

LENORA WORTH

ROCKY MOUNTAIN HEIRS



“I only came here to find my niece ... and maybe be a part of her life,” Jonathan said.

“And,” he continued, “I wouldn’t mind if she came back to Denver with me.”

He could almost see Arabella's stomach clench and knot.

"Can we go somewhere and talk?" he asked.

Jonathan waited a couple of heartbeats, wondering if Arabella Michaels would show him some sympathy and listen to him. Arabella *Clayton* Michaels, he reminded himself. From what he'd heard, the Clayton name sure carried a lot of weight around here. And there always seemed to be several Claytons around at any given time.

She bit at her wide, pouty lip. Jonathan watched her, fascinated with the stubborn slant of her chin and the glint of dare in her catlike gold-brown eyes. When she focused those big eyes on him, he couldn't take his next breath.

This woman stood between him and his niece.

* * *

Rocky Mountain Heirs: When the greatest fortune of all is love. *The Nanny's Homecoming*—Linda Goodnight July 2011 *The Sheriff's Runaway Bride*—Arlene James August 2011 *The Doctor's Family*—Lenora Worth September 2011 *The Cowboy's Lady*—Carolyn Aarsen October 2011 *The Loner's Thanksgiving Wish*—Roxanne Rustand November 2011 *The Prodigal's Christmas Reunion*—Kathryn Springer December 2011

Dear Reader,

It was a joy to be a part of this big, sprawling story of the Clayton family. I've been to Colorado a few times and I love the state, but trying to keep up with the Claytons was a new

experience! Thanks to all the other writers on this project for keeping me on track!

My heroine, Arabella Michaels, is independent and determined. She wants to protect her three little girls, but in doing so, she guards her heart a bit too closely.

Dr. Jonathan Turner secretly wants a family of his own, but he also guards his true feelings by pouring himself into work. When he comes to Clayton looking for his niece, not only does he find family but he also finds a ready-made family in Arabella and her adorable four-year-old triplets. The city doctor falls for the small-town girl ... and her children.

I believe there are families all over the world who have merged to become a true family. I know this isn't always easy. But to those who work hard on being a family, I salute you. God had only one son and that son came to teach us how to love and how to find redemption. We are never alone when we have Christ by our side. I hope you enjoyed this colorful story. Keep in touch with me at www.lenoraworth.com.

Until next time, may the angels watch over you, always.

Lenora Worth

The Doctor's Family

Lenora Worth

Love Inspired

www.millsandboon.co.uk

And I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to Me, says the Lord Almighty.

—2 *Corinthians* 6:18

To all of my wonderful editors:

Patience Bloom, Emily Rodmell, Tina James and Melissa Endlich.

Thanks to each of you for allowing me to use my imagination and create my stories.

Chapter One

This was probably a bad idea.

Arabella Clayton Michaels headed toward the back door of the big industrial kitchen inside the Clayton Christian Church fellowship hall. The Wednesday-night meeting of the Church Care Committee was about to get started, but she was determined to check the parking lot for a silver sports car. She had a sneaking suspicion that she'd find that stranger hovering outside, the same stranger who seemed to be following her around town.

“Hey, Arabella, Zach’s looking for you.”

Arabella turned to where Gabe Wesson stood with some other men who’d helped set up the tables and chairs and were now waiting for the meal to commence. “Thanks. I’ll be right back. I have to take care of something.”

She didn’t wait for a response, nor did she look for her cousin Zach. She’d talk to him later, after she found Mr. City Slicker and set him straight.

Her crinkled denim skirt flew out over her worn red cowboy boots as she took the back steps, her arms wrapped against the soft chenille of the blue sweater she wore over a white button-up shirt. The fall temperature cooled with each dip of the golden sunset over the Rocky Mountains to the west.

But the chill covering Arabella didn’t come from the crisp fall air. It came from a fear deep inside her heart. A fear that

refused to let go. Arabella had an awful feeling her routine life was about to change. She couldn't explain this feeling but it was there, holding her down with all the heaviness of an anvil.

She'd felt this way since the day her grandfather, George Clayton, Sr., had passed away. Arabella was the only grandchild who'd stayed here in the tiny Colorado town of Clayton, founded and named after her ancestors. The feeling of a change coming in the wind had increased after the reading of her grandpa's will. The ornery old man had left \$250,000 plus five hundred acres of Clayton real estate to each of his six grandchildren—with certain stipulations, of course. One of them being that the other five adult grandchildren had to return to Clayton and live here for a year—or no one got their inheritance.

And Arabella, a single mother with triplet girls, would be forced out of the old Victorian home known as Clayton House. If her uncle Samuel's family had its way, she'd already have been booted out without a second glance. The other side of the Clayton family had hard feelings about the will. Because her grandfather had stipulated that if her cousins didn't come home to honor his request everything would revert to his brother Samuel, Arabella figured any slipup on her part could be used as fodder for Uncle Samuel's case.

That was why she was so concerned about this stranger lurking around town. What if her uncle had hired this man to spy on her and her cousins?

She intended to confront the man and ask him outright what

he was doing here. Jasmine, the teenage girl who'd lived with Arabella for the past three years, had seen the stranger's sleek silver car earlier near the park.

The newcomer was probably a private detective hired by Samuel Clayton because he stood to inherit everything if her cousins didn't cooperate and come home. Or just as bad, the man could have been sent by her ex-husband, Harry. It'd be just like Harry to hear about her possible inheritance and try to muscle in on things, even if the man did send sporadic checks to help with his daughters' care and well-being.

She'd fight this, not because of the money, even though money would be nice. She had to fight for her three little girls. And the first thing she'd tell the stranger she'd seen hanging around last month and again today—take a long hike up a tall mountain.

She came around the back of the white clapboard church and squinted into the golden threads of the sunset. And saw the glint of a silver car flashing on the edge of the lot near a cluster of aspen trees.

Hurrying, her boots clomping on the pavement, Arabella didn't stop to think. With both hands she tried to open the car's passenger-side door then looked through the dark windows.

The car was empty.

Then she heard a male voice behind her. "Looking for me?"

Arabella whirled to face the man who had caused her nightmares over the past few days. "You could say that. I don't like the way you've been watching me and my family. I want it

to stop.” She glared at him. “Just so you know, my cousin is the deputy sheriff. I’ve already alerted him about you. He’s probably doing a background check as we speak.”

Her cousin Zach had told her not to confront the man on her own. Too late for that now.

The man stepped forward, his dark blond hair as rich and golden as the glistening dusk. He looked good in his nice-fitting jeans, fancy boots and wool sports coat. But even the worst of criminals could dress with movie-star quality.

“You’ve got it all wrong,” he said, holding up one hand, a whiff of something spicy and woodsy drifting around him. “I can explain—”

“You’d better start talking, then,” Arabella said, her hands on her hips. “Beginning with why you’ve been lurking around my girls and me. I saw you a few weeks back and now here you are again. What do you want?”

He stepped closer, his smoky blue-gray eyes sparkling with interest and intent. “I have a good reason for ... following you.”

“Yeah, and I think I know what it is.”

“No, honestly, it’s nothing sinister or criminal. It’s a bit complicated. I’m Jonathan, Jonathan Turner.”

Arabella deciphered that and the bold look in his eyes. “Turner? That’s Jasmine’s last name.”

“I know,” he said, letting out a soft breath. “Her father, Aaron, was my older brother. I’m Jasmine’s uncle.”

Arabella grabbed onto the sports car, her breath hitching in

her throat. “What?”

She heard the church door banging shut, then Zach calling out her name. But she couldn't move, couldn't take her eyes off this man. Up close he looked like a younger, better version of Jasmine's father, Aaron Turner. She'd only seen Aaron a couple of times around town, but the resemblance was right there, staring her in the eyes.

Taking a quick breath, she asked, “What did you say?”

He stood in front of her now. “I'm telling you the truth, Mrs. Michaels. I'm Jasmine's uncle. I've been trying to locate her ... and last month I asked around to make sure I had the right girl. And now I know I do.”

“I don't believe you.” Or maybe she just didn't *want* to believe him. Arabella didn't like change and lately change had been coming her way with all the haste of the falling leaves around her.

Zach walked up, scowled his deputy sheriff's frown at the man standing there and then took Arabella by the arm. “It's true, Arabella. I tried to find you to tell you. I ran a background check on him this afternoon. He's telling you the truth. Jonathan Turner is Jasmine's uncle.”

Then Zach turned to Jonathan. “And all that aside, you'd better have a very good reason for messing with my cousin and her family, Dr. Turner.”

Arabella looked from Zach to the man he just addressed as Dr. Turner. “A doctor? I can't believe this. We imagined all kinds of horrid things. When we first saw you, we thought you reminded

us of someone, but I never dreamed—” She stopped, her hands fisting at her sides. “That was mighty mean, what you did to us. What you did to that girl, sneaking around like that.”

Jonathan lowered his head, forcing her to look at him. “I’m not trying to frighten you. Honestly. I only came here to find my niece ... and maybe be a part of her life. I live in Denver and I thought Jasmine should at least know me.” He took a deep breath before continuing. “And, to be frank, I wouldn’t mind if she came back to Denver with me.”

Arabella’s stomach knotted. So this was it, then—that something terrible she’d been dreading. This man had come here to rearrange her carefully constructed life.

Or so he thought.

“Can we go somewhere and talk?”

Jonathan waited a couple of heartbeats, wondering if he’d be arrested for harassment or if Arabella Michaels would show him some sympathy and listen to him. Arabella *Clayton* Michaels, he reminded himself. From what he’d heard, the Clayton name sure carried a lot of weight around here. And there always seemed to be several Claytons around at any given time.

She bit at her wide, pouty lip then glanced over at the uniformed deputy sheriff—what was his name ... Zach? Jonathan watched her, fascinated with the stubborn slant of her chin and the glint of dare in her catlike gold-brown eyes. When she tossed back piles of silky brown hair then focused those big eyes on him, he couldn’t take his next breath. He waited for

her decision, thinking that must be the reason he couldn't think straight. This woman stood between him and his niece.

She cut her gaze toward the sheriff. "Zach, thank you for the update. Could you excuse us, please?"

Zach held up a hand. "Arabella, I don't think—"

"I've got this, Zach. Just . . . keep Jasmine occupied until I can figure out what to do."

"Is she inside?" Jonathan asked, hoping to meet his niece at last.

"She is, but you don't need to bother her right now." The woman turned to her cousin. "Zach, please?"

Zach didn't look convinced. He pivoted toward Jonathan, his brow furrowing. "I don't know what kind of game you're running here, but if you do anything to hurt Arabella or her family, you'll have me to deal with. Understand?"

Although Jonathan respected the man for doing his job and trying to protect his cousin, he'd been more intimidated by gang members brought into the E.R. with gunshot wounds. "I read you. I only want to get to know my niece."

Zach dropped his hand. "I'll be inside if you need me, Arabella."

She nodded, then waited for Zach to stalk away.

"Protective, isn't he?" Jonathan said by way of getting through the icy chill in her eyes.

She gave him a look that could crumble Pike's Peak. "Claytons stand together. Well, at least my side of the family does anyway."

Hmm. Trouble in Claytonville? Jonathan filed that away for another time. Right now he wanted to discuss why he was here. “I admire that. And I’m sorry I scared you.”

He motioned to a bench inside the spot marked as a prayer garden. Tall trees and fat shrubs gave the walled-off area a sense of seclusion. Inside, a fountain bubbled in the center, and colorful, fat mums bloomed in shades of red, orange and yellow in the flower beds. A plaque showing praying hands read “He will not leave you comfortless.” Maybe the serenity of the place would calm both of them down.

She followed him, then sank against the stone bench, putting her elbows on her knees and leaning over, her head in her hands. “I thought you were some sort of private investigator or, worse, a creep.”

He had to smile at that. “I’m neither, although I’ve been called worse. Lots of times.”

She sat up straight, adjusting her shoulders into what looked like fight mode. “I can’t imagine why. You sneak around spying on people. I’m a mother with small children. Why didn’t you just come to my front door and tell me the truth?”

He didn’t have a good answer for that. Shrugging, he said, “I’m not good at confrontations.”

She shot him a measuring look. “You’re a doctor?” “Yeah. I’m better at telling people what I can and can’t fix. Not so good in the emotional part of the conversations.”

“So your bedside manner is lacking as much as your social

skills?”

He grinned, glad she had a sense of humor. “Somewhat, or so I’ve been told.”

Her lips pursed at that comment. “And you live in Denver?”

“Denver, yes. I have a high-rise condo near the hospital.”

She stared out at the aspen trees lining the parking lot. “Not so far away.”

“No, not really. An hour or so.”

“You can’t take Jasmine away.” She took in a breath, then stared over at him.

“Excuse me? She’s not a kid. I don’t plan on *taking* her away. But I am going to offer her a place to live if she wants it. I owe her that at least.”

She gave him another glaring look, but her expression softened. “You heard me. You can’t just barge in here and expect Jasmine to clap her hands in glee and pack her bags. She’s eighteen now and making her own decisions. And besides, this is her home. She was born here.”

“And had a bad life here from what I’ve heard.”

Arabella leveled him with a scathing glance. “Yes, and where were you when she was having that horrible life? Where were you when she lived in that filthy apartment for months and months after Aaron Turner up and left?”

He had to swallow the lump of regret in his throat. “I didn’t know—”

“You didn’t know or you didn’t care? Were you so busy

doctoring you couldn't even check on your own family?"

"My brother and I ... were estranged. We hadn't spoken in years. I didn't know where he was."

"And you apparently didn't try to find out."

"Yes, I did," Jonathan said, getting up to pace across the brick tiles. "I did. Many times. But Aaron wasn't one for sending greeting cards. He could hold a grudge, that's for sure."

"And where is he now? Or do you even care?"

A sick feeling hit Jonathan in his stomach. "You mean, you haven't heard? He's dead. He died about a month ago in a car crash. He was driving drunk."

Arabella put a knuckle to her mouth. "Oh, no. Oh, my goodness. Jasmine doesn't know that. No one contacted us." She gripped the bench, her hands down beside her skirt. "How am I supposed to tell her that?"

Jonathan wished he could make it easier. "She has to hear it—and understand I just found out a few weeks ago. I'd have come sooner if I'd known. I didn't even get to attend his funeral."

"And why didn't you know? Why didn't you two keep up with each other?"

Jonathan looked down at the pretty garden tiles. "He hated me. Because I left. I got out."

"Got out?"

Jonathan wasn't ready to give her an up-close-and-personal history of his family dysfunctions. "It doesn't matter. We drifted apart after ... after our daddy died. But I'm here now. I don't

want to let the same thing happen with Jasmine. I want her to know she has an uncle.”

“And how will your family feel about this?”

He glanced at the praying hands set in stone. “I don’t have a family. I’m not married and our mother died when we were little. Our father died years later.”

“That’s tough—losing your mother like that. I’m sorry.”

He nodded at the understanding in her eyes. “That’s why I want to get to know Jasmine. I’m her only close relative.”

She stood, too, anger seeming to push away her compassion. “And you’re willing to entice her to the big city even though she doesn’t know you? Have you even considered what that might do to her?”

“More than you can imagine,” he said, his own doubts matching the darkness in her eyes. “As you said, she’s an adult now. Neither of us can force her to do anything. I hear she’s engaged to some kid—Cade Clayton. Are you related to him?”

“He’s a cousin, yes. Second cousin. His daddy, Charley, is my cousin. And let me tell you, you don’t want to mess with Charley Clayton or his two stubborn brothers.” She sighed. “He’s fighting this marriage and he’ll fight you, too, if you start in on Cade.”

Jonathan pressed two fingers against the throbbing in his forehead. “I’m getting that we have some good Claytons and some not-so-good around here. Am I right?”

“Unfortunately, yes. Our uncle Samuel has three sons—Charley, Pauley—our honorable mayor—and Frank. He’s the

quiet one who lives on the outskirts of town. But between them and their offspring, it's always high drama around here." She glanced toward the church. "Listen, I need to get back inside. I'll have to make up an excuse if Jasmine sees you. We can't blurt this out in front of everyone inside."

Jonathan wasn't ready to let her go. "Wait. This Cade—is he a good kid?"

"Yes, surprisingly. Smart, too. And ... he loves Jasmine. I'm not all excited about them getting married so young but they're determined." She gave him a pointed look. "You might want to keep that in mind when you tell Jasmine you have grand plans to invite her to check out Denver."

She started across the parking lot, her skirt swishing against her boots.

"When can we talk again?" Jonathan called. "When can I see my niece?"

She turned around, her hands on her hips and her head tilted. "Come by the house tomorrow. We'll have lunch. Until then, stay away from her. Let me talk to her. She doesn't need to hear all of this from a complete stranger." She stood still, giving him another thorough glance. "I believe you know where I live."

Then she whirled with all the dignity of a queen and left him standing there. Jonathan hadn't even realized he'd been holding his breath until she was out of sight. He gulped in the cool night air, wondering what he would have done if she had refused to let him visit with Jasmine. And wondering why this particular

woman made him bristle like a grizzly each time she looked at him.

Chapter Two

Arabella slammed the back door to the church kitchen, her mood shifting from confused to mad to sad. She shouldn't feel sorry for the man. It was ridiculous to hold her breath in awe against the person who'd spied on her, scared her silly and floored her with that bombshell of an introduction. But there was something about Jonathan Turner. Something that tore at her heart.

Maybe it was that haunted look of regret in his eyes or the way he'd put his hands in his pockets when he tried to explain things to her. Maybe he truly wanted to do right by Jasmine. And where was the harm in that?

He'd come here to find his niece. Now that she knew his real reason for being here, Arabella could let out her held breath. Only now she had a whole new set of worries.

One, Jasmine wasn't going anywhere with Jonathan Turner. Arabella was certain of that. Cade wouldn't allow it, either. He'd fight the good doctor on that one, same way he'd fought Arabella and his entire family on trying to stop them from marrying so young. Arabella had finally caved—her romantic heart overruling her pragmatic head. Jasmine and Cade were both adults now. They could live wherever they wanted and they could visit any city they wanted, including Denver.

And two, in spite of her sympathy for the loss of his brother

and Jonathan's being alone in the world, Arabella didn't trust the man. She needed to learn more. Needed to see that he had Jasmine's best interest at heart. Arabella didn't cotton to shiftiness and lying, no, sir. The doctor had started off on a bad foot by not coming to her and explaining himself the minute he'd come into town.

And three, she didn't like the way he made her feel—kind of shaky and unsure, as if she'd stepped on a rock's edge and the foundation was about to give way underneath her feet. She was in shock, nothing more. Too much chaos would do that to a person, especially a person who thrived on order and routine. Her whole life had tilted over the past couple of months. For her kids' sake, she needed things to settle back down. This sudden development would not help, not at all.

First, her grandfather had gone and died on her just when she was beginning to truly understand him. Then seeing him on that strange video, demanding her cousins all come home and make nice by living in Clayton for a year so they could receive their proper inheritance. And now, a city slicker coming to town and announcing he was Jasmine's only living kin.

What else could happen?

Take a long breath, she told herself. And say a long prayer.

She entered the warm kitchen and went to work helping the bustling women finish getting the meal on the table. Staying busy was her way of blocking out all her problems. But when she carried out a big pan of baked chicken, Zach met her halfway

and took it.

“Okay, so how’d that go?” he asked on a low whisper.

She shrugged, motioning for him to put the container on the table. “Fine ... I guess. He seems sincere but I have to be sure. He wants to meet Jasmine. I told him to come by tomorrow.”

“Want me there?”

She thought about that for a minute. “No. I think he can’t be intimidated, even by you. And I get the impression he won’t give up so easy.”

“He has a right to know his niece, Arabella.”

“Yeah, well, I have a right to protest that.”

“Not a legal right,” Zach reminded her. “But as a mother—a guardian of sorts—yes, you have certain rights. You’ve been taking care of Jasmine for a while now. Besides, from what I could find out, he’s not married. Why would a bachelor want to deal with a niece?”

Arabella fussed with the silverware on the table. “I won’t let him talk her into moving away.”

“She’s entitled to make up her own mind. She and Cade have been planning to move anyway. Or at least Cade’s planning on going away to college.”

“What if she does decide to go to Denver, though? What if she wants to leave for good?”

Zach patted her arm. “We’ll deal with that if it happens. You’ve always said she was free to go if she wanted to. Don’t go borrowing trouble.”

Arabella wanted to tell her handsome cousin that trouble always had a way of finding her before she even thought of borrowing it. But a commotion near the entranceway to the fellowship hall caught her attention.

Zach started to speak again, but Jasmine pushed through the room and hurried toward them. “Arabella—”

Someone called from across the room. “Arabella?”

“Hold on a minute, Jasmine,” Arabella said, turning. “Oh, great. It’s Dorothy Henry. Probably wants me to serve on yet another committee.” Dorothy ran the Lucky Lady Inn and kept her nose in everyone’s business. She was always trying to fix Arabella up with eligible bachelors. “She’s waving to me. I’d better go.”

Zach shot her an amused look. “Better you than me.”

Jasmine grabbed Arabella’s arm, fear shadowing her blue eyes. “I need to tell you something.”

Arabella’s whole system hissed and buzzed. “What’s wrong, honey?”

“That man is still here—the one we saw a while back. Remember he drove by our house and stopped at the corner? I just saw him outside again talking to some other people.”

Arabella noticed the worry in the girl’s blue eyes. *Had Jonathan already said something to Jasmine?* “Did you talk to him?”

“No, I came back into the kitchen before he saw me.” “It’s okay. I’ve already spoken to him. I’ll explain later. In private.”

Jasmine didn't look so sure. "Maybe he left." "I told him to leave, yes."

Dorothy shuffled in and headed toward Arabella, her cane hitting the linoleum, her patchwork purse swinging as she gave Arabella another frantic wave then called out, "We have a guest. And I especially wanted you to meet him."

Arabella waved back then turned to face Jasmine, hoping to distract her. "We'll talk later. Will you and Zach make sure we have enough coffee made? And we need ice for water and tea."

Zach pushed Jasmine toward the kitchen, then called over his shoulder to Arabella. "Go, go. We'll take care of the drinks. But remember, I've got your back."

"Good to know," Arabella replied as she looked back at him.

Then she turned around to find Jonathan Turner standing there with Dorothy.

"Found him in the parking lot," Dorothy said, smiling a bemused smile. "Told him to get on in here and have some dinner with us. And I especially wanted him to meet you since he went on and on about you and your bakery the other day." She glanced his way. "He loves your fresh-baked bread. Bought a loaf at the Cowboy Café."

Arabella's blood boiled over. He'd asked Dorothy Henry about her? Using her bread as a cover? "I just reckon he does love fresh bread."

Dorothy looked confused then leaned close. "He's a doctor from Denver. A single doctor."

Arabella swallowed back a retort and pasted a smile on her face. “The doctor and I have met, Miss Dorothy.”

Dorothy put a hand to her faded yellow sweater. “Really now? Nobody told me that.”

Dorothy had the idea that everything happening in Clayton had to come through her first. Weddings, funerals, births, breakups and especially new people in town.

Arabella glanced around. Thankfully, Jasmine had gone behind the swinging door to the kitchen. Zach motioned to that same door then went in, probably to keep Jasmine busy.

Jonathan looked as uncomfortable as Arabella felt. “We met briefly earlier in the parking lot. We haven’t had a chance to really get to know each other.” Giving her an apologetic but challenging look, he reached out a hand. “Good to see you again, Mrs. Michaels.”

Arabella took his hand, shaking it in spite of her better judgment. His grip was firm, his fingers lingering on hers while his eyes swept over her face. Did she see longing there in his misty eyes, a plea for forgiveness, maybe? Or was this just another one of his tricks?

The room turned from uncomfortable to a bit too warm.

“Call her Arabella,” Dorothy suggested. “You two can’t be that far apart in age.”

“Arabella,” Jonathan said. “I like that name.”

“It means ‘beautiful altar,’” Dorothy supplied with a beaming grin. “Or ‘entreated,’ depending on which name book you look

at.” She winked at Jonathan. “Of course, Arabella here’s the one who’ll have you begging. For more of that good bread!”

Dorothy cackled at her own joke while Jonathan looked like a trapped raccoon.

Arabella pulled her hand away. “It’s almost time to eat. Help yourself, Dr. Turner.” She turned to go back to her spot at the serving table.

“Excuse me.” Arabella heard him, then noticed how he rushed past Dorothy, almost taking Dorothy’s purse with him, to catch up. “I’m sorry. She insisted.”

“I’m sure. Here to spy again? Pick everyone’s brains for more information on my family?”

“No ... I’m done with spying. But I would like to get to know my niece. And you.”

Arabella turned on that note. “You should have tried that to begin with, by being honest. I don’t trust sneaky people. And you’d better steer clear of Jasmine tonight. She’s had a hard time of things, and I don’t want to upset her. Not here, not now.”

She glanced around and saw her cousins Marsha and Vincent across the way with Marsha’s husband, Billy Dean Harris. Uncle Samuel’s clan usually came to church when food was being offered, and they’d sure gossip about anything unusual. Especially if they found out Jasmine had an uncle from Denver.

“You can meet Jasmine tomorrow,” she said, her tone firm.

He looked genuinely crushed. “I’d like to start over, okay? Can we call a truce for now? I promise I won’t approach Jasmine. I’ll

wait until you tell her.”

“Since I don’t have much of a choice, I guess I can agree to that. But ... I’m watching you, you understand?”

“Got it. No more hiding in the bushes.”

She looked him square in the eye. “Good, because next time I’ll shoot first and ask questions later.”

It didn’t help that Pastor West held up his hand for quiet the second before she said that loud enough for several people standing by to hear.

And it sure didn’t help that the good reverend chose that particular moment to ask, “Arabella, would you mind leading us in prayer?”

Jonathan found a seat across from Arabella, still smiling to himself at how she’d managed to go from threatening to shoot him to praying sweet words of praise and thanksgiving. He wasn’t all that hungry, but the church ladies had ladled him a plate full of chicken and dumplings and fresh squash along with several other colorful vegetables, apparently grown in the community garden behind the church. They also piled on two big snickerdoodle cookies. He couldn’t say no, not with Arabella Michaels giving him a daring look each time he thought about bolting for the door. He was afraid she’d either shoot him or pray for him. Or maybe do both.

To ease his discomfort, he pulled a worn picture out of his pocket, one finger touching the grinning face of the little girl. The picture was old. According to the lawyer who’d told him

about her, Jasmine would be at least eighteen by now. All this time and he'd never even known she existed.

She was his only family now. They were both alone. Well, Jasmine seemed to have a solid church family. But he was all alone. He had a thing about family.

He'd always wanted a real one.

He wanted to let Jasmine know that he cared about her, even if his bitter older brother had stopped talking to Jonathan the day he'd left their sorry life behind. Jonathan wanted to offer her a chance to go back to Denver with him. Or at least come and visit him there. He could do that. He could give this girl the kind of life he'd never had.

He kept watching all the people laughing and talking around him as if they didn't have a care in the world. Arabella had introduced him to her cousin Brooke and a friend named Kylie, both nice women who'd offered him more food. Clayton had obviously hit on hard times, but no one in this room seemed to mind. Arabella told him they all pitched in to bring the food and that she supplied the bread and desserts for a lot of these meetings. Maybe there was something to being part of a church family.

But where was his niece?

"Want a piece of apple cake?"

He looked across the table at Arabella. She hadn't eaten much, either. "No, I'm good." He coughed. "I'm a little nervous. I can't get used to ... being an uncle."

She leaned close. "I can't get used to you being *Jasmine's* uncle."

Seeing the tiny twinkle in her eyes, he relaxed. "I guess I could have knocked on your door and told you who I am."

"That's how most people announce themselves."

"What if she doesn't want anything to do with me?" he asked quietly.

Arabella scooted her chair around the end of the table so they wouldn't be overheard. "Are you kidding? That child is starving for love. I worry about her. She always sees the good in people."

"What if she can't see any good in me?"

Arabella leaned back and gave him a squinting look. "I can't see much bad, unless you're still hiding things from me. You could be a thief on the run or a bank robber passing through."

"Your cousin had me checked out, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. He did, didn't he? But ... that doesn't mean I'm completely sure of you."

He quirked a brow. "Are you always this distrustful?"

"Yes, pretty much. I have good reason not to trust people."

He was about to ask her why when an older woman came walking toward them with three cute little girls, all holding hands. The woman wore her hair in a silver bun, but the little girls had shimmering, light brown curls and big pretty brown eyes.

Arabella stood up. "Uh-oh. Must have been some trouble in the nursery. Why is it always my three?"

Jonathan looked at the adorable girls then back at Arabella.

“Your daughters? Dorothy told me you had triplets.”

He'd seen her around town with the girls already. She obviously loved her children. And who wouldn't fall for these three? They were dressed in matching blue dresses with puffy sleeves and embroidery across the bodice. Each girl had a different flowery design, which probably meant their mother had recognized their individuality and made sure they did, too.

“Yes, four years old and growing too fast.” Arabella nodded, then headed toward her girls, her smile at a thousand-watt beam. “Hello. Did you have fun eating your dinner with your friends in the nursery?”

“Jessie was mean to me,” one of the girls said, pointing an accusing finger at her sister.

Arabella turned to the cute culprit. “Jessie, were you ugly to Julie?”

Jessie produced a pout. “Julie wouldn't share her cookie.”

“Oh, my goodness. Julie, you know to share with your sisters.” Then she turned to Jessie. “But, Jessie, you each had your own cookie, so I don't think you needed any of your sister's.”

“I shared, Mommy.” The third of the bunch said, her puffy blue plaid dress swirling around her chubby little legs. “I was nice to Jessie. I gave her part of my cookie then Julie gave me some of hers.”

“Thank you for that, Jamie. But I think your sisters need to kiss and make up and then give you a big hug since you shared your food to please both of them.”

The older lady laughed. "I couldn't get them to do that. They wanted to talk to you about it."

"C'mon, now," Arabella said, urging the girls toward the table. "Mommy has to help clean up. And I can't do a good job if I think you girls are mad at each other."

"Who's that?" Jessie asked, pointing toward Jonathan.

Arabella sent him an appraising glance. "This is Dr. Turner. He's here to ... visit."

"No doctors," Jamie said, shaking her head. Her sisters shrank back against Arabella, holding each other despite the cookie situation.

Jonathan couldn't stop his smile. "I see you're all acquainted with doctors."

"They don't like shots," Arabella said, mouthing the words. "This is a nice doctor," she told Jamie. "He came from a big city."

"Where?" Jessie asked.

"Not too far from here," Jonathan answered, the girls captivating him with their charm.

Arabella pulled at Jessie and Julie. "Okay, say sorry so I can get you back to the nursery for story time."

Jonathan watched as the tiny doll-like girls stared each other down then grabbed on for a long group hug. After that, they were all giggles. Arabella guided them back to the nursery worker, kissing each of them before they once again held hands and walked down the hallway.

"They're beautiful."

Watching them out of sight, Arabella turned back to Jonathan. “Thanks. They have their moments.” She started gathering plates. “I’ll see you tomorrow for lunch.”

He got up, accepting that he was being dismissed. Accepting, but regretting it. He wouldn’t mind spending more time with her and those little girls. “I’ll help clean up, too.”

“You don’t have to. We have a meeting after cleanup. It’s boring unless you’re on the committee.”

“Oh, right. Dorothy informed me I wasn’t allowed to stay for that.”

“She’s afraid somebody will have better ideas than her,” Arabella said under her breath. Then she put a hand over her mouth. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s okay,” he replied. “I’ve been around her for a little while now and I do believe you’re right.”

Arabella gave him a slight smile. “People are watching us, you know. Dorothy will be puffed up with pride, thinking she’s made a match.”

“Oh, is that why she insisted I attend this dinner?”

“You mean you didn’t figure that one out?”

“No, I didn’t. But ... I’m glad she did force me in here. The food was great and it was nice to get to know you a little better.”

“We’ll see how that goes,” she said. Then she turned and strutted away.

Jonathan told himself he didn’t care what Arabella Michaels or anyone else thought. He’d come here with a purpose. He

wanted to get to know his niece. And he wouldn't let a pretty, voluptuous woman in a flowing skirt and cute cowboy boots stop him from doing that.

Back in his car, Jonathan pushed at the memories of his own lousy childhood. In no hurry to get back to the Lucky Lady Inn, he made his way across the town green onto Railroad Street. Glad the speed limit was slow here, he let the top down on the convertible and breathed in the crisp fall air.

Just outside of the main stretch of town he stopped at the driveway of the huge creamy-yellow Victorian house with the big, tree-shaded yard. This was where Arabella, her triplets and Jasmine lived. He'd seen them at the town green when he had come to town the first time and followed them to this house.

A set of matching bronze-encased porch lights sent out a welcoming glow on each side of the big double doors. Colorful yellow and burgundy mums and fat orange pumpkins decorated the long wraparound porch, and a matching set of fall wreaths gave a welcoming look to the entranceway. Nice, he thought as he zoomed on by. It was a little run-down but still like something out of a magazine spread.

He hated that Jasmine had been abandoned. But he thanked God that she'd found a safe place to stay. And he couldn't fault Arabella because it certainly looked as if she cared about Jasmine. He'd just have to prove that he cared about his niece, too.

Driving around the quaint mountain town, Jonathan compared

it to Denver. This threadbare little town certainly was quiet and less crowded, but it reminded him of the place where he'd grown up, which was only about twenty miles up the road. He didn't like small towns. This one held a forlorn look, like a frayed set of yellowed lacy curtains. But it also exuded a sense of pride. Apparently, Clayton had seen better days, but it wasn't a ghost town yet.

He sure hoped Jasmine would consider coming to Denver. Maybe she'd like the big city.

Pulling into the less-than-stellar white clapboard boarding house with the faded green shamrock-shaped sign proclaiming it the Lucky Lady Inn, Jonathan wondered for the hundredth time if this had been the right thing to do.

He'd made a nurse mad after canceling their date to take a few days to come down here. He'd also made the chief of staff mad when he'd told the man he might need to take an extra week to work this out. How would Jasmine react? Would his niece want to get to know him, or would she scorn him the way her daddy had?

Legally he couldn't force her away from a place where she'd lived her whole life. He was a complete stranger to this girl. But he wanted to be family to her. Jonathan needed this connection, needed to know that somehow he could make up for his past.

He might have to do that right here in Clayton. At least he could visit her here if she refused to come to Denver to see him.

He'd thought about becoming a family man a few times, and

too many times he'd stopped himself. Most of the women he knew either wanted more than he could give or didn't quite need enough. He always managed to drive them away, no matter their own agendas. He'd never found the right fit. But having a niece might bridge that gap and give him some experience in the commitment department.

He couldn't wait to meet Jasmine. She was his closest living relative, after all. He wouldn't let the girl think she'd been completely abandoned.

Not the way his brother and he had been abandoned.

The girl might not have a mother and father, and in spite of all the wedding talk she had an uncle who wanted to get to know her and give her a better life. Jonathan made a good living. He could help Jasmine receive a college education, offer her a safe place to live, take her out of this one-horse town and show her all the possibilities of living in the big city. First, he had to get to know her and her fiancé better. And to do that, he'd have to get past that perky brown-haired guardian who wore flowing skirts and apparently knew how to use a gun.

Chapter Three

“What did you say to that man, Arabella?” Jasmine asked the minute Arabella got back from dropping the girls off at preschool. “Cade and I didn’t stay to eat last night but I saw that silver car when we left.”

“I found out why he’s here,” Arabella replied to Jasmine’s rapid-fire question.

Yep, she knew why Jonathan Turner was here. Just thinking about the man had kept her up most of the night. He contradicted everything she wanted to believe about him. He’d gone about things the wrong way, but after talking to him she could almost understand his hesitancy. The man was single and a surgeon. Arrogance personified. Only he didn’t seem all that arrogant. He seemed lost and lonely.

“Who is he?” Jasmine munched on dry cereal, her eyes wide with worry.

Arabella stared at her own cold toast, wondering the same thing. “He’s a doctor from Denver.”

“Why is he here?”

“He was looking for a family member.” Asking God to help her find the strength to tell Jasmine the truth, Arabella closed her eyes and rubbed her temple with two fingers. “And ... he’s found that person.”

Early-morning sunshine glinted through the kitchen windows,

making Arabella wish she could enjoy the pretty fall day. She had to tell Jasmine the whole story, but so far she hadn't found the courage. Grabbing her third cup of coffee, she took another sip.

Jasmine tapped her fingers on the counter. "You know something, don't you? You're not telling me everything."

Arabella had to admire Jasmine's shrewd no-nonsense detector. "There is more. . . . Go get dressed and we'll talk."

Jasmine frowned then headed upstairs, the slump of her slim shoulders breaking Arabella's heart.

An hour later, Arabella sat with Jasmine in the kitchen. The old house was quiet, its bones creaking and shifting with a familiar kind of sway that usually comforted Arabella. But today it only added pressure to the tight fist holding at her heart.

"Talk to me," Jasmine said, taking Arabella's hand in hers. "Is that man here to stop my wedding? Is this something about my daddy?"

Arabella squeezed the girl's hand, unable to speak.

Jasmine pulled her hand away, the tiny solitaire Cade had given her when he'd proposed twinkling like a baby star on her finger. "I won't give up Cade. I don't care how many spies Charley Clayton hires. I don't care if my own daddy comes back and tries to stop me."

Arabella winced at that declaration. "That man—he's not a spy, Jasmine. He's . . . he's your uncle."

Arabella hadn't planned to blurt it out that way, but the girl was about to hyperventilate.

“What?” Jasmine held a hand to her chest, her eyebrows lifting, her mouth widening. “What are you talking about?”

“His name is Jonathan. Jonathan Turner. He’s a doctor in Denver and he only recently found out about you.”

Jasmine sank down in her seat. “You’re kidding, right? My daddy has a brother?”

“Honey, I’m not teasing you. I wish I were. And ... there’s something else you need to know.”

The girl shook her head. “I can’t take anything else. I can’t believe he’s my uncle. So he’s here to see me, right? That’s why he was following us and hovering around?”

“Yes, but he didn’t mean to scare us. He only wanted to make sure he’d found you.”

“Now that he’s found me, what does he want with me?”

Arabella had to make Jasmine understand, but how could she when she didn’t even understand herself?

“Honey, he had some bad news.”

“What kind of news?” Jasmine backed away as if she already knew what was coming. “What else?”

“Your daddy ... he died about a month ago. In a car accident.”

Jasmine didn’t move. She sat staring at Arabella, her mouth parted, her eyes vivid and bright, a raging river of doubt and shock. Finally, her voice cracked. “My daddy’s dead?”

“Yes. I’m so sorry.” Arabella reached for Jasmine but the girl pushed her away. “I ... I need to talk to Cade. I want Cade.”

Then Jasmine rushed out of the kitchen and straight upstairs

to her bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

Arabella tossed her cold coffee in the sink, then stood staring out at the fall leaves in the backyard. She didn't want the girls to pick up on her tension. They'd be in preschool for a few hours, but what about lunch? She'd invited Jonathan to come here to meet Jasmine.

Deciding she'd tell their teacher to take them over to the Mother's Day Out program a lot of the moms in Clayton depended on, Arabella breathed a little easier. That would get her through this awkward lunch at least. Then she'd get the girls and settle into some afternoon baking.

But everything would be different by then. Although she didn't relish this new development, she squared her shoulders and decided to get on with things. Some changes you just couldn't stop or fix—like death or divorce or feuding families. She'd tried to fix all of those things and failed miserably.

"I need You, Lord," she said on a whispered breath. "I don't know how to deal with this. I'm tough and You've seen that. I never knew my daddy and I watched my mother walk away. I watched my husband pack his bags. I stayed by my grandpa, watching him die when no one else would help. I've tried to raise my girls the right way. But this—this is throwing me for a loop, Lord. I need You to help me get through this." Jasmine had come to mean so much to Arabella. She'd already been bracing for Jasmine's wedding and now this. She'd miss the girl, whatever Jasmine decided.

But after trying with all her might to stop the wedding, Arabella had a change of heart. Maybe because life was so fragile and unsure or maybe because underneath all her bravado, she still believed in love. How would the formidable Grandpa George have handled this situation? He'd probably hire someone to run the doctor out of town. But George Clayton hadn't been all bad. She remembered how he'd come into the hospital room when the girls were born. He'd stared down at the three little pink bundles without a word. But a single tear had fallen down his rusty old cheek. Then he'd turned and walked out of the room.

That tear had told her more than any words ever could.

Grandpa George loved his great-granddaughters. And he loved Jasmine, too. He'd want Arabella to fight for her home and for her children, including Jasmine.

Why had God allowed them to love Jasmine, to make the girl one of their own, only to bring Jonathan Turner here with bad news? Would he entice Jasmine with his wealth and position? Or would he promise her the moon but then leave and forget her? Jasmine had suffered enough.

Arabella had suffered enough, too. Was she being selfish, wishing Dr. Turner had never found his niece? Like it or not, Jasmine had grown up and was to be married in December. Arabella would have to let her go, one way or another.

Arabella had a hard time letting go, though. Her own mother had left her here in Clayton when Arabella, a teenager at the time, had refused to move away. She'd stayed for love, or so she

thought. She'd married too young, and before she knew it, her marriage had fizzled out like a dud stick of dynamite. People were always leaving her, and she was tired of it.

What next? she wondered.

Outside, the leaves fell from the trees with a gentle abandonment that seemed to Arabella like a release. She wished she could just drift away like that. But she had responsibilities. She had to face reality. She couldn't let her protective feelings put a wedge between Jasmine and her. There really wasn't anything she could do, except pray that Jasmine would be happy, no matter where she wound up.

Arabella spent the next hour making soup and baking rolls for lunch. Only she didn't have an appetite and she couldn't get Jasmine to come downstairs.

Cade called Arabella's cell. "What's wrong with Jasmine? She left me a message, and she was crying." His voice filled with concern. "Is this about the wedding? Did somebody say something to her? I called back but she wouldn't tell me anything over the phone."

"Are you coming over here?" Arabella asked, hoping the boy could comfort Jasmine but dreading all that she'd have to tell him. "We can talk then."

"I'm finishing up some things with Mr. Jameson at the Circle C. I'll be over there when I'm done."

"That's fine," Arabella told him. Cade had big plans to become a doctor, but right now he needed a steady income and

the Circle C ranch needed workers. Thankfully, Cody paid him a fair wage for a good day's work. "Come on over when you're done. I'll be here through lunch, so Jasmine won't be alone. Just get here when you can and maybe you can talk to her. She won't talk to me right now."

She was glad she'd told the girls' preschool teacher to take them next door to Mother's Day Out. Normally, she only sent the girls over there when she had deliveries or other appointments.

Their teacher, Mrs. Black, had readily agreed. "They'll be just fine, Arabella. The girls love playing with the other kids who stay late. Don't worry. Enjoy your afternoon."

Arabella didn't see how that would be possible. This was one of those days where she wished she could just run away and start fresh. But she busied herself with cooking, something that always soothed her when she was worried about things.

Her cell rang, showing Brooke's number. "So ... what's up with you and that handsome doctor?"

"He's new in town," Arabella told her cousin. "And ... he's Jasmine's uncle. His name is Jonathan, and he told me her daddy died a short time ago."

"Oh, that's horrible. How's she doing?"

"Not so great. I just told her this morning. Jonathan's coming over for lunch so he can talk to her."

"Give Jasmine a hug for me," Brooke said. "Listen, I heard from Vivienne."

Arabella braced herself. Had her cousin decided against

coming home for the requisite year? “What did she say?”

“She’s visiting friends in Denver right now, but . . . she lost her job. She said since she’s got nothing to go back to in New York, she’ll be home soon. She’s willing to try the year thing.”

Arabella thought how hard her vivacious cousin had worked to become a successful chef in New York. Vivienne hadn’t been thrilled at the stipulation of having to return to Clayton for a year to receive her inheritance. But now she’d need that money. “Viv is being brave about this. I hope she won’t regret it.”

“I told her I sure am glad I came home, in spite of everything.”

“Me, too,” Arabella replied. “Thanks for the update. Now we need to pray Zach hears from Lucas.”

“I’m on it,” Brooke said before hanging up.

Arabella went back to her cooking, her prayers scattered from her cousin Lucas missing somewhere in Florida to Vivienne at loose ends in Denver and everyone in between. Especially Jasmine . . . and her uncle.

Jonathan walked up onto the inviting porch of what everyone called Clayton House. The big old Victorian looked pretty from a distance, but up close he could see the signs of wear and tear. The yellow paint was chipped and peeling in places and some of the big white shutters drooped with a heavy-lidded sway. This painted lady had seen better days. The house had to be over a hundred or so years old, so Jonathan took it in with a forgiving eye.

Maybe Arabella Michaels would be the same. Pretty from afar

but worn a bit when he got up close. He almost wished that were true. Except last night she'd looked pretty good for a woman who'd come to confront him. He didn't need the distraction of a pretty woman right now. He had to talk to Jasmine, tell her he wanted to give her a chance for a new life and then get back to his old life. If he kept taking time off from the hospital, he could be out on his own, searching for a new place to work.

The front door creaked open with a groaning cackle. "I thought we agreed you wouldn't hide in the bushes anymore."

Jonathan gave Arabella a twisted smile. "I'm not hiding in the bushes. I'm right here in plain sight."

"Then why didn't you knock on the door? You've been standing there for at least five minutes."

He took in her careless chignon and the soft green sweater she wore over old jeans. And she had on yet another pair of cowboy boots—these a rich, burnished brown that matched her upswept hair. Unlike the house, she did not look worn and frayed around the edges. She looked great. All natural and all attitude.

"I ... uh ... this is hard," he said, his tongue tripping over his teeth. "I brought Jasmine a few things." He shoved the gift bag and a small bouquet of flowers toward Arabella. "The flowers are for you. And ... some stuffed animals for your girls."

Arabella took the flowers and looked down at the big floral bag then back up at him, surprise and sweetness in her eyes. "I see you've been to the Flowers and Fancy Finds gift shop."

"Dorothy recommended it. And asked me several pointed

questions about why I wanted to buy frilly gifts.”

“I’ll reckon she did,” Arabella said, standing back. “C’mon on in. I might as well let you know—I told Jasmine everything and now she’s locked in her room. Cade’s supposed to come over in a little while.”

Jonathan’s heart knocked against his chest. “I didn’t want it to be this way.”

“She’s upset about her daddy. In spite of Aaron Turner’s nasty ways, I guess the girl still loved him.”

“He wasn’t always bad,” Jonathan said, following her into what looked like a parlor. He saw antique sideboards and cherrywood tables mixed with a modern brown leather couch and high-back chairs strewn with colorful pillows. In one corner, a massive wicker basket filled with children’s books and toys seemed to fit right in. Family pictures lined the bookshelves. “Maybe if I talk to her ...”

Arabella pointed to a floral chair by the fireplace. “Have a seat. I’ll bring in coffee. I made vegetable soup and bread. And I have pie.”

“But—”

She whirled to stare at him, the big bag clutched in one and the flowers in the other. “I’m going up to tell her you’re here. Maybe she’ll come down.” Laying the bag on a side table, she said, “And if she doesn’t, well, you and I still need to have a long talk. So make yourself comfortable. This might take a while.”

Jonathan sat down, nonplussed by her bossy attitude. He was

used to bossing people around, but it sure wasn't as much fun to have the tables turned. He decided this trip wasn't going to be as short and sweet as he'd imagined.

Things were getting more and more complicated by the minute. And from the frown on Arabella Michaels's heart-shaped face, he had a feeling this was just the beginning.

Arabella found a crystal vase for the flowers. The fall arrangement contained vines and briar roses mixed in with fat burgundy mums and variegated sunflowers in amber and orange. It wasn't very big and it wasn't formal, but the cluster of flowers made a statement.

Was the man sitting in her parlor trying to make a statement, too?

She fussed with the arrangement and then put it in the middle of the long oak dining table. Jonathan's act of kindness had touched her. But then she figured he was making nice before he met Jasmine and plied her with big-city dreams. And why would a busy single doctor want to deal with a teenager anyway?

Maybe because that teenager was his only family?

Arabella could certainly understand that concept.

She heard footsteps and saw Jasmine moving down the stairs, her eyes red-rimmed, her hair falling in gentle brown ribbons around her face. Before Arabella could say anything the girl marched across the entry hall and into the parlor, stopping inside the arched doorway.

Arabella hurried after her but stopped in the dining area

behind Jasmine.

“So you’re my uncle?” Jasmine said it in the form of an accusation, the words sharp like arrows, her voice hoarse and raspy but determined.

Jonathan stood up, his hands going into the pockets of his jeans. “Uh ... yes. I’m Jonathan. I’m sorry we had to meet this way.” His expression was filled with a cautious joy, but his eyes held a definite sorrow.

Jasmine didn’t say anything for a split second. Then she crossed her arms at her midsection and said, “And so, my daddy’s dead?”

Jonathan shot Arabella a helpless look and then focused on Jasmine. “Yes, he is. I’m sure you knew he was an alcoholic—”

“Yeah, I did know that. How did he die?”

Another pleading look. “He left a bar late at night and ... apparently lost control of his truck on a curve.” He started to say more but held back. Finally, he said, “He died on impact.”

Jasmine raised a hand to her mouth then put her head down. “He wasn’t always so mean. He just couldn’t beat the liquor.”

“I know,” Jonathan said, his eyes burning with what looked like unshed tears. “I understand and I’m so sorry. He wasn’t always like that when we were growing up, either.”

Jasmine’s head came up. “What made him get that way?”

“It was probably the disease.” Jonathan stepped closer. “He followed our father’s example, I think maybe to have something in common with our old man. They used to drink together a lot

once my brother got older.”

Jasmine swiped at her eyes. “But you turned out different? How’d that happen?”

He shrugged, his shoulders slumping, the weight of this discussion seeming to wear him down. “I tried to just survive. I ... was younger. Aaron took the brunt of things. He wanted to protect me. I only wish I could have protected him.”

Jasmine whirled toward Arabella and rushed into her arms. Arabella grabbed hold and hugged Jasmine tight, warning Jonathan away when he moved toward the girl. “It’s all right. We’ve been through a lot together and we’ll figure this out. It’s gonna be okay, I promise.” She voiced that promise loud enough for the man standing there to hear it.

Jasmine sniffed and looked up at her. “I always thought he’d come back here one day. That he’d want to come back for me. Or maybe he’d show up at my wedding. Now I’ll never see him again.”

Arabella held her own tears inside. It wouldn’t do for her to fall apart, too. She had to be strong to keep Jasmine intact. “Maybe he was trying to get back. We can’t be sure. Maybe he went away to get better and ... just didn’t have the strength to make it home.”

Jasmine turned then, her eyes scalding Jonathan. “Maybe if he’d had someone to help him—”

“I didn’t know where he was,” Jonathan said, but it sounded like a pitiful excuse and he seemed to realize that. He dropped his hands to his sides. “I wish things could have been better between

us. I tried to stay in touch, but he never answered my calls or my letters. He resented me going away to college.”

Jasmine lifted her head an inch, her chin jutting out. “He used to pick on me about that. Said college was a big waste of time and money. Said I didn’t have enough sense for higher education. I’d do better to get a job right here in Clayton and learn my place in this world.” She held herself, her arms tight against her stomach. “I guess he was right.”

Arabella leveled her gaze on Jonathan. “He was wrong, Jasmine. You’re a very bright girl. If you want to go to college, we can make that happen.”

And she dared the good doctor to dispute that.

Then Arabella had a new thought. Denver had several very good colleges. Maybe the doctor *could* actually help make Jasmine’s dreams come true. And maybe it was time Arabella stopped wallowing in her own woes and, instead of resenting Jonathan Turner, found a way to help make that happen.

Chapter Four

“I don’t have to go to college right now. I *want* to marry Cade,” Jasmine said. “He’s smart and he’s looking for scholarships and working on securing student loans. He’s gonna be a doctor like you. How about that?” she inhaled a tiny breath. “After we’re married, he’d going to get started in college and I’m going to work to help support us. That’s our plan.”

Arabella saw the stubborn look on Jasmine’s face. She wouldn’t abandon Cade. And she’d put his dreams ahead of hers. The girl had talked about working while Cade went to college and on to med school. But neither of them had decided whether they should stay here and commute to any of the nearby large colleges or if Cade would live on campus. Either way, it would be hard to start a marriage like that.

Jonathan relaxed a little, a tight smile playing on his lips. “I ... can talk to him, answer any questions he might have.” Then he took another step. “How about you though? Don’t you want to continue your education after the wedding?”

Arabella wondered if he’d accepted that there would be a wedding or if he was just fishing.

Jasmine nodded, the motion barely there. “Yes, I’d like to go to college, too. I’ve already checked into taking some courses online. But I don’t mind working while Cade gets his medical degree.” She shrugged. “I like cooking and baking. And there’s

no shame in waiting tables until I decide what I want to do.”

Her tone indicated she'd be the one doing the deciding. Arabella was used to this but had to smile at Jonathan's poleaxed look.

Arabella touched her on the arm. “Let's talk about all that over lunch,” she said gently. “Cade called earlier. He should be here soon. But we can go ahead and eat since it's ready. Your favorite vegetable soup and fresh-baked wheat rolls. And I made pumpkin pie for dessert.”

Jasmine wiped at her eyes again. “Cade's coming?”

“He said he'd be here after he did some chores for Cody.”

Jasmine glanced over at Jonathan. “He has a good job on a big ranch just outside of town. I told you he's smart and he works hard, too.”

Jonathan focused on Arabella then glanced back at Jasmine. “I'm looking forward to meeting him.”

Arabella motioned for Jonathan. He couldn't stand there in the parlor all day. “C'mon. Soup's getting cold.”

He stepped across the hallway and into the dining room. The wall between the kitchen and this room had long ago been opened to form one long room that included the kitchen, a small desk and sitting area and the dining area. Arabella found it a bit disconcerting, the way Jonathan seemed to fill the space and make it smaller.

It had been a long time since she'd had company for lunch. Adult male company, that is. Why hadn't she bothered to put on

some lipstick and comb her upswept hair?

Jonathan shot a wary eye toward Jasmine then asked, “Where are the girls?”

“They attend preschool at the church three days a week,” Arabella said as she poured tea and ladled soup. “I sent them over to Mother’s Day Out for the afternoon. I let them stay there some afternoons when I need to leave them with someone I can trust.”

Jonathan took the iced tea she handed him. “You seem to have such a strong sense of community around here.”

“We do. This little town might have seen better days, but we tend to stick together through thick and thin.”

His guilty look made her wish she hadn’t said that. Did he think she was making a point with him? His next words explained that.

“I ... we ... grew up in a small town like this. It’s about twenty miles from here, closer to Denver.”

He didn’t mention exactly which town, however.

“We like it here,” Jasmine said, her words quiet but firm.

Jonathan smiled at Jasmine. She was busy placing bright yellow linen napkins around the table. But Arabella didn’t miss the shy look Jasmine shot toward Jonathan. The girl was getting used to the idea of having an uncle apparently.

“Let’s eat,” Arabella said. “We have a couple of hours before I pick up the girls.”

And so they sat down, the three of them. A minute of awkward silence followed, the only sounds the ticking of the grandfather

clock in the foyer and the usual whines and groans of the old house.

Then Jasmine reached out a hand to both of them. “I’ll say grace.”

Arabella took the girl’s hand on one side and then, reluctantly, took Jonathan’s hand on the other. And the reaction she’d been expecting, the dread she’d felt coming since he’d shown up, settled over her like a rock slide, swift and accurate. Only now, the dread was mixed with a bit of anticipation, too. She had to inhale a breath to get her bearings.

Because she was holding the hand of a man who’d come here to mess with her carefully controlled, deliberately scheduled life. And that made him far more dangerous than she’d ever dreamed.

Jonathan took the coffee Jasmine handed him. Her tentative smile brought him a small measure of comfort. Was she warming up to him?

Jasmine placed a chunky slice of pumpkin pie in front of him. “Do you want whipped cream on top?”

“No, no,” Jonathan said, eyeing the pie. “This is plenty. I’m not used to eating like this.”

Jasmine glanced over at Arabella. “We always have plenty to eat around here. Arabella is a caterer. She bakes all the bread for the Cowboy Café and makes wedding cakes, too. She can cook for a big group, but you have to book that ahead of time. I help her. She pays me to babysit and help with the baking.”

Jonathan saw the pride in Jasmine’s eyes. He wanted her to

feel that same pride about him. “Sounds as if you two have a good thing going.”

Jasmine bobbed her head. “We do. Arabella’s been good to me. She’s like ... my mom.”

Bragging and making another point.

He wished he could accuse Arabella of taking advantage of his niece, but that didn’t seem to be the case. Arabella Michaels didn’t act like the type to work anyone too hard. She had a gentleness about her that belied the steel underneath. But she was a good person. He could see that from this cozy, colorful home and her unconditional love for her family.

He and his brother had never known that kind of love. Not after their mother had died when they were still boys.

Arabella wasn’t taking advantage of his niece. She’d given the girl a home and a job. That was different from working the girl too much. And it wasn’t the same—not the way his father had tried to work his brother and him, all the while making them feel somehow responsible for their mother’s death. He was thankful Jasmine had found a good place to live.

But he needed to lay his cards on the table regarding his niece. “Now that we’ve had a chance to get to know each other, Jasmine, I wanted to extend an invitation to you.”

Arabella stood straight up across the breakfast bar, the daring look in her golden-brown eyes nailing Jonathan to his chair.

“What kind of invitation?” Jasmine looked from him to Arabella. “I’d like to hear that.”

He cleared his throat. This was the moment he'd been waiting for, the reason he'd come here. "Now that I know about you and I've seen . . . your situation," he began, hoping to make sense, "I'd like you to think about the possibility of coming to Denver."

Jasmine looked confused. "You mean for a visit, right?"

"No, I mean for as long as you want."

The girl pushed at her long hair. "But . . . you understand I'm getting married in December?"

"December?" He never dreamed the wedding would be that soon. "Isn't that a bit rushed? You've only been out of high school for a little while, right?"

"I graduated last spring. Cade did, too. But we both have jobs—just until Cade can get everything lined up for college and med school. And Arabella has a room here on the back of the house that Cade and I can use until we decide. It was her grandpa's room for a while."

Arabella came around the counter and sat down. "I had to move my grandpa downstairs for a few months before he died. After he passed, I remodeled the room and turned it into an efficiency apartment, thinking I might rent it out. It has a bath and a small kitchen. I offered it to the kids rent-free until they get settled and decide about college."

"So they'd stay here?" This time, Jonathan's tone *was* accusatory, but he didn't care. Maybe he'd been wrong to assume Arabella didn't have an agenda. "You've thought of everything, haven't you?"

Arabella gave him another stubborn look. “When my grandpa got so sick, all I could think about was that he didn’t want to go to a nursing home. So I brought in a contractor to do some quick remodeling. We opened up a big storage closet and made it into a bathroom for him.” She shrugged. “After he died, I thought about bringing in some extra income since my child-support checks are few and far between. So don’t go guessing that I’m trying to manipulate things for my own benefit.”

“I never suggested—” he began.

“I actually think it might be a good idea for Jasmine and Cade to consider living in Denver. Several fine universities are there and they have talked about that possibility.” She met his eyes. “Having you nearby would ease my mind, that’s for sure.”

Jasmine bobbed her head. “That’s true. It would be even better to know somebody in Denver. Especially a doctor.” She glanced at Arabella. “Cade’s mom lives there, but they’re not close. He won’t even talk about asking her to help.”

Jonathan saw the hope in Jasmine’s eyes and the encouragement in Arabella’s.

Maybe she wasn’t manipulating anything after all. But it would be hard to let her number-one helper leave. “Sorry. It just seems so convenient—wanting Jasmine and Cade to stay here with you.”

Jasmine dropped her fork, her gaze widening. “It’s a good plan—if we decide to do that. We’ll have privacy here before we decide about school. And if Cade goes on to college, I’ll have a

place to stay if I need it and he can come home on weekends. You have a problem with that?”

Jonathan saw that he was caught between two forceful personalities. He knew when to back down. “No, but I still want you to consider coming to Denver.” He sent out his own challenge. “You and Cade both. As Arabella said, we have several very good universities. And I have connections.”

Arabella put her hands on her hips and gave Jonathan a challenging look. “If you’re willing to help them.”

Jonathan tried to hide his surprise, still not sure if she was being sincere or sarcastic. But before he could stop himself, he blurted out, “Seriously?”

“Seriously,” Arabella said, her expression a tad too smug. “That is, provided you’ll stick around here for a while longer and get to know Jasmine and Cade, spend some time with them, let them tell you *their* plans. Get my drift?”

He got it all right. This woman wouldn’t let go without a fight. That, or she was trying to call his bluff about letting them come to Denver. Well, that situation would definitely change his single lifestyle. Obviously, Arabella had already thought about that.

But he wouldn’t be bullied into any type of commitment. “I can’t stay. I have responsibilities—”

She leaned down, her hand centered near his half-eaten piece of pie. “Right now you have a responsibility to your niece. You came here to find her. Well, now you have. You can’t just swoop in and grab her up and cart her off to Denver without talking

about this and thinking things through. That's asking a lot, from us and from yourself. We both need to see if you have sticking power."

"Yes, we do," Jasmine said, nodding her head. "But, thanks for the offer, Uncle Jonathan."

Jonathan knew when he was outnumbered. "I guess I could take a few more days—"

The doorbell rang, followed by Arabella's cell phone. Jasmine rushed to the door. "Cade!" She fell into the young man's arms. "You won't believe this."

Jonathan studied the young man. Muscular with dark blond hair. A nice all-American look. The kid pulled Jasmine into a tight hug.

"Are you all right?" Cade asked, holding her while he looked across the hallway and into the dining room. "Come in and I'll tell you all about it," Jasmine said. Oh, great. Another strong ally in their corner. Jonathan stood to greet Cade, hoping to get a handle on the kid's nature.

But before he could extend his hand, Arabella grabbed him, her phone in her other hand. "I need you."

Shocked and wondering what she had planned for him now, he turned toward her. "Okay."

"No, I mean I need a doctor. Julie fell out on the playground at church and busted her forehead. They think she needs stitches. Will you come with me to check on her?" "Of course."

He turned and gave Jasmine and Cade a shrug. "Go," Jasmine

said. "I need to explain things to Cade anyway."

Cade looked confused, gave Jonathan a scathing look and then asked, "What's that man doing here?"

Jonathan gave Jasmine a reassuring glance as Arabella frantically dragged him out the back door and motioned toward her minivan. "Get in."

"I'll drive," he offered, seeing her agitation. "I have my medical bag in my car."

"I can drive. I'm fine."

Jonathan took the keys out of her hand, noticing the slight tremor. "Let me help. I don't mind."

She looked less than pleased, but didn't argue.

After he grabbed his doctor's bag and they were in her vehicle and headed toward the church, she finally took a long breath. "Thank you."

"I won't let you down," Jonathan promised.

She briefly locked eyes with him, then turned to gaze out the window.

He knew this temporary truce was the best he could get for now, all things considered. At least it was something.

"No sign of trauma to her head. She's alert and focused—no signs of shock. She'll be fine, but she might need stitches."

Arabella glanced from Jonathan to the curly-haired little girl clinging to her. "How many? Will there be a scar?"

Jonathan wasn't used to distraught mothers. He was a surgeon, and he mostly worked on adults. Children weren't his specialty.

“I can’t say how many but if you don’t get stitches, she might have a tiny scar right underneath her hairline. We should get her to the hospital just to be sure.”

Arabella got up, her hand pressing a wet towel against the still-sobbing child’s head. “That’s thirty miles away. Can’t you do it?”

“Uh ... I could but—”

“Look, she’s bleeding all over this towel and I’ve got two more to worry about. Jasmine’s with Cade, explaining everything, and Mother’s Day Out is closing for the day. You’re a doctor and you’re here. You’ll do in a pinch, won’t you?”

He heard the frantic worry in her voice—and the doubt and fear. But she was right. “Yes ... and yes.” He could break the rules. He’d given the little girl a thorough exam, and although her cut was minor, to her mother this still seemed like an emergency. Besides, it wasn’t as if he hadn’t broken a few rules before. “I guess this is a pinch.”

Jonathan turned to where Mrs. Black sat in the big, colorful nursery with Jessie and Jamie and another helper.

When he motioned, the tall blonde came toward him, her eyes on little Julie. “I’m so sorry, Arabella. I was cleaning up my classroom when the MDO worker came running over from the playground. She thought I could calm Julie down. Poor girl turned her head for one second and Julie fell off the climbing rope and hit her head against the wooden ladder next to it.”

Arabella heaved a sigh then kissed Julie’s damp head. “It happens. We can’t always protect them.” She shot Jonathan a long

look. “No matter what age they are.”

“I can stitch her up but first I have to make sure she’s in a sterile setting,” he told the distraught teacher. “I need a room with a table. And a blanket to swaddle her. Arabella, I’ll need both you and Mrs. Black to help hold her down.”

Holding Julie tight, Arabella stood up. “Let’s do it, then.”

“Go on,” the teacher said, waving them toward the room next door. “Our lunch table gets sterilized every day before we leave. I’ll grab a clean sheet and blanket.” She turned to the other worker hovering nearby. “Stay with the girls, okay?”

The young woman nodded and immediately went over to where Jesse and Jamie sat playing inside a big plastic toy house.

“Thanks.” Arabella held the towel to Julie’s swollen forehead. Then she turned to Jonathan. “Let’s go.”

Jonathan could see the fear in her eyes. “You sure about this?”

“Yes. Are you?”

“As you said, I’m a doctor.” He’d taken an oath, so why was he so afraid? He didn’t want to abandon her with a hurt child. He didn’t abandon people. He just pushed them away. He wasn’t afraid to do his job. He was afraid of failing at that job. But stitches on a preschooler? He could do that procedure in his sleep. This time, however, things felt different, as if doing this would be a test. If it meant gaining Arabella’s trust, he knew he’d have to pass with flying colors.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.