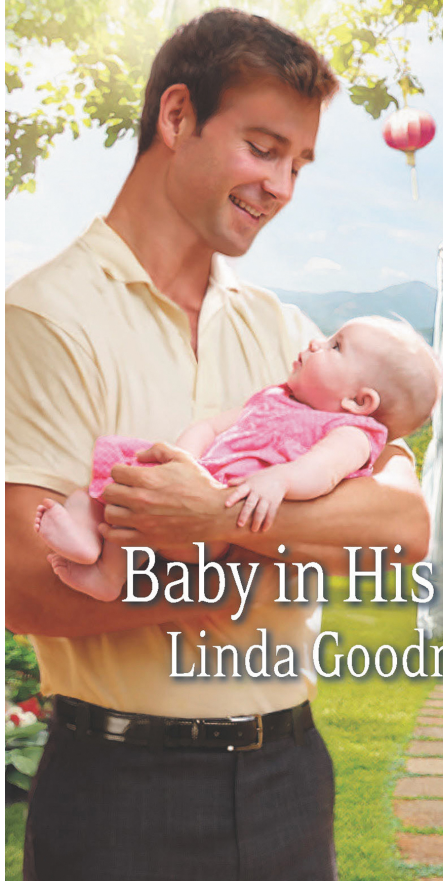


HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired



Baby in His Arms

Linda Goodnight

WHISPER
FALLS

Linda Goodnight

Baby in His Arms

Аннотация

Helicopter pilot Creed Carter can't believe his eyes—someone's left a baby on the church altar. When this perfect little girl is temporarily turned over to Haley Blanchard, Creed is skeptical. The auburn-haired foster mother in flowing skirts is pretty, yet definitely not his type. But the more time Creed spends with Haley, the more he appreciates her style and her fierce commitment to her foster kids. To his surprise, he's falling for her—and for baby Rose. But when a crisis strikes, can Creed convince Haley to face her worst fear and trust what's in her heart

A Newborn Surprise

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“Want me to hold her while you do that?”

He'd never been a guy who went around holding babies, but Rose Petal was different. She'd stolen a corner of his heart yesterday morning and he hadn't gotten it back yet. That a tiny infant wielded such power felt nothing short of weird.

He reached for Rose. His fingers collided with Haley's soft, smooth skin. His pulse jumped. He took Rose and stepped back, bothered.

He wasn't attracted to this earth mother. He couldn't be.

Getting that itchy feeling again, Creed turned his attention to the soft bundle in his arms.

“Hey, little girl. Remember me?” Creed stroked one tiny fist and was gratified when the infant clutched his finger. The action was an innate reflex, but his insides warmed anyway. “Why do you think her mother left her?”

“I don’t know. I try not to think about it.”

He couldn’t think of anything else. The fact that Haley didn’t only proved how different they were.

He definitely wasn’t attracted to her. Not one bit....

LINDA GOODNIGHT

Winner of a RITA® Award for excellence in inspirational fiction, Linda Goodnight has also won a Booksellers’ Best Award, an ACFW Book of the Year award and a Reviewers’ Choice Award from RT Book Reviews. Linda has appeared on the Christian bestseller list and her romance novels have been translated into more than a dozen languages. Active in orphan ministry, this former nurse and teacher enjoys writing fiction that carries a message of hope and light in a sometimes dark world. She and her husband live in Oklahoma. Visit her website at www.lindagoodnight.com. To browse a current listing of Linda Goodnight’s titles, please visit www.Harlequin.com.

Baby in His Arms

Linda Goodnight



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Whoever is a believer in Christ is a new creation. The old way of living has disappeared.

A new way of living has come into existence.

—2 Corinthians 5:17

This book and the entire Whisper Falls series are dedicated in loving memory of my brother, Stan Case.

People say that if a prayer is whispered beneath Whisper Falls, God will hear and answer. Some folks think the tale is superstitious nonsense. Some think it's a clever ploy to attract tourists. But others believe that God does work in mysterious ways. And prayers, no matter where whispered, are always heard.

Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Dear Reader](#)

[Questions for Discussion](#)

Prologue

Desperation drove her to it.

Even though the rocks behind the falls were slippery and wet, even though she shivered in her sweater and pulled the well-wrapped baby closer to her aching chest, she struggled along the ledge, clinging to the gleaming black rocks with one hand and to the baby with the other.

The crash and roar of river water filled the air, filled her head, filled her completely and terrifyingly. She must do this. She must. Whisper Falls was her last and only hope.

With water spraying relentlessly against her face and hair, she edged along the rock face. Thank God for the rock cleaves and ledges made by nature and humans, many perhaps as desperate as herself. People who'd climbed down the rocks to the ledge below and clung to the rock face like snails to somehow manage the difficult journey to that sacred spot behind the waterfall.

The roar grew louder. Tons of water cascaded in front of her, a white spray of fierce beauty. Her body trembled violently from cold and wet, fear and exhaustion as well as from the lonely,

terrible suffering of solitary childbirth hours before.

“Please, God,” she whispered, “help me do this for my baby.”

She'd heard the tales of Whisper Falls. Tales of whispered prayers answered if the one in need had the courage to climb behind the falls and send a prayer on angel wings to God.

One more step and she'd be there. One step. Barely able to hold on because of the violent weakness in her knees, she slipped successfully behind the falls. Just that quick, she stepped into a place of tranquility and quiet as though the curtain of white water blocked the painful, bewildering world she'd fled.

She let out a long sigh of relief, eyes closed, resting the back of her head against the hard, cold rock for a moment. Mist drenched her face and clothes, but the baby rested warm and dry, protected by a vinyl tablecloth.

“Dear God,” she whispered.

She wasn't sure how prayer worked or if there were rules. But she knew God was big and if anyone could help her, He could. He was likely the only one.

“I need your help, God. I don't know where to go or what to do. Tell me what's best for my baby.”

She waited, unsure, hearing nothing but the waterfall's mighty rush. She didn't know what she'd expected but not this loud silence.

“If you're listening, God. If you even listen to someone like me, take care of my baby.”

The tears she'd held inside all through the grueling birth fell

now and mixed with the swirling mist until her chilled face ran like a windowpane.

“I’m not asking for me. I’m asking for her. She didn’t do anything wrong. Please, God, send a family to love her.” Her voice choked. “Really love her. This is all I’ll ever ask of You.”

She gazed down at the tiny red face, memorizing the thatch of dark hair above the perfect nose and chin. Then she offered up the child, a living sacrifice for her mother’s sins. Her terrible, terrible sins.

Chapter One

A baby on the doorstep was a cliché. Wasn’t it?

Creed Carter shook the early morning cobwebs from his head. He should have had one more cup of coffee. Maybe two.

No one abandoned babies on doorsteps anymore. Especially in a town as small as Whisper Falls.

But this wasn’t a doorstep. This was the altar of Whisper Falls Community Church. A small church that was always as quiet as a tomb on Tuesday mornings and every other morning he came in to pray before starting his day in the air above the Ozark Mountains.

Creed blinked and crept closer, tiptoeing, hoping his vision would clear or he would awaken and laugh off the silly dream.

Maybe a child had left a doll behind. Maybe the Christmas committee had gotten the baby Jesus doll out of storage for some reason.

But this was spring. Christmas was months away.

Suddenly, the small wrapped bundle stirred. Creed's heart jumped, kicking up to a hundred knots. A man who'd flown helicopters over Iraq wasn't scared of anything. Except very small human beings who cried a lot and couldn't talk. Or walk. Or feed themselves.

A pair of tiny fists rose from the odd-looking bundle. Right behind them came the mewling cry.

His heart slammed against his chest wall as if he'd lost power over Whisper Falls with the chopper filled with sightseers. Creed rushed to the altar and fell on his knees beside the bundle. A tiny baby, face wrinkled and red, eyes still puffy and slanted as if she or he was brand-new, quivered and kicked. The tiny rosebud mouth opened with a loud, distressed wail.

Creed glanced wildly around. Surely this child had a mother around here somewhere. Reverend Wally Schmidt opened the church every morning at five before making his trek over the mountains to his day job in Fayetteville. If Creed arrived early enough, sometimes they prayed together. But not this morning. The church was empty. Not even Wally's four-wheel drive was parked outside. There wasn't another soul around except him and this little bitty, squalling baby.

Heart revving faster by the minute, Creed offered up a quick prayer and then whipped out his cell phone and did what any sensible man would do. He called 9-1-1.

* * *

The sound of JoEtta Farnsworth's moped had barely died

when the Whisper Falls police chief slammed through the double doors into the sanctuary. Short and stocky and tough as shoe leather, the middle-aged blonde looked like a scooter-riding version of Amelia Earhart.

“What’s going on in here?” she demanded in voice like a foghorn.

“I found this baby,” Creed said, realizing how sad that sounded. People found pennies, not babies.

It was weird. He, an only child whose experience with babies was limited to diaper commercials on TV, was downright heartsick to think anyone would leave a baby alone. Even if the little thing had been left in a church, he or she was alone. Abandoned. Helpless.

“What do you mean you found her?” Chief Farnsworth eyed him as if he was a teenaged driver caught spinning doughnuts on Main Street.

“I came in a few minutes ago, and there she was.” He hitched his chin toward the long, oak altar.

“On the altar?”

The baby stirred. “Wrapped up in this thing. It’s a tablecloth, I think.”

“Uh-huh. The kind you carry on picnics.” The chief stepped closer. “Flannel on the inside. Vinyl on the outside.”

“She quieted down when I picked her up.”

He’d rocked her, too, and sung “Jesus Loves Me” in the rough, pathetic voice that could make dogs howl and soldiers throw

things. She'd seemed to go for it.

Creed didn't mention the singing and rocking to the chief.

"Anyone else around?"

"No one I saw."

"Did you look? Check in the office or the bathroom?"

"Never thought about it. She was crying." A man would be heartless to walk away from a cry like that.

JoEtta peeled back the vinyl to peek at the sleeping face. "You say she's a girl? What about the umbilical cord? Is it still attached?"

Creed blinked, horrified. "I didn't look. I just thought she seemed pink and round like a little girl."

"Oh, for pity's sake. Let me see its belly." The no-nonsense policewoman pushed aside the cloth and peered down at the naked baby. "It's a girl, all right," she said. "New as the dew."

The baby started crying again.

"Well, pardon me, missy," JoEtta said with a snort.

Creed rewrapped the baby and snuggled her close to his shirt. She stopped crying.

"I think she likes you, Creed."

Creed figured the little thing was simply happy to be held. Either that, or desperate to escape Chief Farnsworth's rock-grinder voice. But the idea that she liked him tickled his chest, anyway. "What are you going to do with her?"

"Call Social Services." JoEtta pointed at the altar. "Sit down there and do whatever it is you've been doing to keep her happy

while I search the church and make sure there's not a mama lurking around."

"You think someone walked in here and had a baby, then left her?"

"Stranger things have happened."

"Not in Whisper Falls."

The chief made a rude noise in the back of her throat. "I beg to differ. A woman had twins one year on the Ferris wheel at Pumpkin Fest because that idiot Buster Grubenheimer thought she was screaming from fright and wouldn't shut down the ride."

"True. I'd forgotten about that. She named the babies Ferris and Wheeler."

"Sure did." JoEtta slapped her thigh and guffawed. The baby jerked. "Sit tight. I'll be back."

Creed grinned as the short, squat chief stomped away, gear rattling at her side.

The sanctuary grew quiet again. A large round clock on the back wall reminded him of the time. With a grimace, he sat down on the front pew.

"Don't worry, princess," he said to the sleeping face. "I won't bail on you. Not like your mama did."

He fished for his cell phone and canceled his first scenic flight of the day. He'd no more than ended the call when the baby's mouth opened in a whimper that quickly escalated to a cry.

Creed scooped the frantic bundle against his chest and patted her back. She was probably hungry. He was about to sing again

when the police chief marched in from the vestibule.

“Social worker’s on her way.”

“You didn’t find any sign of the mother?” he asked.

“Nope. The way I figure it, the mother slipped in, left the baby and made a run for it.”

Left at the mercy of strangers.

The idea twisted in Creed’s gut. Through a cap of fine dark hair, he could see a pulse in the infant’s head. The sight scared him silly. “Maybe we should call Dr. Ron.”

“The social worker will make that determination. She ought to be here any minute.” The back door opened. “See? I told you. Howdy, Melissa.”

“Chief Farnsworth.” A surprisingly young woman wearing very high heels with a black business suit and crisp white blouse bustled into the room. Before Creed could say a word, she took the baby from him.

He didn’t think he liked her.

* * *

Haley Blanchard got the call at ten o’clock. She stripped off her gardening gloves, stuck her feet into a pair of flip-flops and jumped into her minivan. Never mind that her hair had escaped its topknot and now danced in auburn wisps around her face, or that she was sweaty, grubby and needed a shower.

A baby had been abandoned. The thought quickened a sinking sensation deep in her gut, a moment of deep pity. But this was her job. Fostering was what she did. If a child was in need of a

temporary home, she provided one. She didn't let her emotions get in the way of doing the right thing.

Haley reached Dr. Ron's clinic in less than ten minutes, a thousand questions and thoughts racing through her head. Who found her? Where? Was she healthy? Who would abandon a baby in Whisper Falls?

As she entered the building, flip-flops smacking the tile, she was greeted by Chief JoEtta Farnsworth and a social worker, Melissa Plymouth. The three were well-acquainted, having worked together on child welfare cases many times.

"Where's the baby?" Haley asked.

"Dr. Ron's checking her out."

"What happened? Where was she found?" Haley ran her hands down the sides of her dress, glad for the hand sanitizer hanging on the wall.

The chief gave her a brief rundown, answering the questions she could. At the moment, no one knew why the baby had been left at the church or by whom.

"Did Reverend Schmidt find her?"

"Actually, no." Chief Farnsworth stepped to the right, creating a space between herself and the social worker.

Haley's gaze snapped into focus.

A deeply tanned, dark-haired man slapped a magazine shut and stood. "I did."

In her haste to speak with the women, Haley hadn't noticed the man sitting against the pale green wall. Now she did. Creed

Carter, the helicopter pilot. She'd seen him around, mostly at the Iron Horse Snack Shop, knew he flew a helicopter all over the place and was too good-looking for anyone's good. He was the usual well-built, compact size for a pilot. Dark spiky hair, black cargo pants, black golf shirt with a bright yellow helicopter logo on a very nicely formed chest.

She yanked her attention from his chest to his dark chocolate eyes and found those every bit as compelling as the rest.

His lips twitched. He'd caught her staring.

Haley lifted her chin and eyed him coldly.

Arrogant. Overconfident. A typical flyboy. She decided not to like him.

"What were you doing in a church that early in the morning?"

Her words were sharp with suspicion.

"Praying."

His mild expression pricked her conscience. Okay, so she'd been a little rude. The man reminded her of someone she'd dated. Well, a lot of someone she'd dated.

"Why would anyone abandon a baby in a church?"

"Why would anyone abandon a baby at all?" A muscle ticked under his left eye.

"Good point."

Clearly, he wasn't happy to be here. Typical of a flyboy. But he'd stuck around, and that was the part—the only part—that interested Haley, regardless of how good-looking Creed might be.

“There was a note,” he said.

JoEtta Farnsworth, who scared Haley a little with her gruff demeanor, dug inside her brown leather vest and produced a folded piece of notebook paper. “Looks like it was ripped right out of one of those spiral notebooks kids use in school.”

“What does it say?”

“Not much, but enough to know the mother thought she had no other choice. She seems desperate and certain she’s doing the right thing. Tragic.”

Tragic didn’t cover it as far as Haley was concerned. Irresponsible. Selfish. Some mothers were. No one knew that better than Haley. “May I read it?”

“Sure.” The chief passed the note over.

Haley read the note and then looked up. Creed Carter watched her from beneath hooded eyes, arms crossed over his black shirt.

Okay, so he was really good-looking.

She did her best to ignore him while she read part of the note out loud. “Please find the perfect family for my baby. Don’t look for me. I won’t take her back. I can’t. I prayed at Whisper Falls, and this was the answer. Tell her I’m sorry and I love her.”

“The mother sounds very young and frightened,” the social worker said. “I hope she’s all right.”

Creed’s feet shifted against the tile, a tense, masculine presence Haley found unsettling. She was here now. He could go.

“Will you look for her?” he asked in a voice Haley could only describe as dark, rich chocolate.

“Have to,” the chief said with a sniff. “She broke the law.”

After reading the note, Haley wanted to protest. The girl, whoever she was, wasn't a criminal. Nor was she anything like Haley's mother. The girl sounded hopeless and alone, two emotions Haley understood very well. She'd broken the law a few times herself when she'd been young and stupid and under the spell of her crazy mother.

Before she could say anything, though, Dr. Ron and Wilma, the doc's bun-haired assistant, appeared from the back carrying an infant. Wilma held a bottle of formula against the tiny face. Every adult in the waiting room turned in their direction. Creed Carter's expression, Haley noticed with interest, went from cocky to concerned...and bewildered.

“She appears healthy and full-term,” Dr. Ron said.

The only doctor in Whisper Falls, the forty-something physician handled anything that came his way from delivering babies to setting bones. Issues outside his abilities he sent to Fayetteville or Little Rock. Haley liked the youthful-looking doctor with his freckles and cowlick and affable bedside manner. She'd committed more than one foster child to his efficient care.

“Does she need to go to the hospital?” Haley asked.

Creed stepped up beside Haley, bringing with him the scent of woody aftershave and pressed cotton. She tried not to notice but she liked scents. She liked them a lot.

“I can fly her there.”

Haley shivered at the thought. No way was she going up in his

death machine with a baby. Or with anyone else for that matter.

“Thanks, Creed,” Dr. Ron said, “but no need at this point. Right now, the baby looks good. Not very big, but at six pounds two ounces and eighteen inches long, she’s big enough. Formula and diapers and a lot of love should fix her right up. If anything medical presents, Haley will let me know. Right, Haley?”

“Absolutely.” She reached for the baby. Too late, she saw the grass stain on her fingers.

“You’re not taking her, are you?” Creed’s voice was incredulous.

Haley bristled. As Wilma transferred the baby to Haley’s arms, she said, perhaps a bit stiffly, “The social worker called me. I am a certified foster parent. Taking care of displaced children is what I do.”

So she sounded defensive and more than a little testy. The man’s attitude ticked her off.

His doubting gaze drifted from her frizzy hair to her stained hands and down to the chipped polish on her toenails. A flare of nostrils indicated he’d seen the dirt on her feet, too. “You do?”

With those two words, he made her feel about an inch tall. The jerk.

“I was working in my garden,” she said hotly and then wondered why she felt the need to defend herself to him. A helicopter pilot. Ugh.

“Haley is an excellent foster parent.” Melissa’s gracious comment mollified her some, though not completely, after Creed

had insinuated the opposite.

Creed still didn't seem convinced. "You'll take good care of her, won't you? She's really small."

The man was hovering. She wanted to dislike him. She wanted to tell him to get lost, but he had found the child. Maybe he actually cared.

She softened a bit. That was it. Perhaps he wasn't criticizing her. He was genuinely interested in the baby's welfare.

"She'll be fine." Haley jiggled the infant for effect, noticing how avidly the little girl sucked at the bottle.

"Right. Okay." Creed stepped back, but his gaze remained on the nursing child who was now dressed in an oversize yellow drawstring gown.

Haley was forever amazed at the supplies Wilma stocked in that small clinic. "I can assure you, she will be well-cared for until the authorities decide what to do with her."

Creed's lips twisted beneath flared nostrils. He gave her a searing, squint-eyed look she couldn't begin to comprehend. Then to the chief, he said, "You'll keep me posted."

"Will do. Thanks, Creed."

With one last troubled glance at the infant in Haley's arms, Creed Carter strode out of the clinic.

He had insulted her, but Haley had the inexplicable feeling that she'd somehow offended the handsome flyboy.

Chapter Two

Creed had no idea what he was doing. None whatsoever. If

the guys could see him now, they'd bust a gut laughing and he would never live it down.

With a grunt, he wrestled the giant pink teddy bear from the backseat of his black Jeep and picked his way along a series of odd-shaped stepping stones through a mass of flowers and plants that led to Haley Blanchard's house. She had plants everywhere, most of which he didn't recognize. Plants in pots. Plants in half barrels. Plants shooting up around the pavers to brush at his cargo pants. They all seemed to be blooming, the array of scents so vast, he smelled them all and recognized nothing but the pungent odor of dill pickles.

If the plants weren't enough to affirm his first impression of Haley, the porch did the trick. She was a tad on the flakey side. Out there. A throwback flower child. A wood nymph who'd lost her way.

The front porch was cluttered with an array of stuff. A pair of wicker chairs bracketed the front door; a bright blue front door with a wooden purple-and-yellow fish hanging smack in the middle. Running the width of the white framed house, the porch was crowded with a painted milk can, a wrought-iron cart loaded with more plants, various yard ornaments and, to top it all off, there were plaques and signs and an old Coca-Cola thermometer nailed to the siding. In fact, there were so many items jammed in the small space that his eyes couldn't take them all in.

Yes, sir, Haley was a flake.

He asked himself again: What was he doing here?

Rather than answer his own question, Creed sought a doorbell, and finding none, rapped at the side of the house with his knuckles.

No answer.

He knocked again, this time with the outside of his fist.

The sun was warm, hanging over the edge of the mountain like a giant egg yolk in a bowl of faded blue jelly. A bird of some sort scolded from the huge chinquapin oak in the front yard.

Creed figured he should forget this dumb idea of his. Go back home, call it a night. He could phone Haley tomorrow.

But here he stood holding a pink teddy bear. There was no way he was arriving at his apartment complex with this thing in tow.

“Sorry, pal,” he murmured to the stuffed face. “Somebody’s taking you off my hands.”

A pair of shiny black eyes gleamed at him in amiable silence.

He pounded the door once more for good measure and was looking for a clear spot on one of the wicker chairs to park the bear when he heard a woman’s voice coming from the backyard.

“So that’s where they are.” Hoisting the pink teddy over one shoulder, he made his way around the house. Other than a burst of minty-smelling plants that spilled out of an ancient wheelbarrow, the side yard looked a little bare compared to the front.

He rounded into the backyard, feeling awkward and uncertain, two emotions he didn’t deal with on a regular basis. He was a confident guy, easy in his own skin. Wonky situations didn’t rattle

him, but he'd been rattled all day today.

Haley was sitting on the back step next to a towheaded boy with a cowlick so prominent that it split the front of his hair into a fountain. She and the boy had their heads together over an unassembled kite. A wide-brimmed straw hat had been cast aside next to her.

At Creed's approach, Haley glanced up...and her smile froze. "Oh, it's you."

So much for a jolly welcome.

"Hi." He tugged at the neck of his shirt, growing more uncomfortable by the minute. What was he doing here? "I just came by to see..." He looked around and saw no sign of the tiny girl he'd rescued from the church. A frisson of alarm shimmied through him. "Where's the baby? Did someone already take her away? Did they find the mother?"

Haley put aside the kite parts and stood, brushing slender hands over the long flowered skirt. She was barefoot. Her hair, parted in the middle, hung to her shoulders, the evening sun burnishing the auburn to a darker red.

"You didn't expect a newborn baby to be out here in the backyard, did you?"

Well, yes, he had. Not that he knew a thing about newborns.

"Is she still here?"

Haley stood with hands loose at her sides, watching him as if she'd read his thoughts and knew he considered her a flake. He thought her eyes were brown, but in the glare of sunlight, all he

knew for sure was that they were staring a hole through him.

“Why?” she asked.

“Why? What kind of question is that?” Frustrated, he thrust his arms out to either side. She was the strangest woman. “I found her. Crazy as it sounds, I feel invested in her well-being.”

“Why would you feel that way?”

He opened his mouth and shut it back. What was the point? The woman was too flakey to carry on a simple conversation.

“Never mind. I don’t know what I was thinking by coming here.” He shoved the teddy bear into her arms. “I should go.”

He started to do a sharp, pride-wounded about-face when she touched his arm.

“Wait.”

Her touch was featherlight, but it stuck his feet to the green grass like superglue. He wasn’t a weak man, but he felt a tad wobbly all of a sudden.

“Why?” he asked and was surprised when she laughed.

“I guess we’re even.”

“Even?” What was she talking about?

“I asked why. You asked why. We’re even.”

“Ah. Right.” Strange. Flakey. Out-there.

“Sit down.” With a movement as graceful as a ballerina, she gestured toward the porch. “This is Thomas.”

That was all. Just Thomas. Not her foster child. Just the boy’s name. Kind of nice.

“How ya doing, Thomas? You’re building a kite?”

“Yeah.” The boy’s blue eyes, hidden behind thick glasses, fastened on Creed. He wasn’t very old. Maybe nine or ten. “Haley said you fly helicopters.”

Creed eased a look toward Haley. She’d talked about him?

She twitched, and then smooth as a windless flight, she shot him down before he could get cocky. “You flew over the house today. I explained to Thomas that you’d found the baby.”

No big deal. He didn’t need compliments.

“So, how is she doing?” Tight as a bowstring, he sat on the step next to the young boy.

“Sleeping most of the time.” Absently, Haley settled a hand on Thomas’s slim shoulder. He looked up at her and smiled. Something in the gentle gestures loosed a string of tension inside Creed.

“Is that normal?”

“You don’t know much about babies, do you?”

“Nothing.” He lifted one shoulder. “I’m an only child.”

“Me, too, but I know about babies.”

“You’re a girl.”

“Sexist,” she said, though her tone was more amused than insulted.

“Guilty. I like the differences in boys and girls and think they should be celebrated.” He grinned. “Often and with gusto.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Haley stood, moving to the back door to listen. “Baby girl is awake.”

Without waiting to be asked, Creed followed Haley inside the

house. He'd come to see the infant and he wasn't leaving until he did.

The inside of Haley's house was unexpected. Where the yard was a riot, the small interior was sparse and tidy. The back door led directly into a country kitchen. Fussy baby sounds came from a long, sand-colored basket on a small, square table that had seen better days.

"Come here, precious," Haley cooed as she gently lifted the infant from inside the basket. "Are you hungry? Are you starving? Yes, you are."

Creed was fascinated by the change in Haley. Her voice had gone soft and cooing and she asked questions as if a day-old baby knew the answers. The baby's response was a high-pitched wah-wah-wah.

"Can I do something to help?" Creed asked above the noise.

"Hold her while I prepare formula." Before he could admit that holding a baby made him nervous, she plunked the child against his shoulder. The moment the tiny face touched his shirt, she began turning her head side to side, mouth wide and seeking like a rooting puppy.

"Hey, why's she doing that?"

"She thinks you're her mama. Rub her cheek with the side of your finger."

He did. The baby turned toward the touch. "She's soft as a—"

"Rose Petal. That's what I call her." Haley produced a baby bottle of water, scooped some powdery stuff inside and shook

the bottle hard.

“You call her rose petal?”

“She doesn’t have a name. I have to call her something.”

A sharp pain twisted in Creed’s gut. A baby should have a name, a real one, well-thought out and dreamed about. But he didn’t say that. Haley would think he’d gone soft in the head.

“Hippie name,” he muttered. “Rose Petal.”

Haley took the comment in stride. She widened her eyes and grinned. “Better than sneezewort or moonflower.”

Nice. She had a sense of humor.

“Or dandelion,” he shot back.

“Hey, I like that!”

“Figures,” he said, grinning to soften the teasingly spoken word. Maybe the flakey foster mom wasn’t so bad, after all.

Haley moved in close, maneuvering at Creed’s shoulder to slide the bottle nipple between Rose Petal’s seeking lips. Creed tilted his chin down to watch the tiny jaws latch on. Watching Haley’s long slender fingers hold the bottle, Creed caught a whiff of something flowery mingled with the milky scent and realized how very close the three faces were. He lifted his gaze and there was Haley, watching him watching the baby.

Brown. Her eyes were brown with flecks of gold and a black ring around the irises. A small mole dotted one cheek next to her nose, but instead of detracting, the beauty mark enchanted him. He had a crazy urge to touch it.

When the baby made soft, contented nursing sounds, Haley

smiled into Creed's eyes.

A starburst of feeling exploded inside him, warm and colorful.

It was as if they were a couple and this was their baby. Creed's pulse did a giddyap, stealing his breath. He was mesmerized by the child and the woman. Their soft, clean smell. Their natural beauty.

Creed's head swam and his chest filled with inexplicable tenderness. Flakey Haley must be burning some kind of wacky weed to make his head spin, make him lose his mind. Weird. Very weird.

The back door opened. Haley glanced in that direction. The strange, tender moment dissipated like dandelions on the wind. Creed found his breath again, though his pulse still galloped.

What was going on here?

Bemused and bothered, he eased Rose Petal from his shoulder and handed her off to Haley. The baby was fine, well-cared for. That's what he'd come here to learn. Now he could leave and not look back.

Haley stepped away, hugging the baby close. Relief eased the strange tension in Creed's shoulders. Apparently, the bizarre black-hole magnetism had been one-sided. Haley appeared completely unaffected. He, on the other hand, wondered what had just happened.

He exhaled another cleansing breath. Better. Much better. Get a grip, Carter.

Thomas came into the kitchen, dragging the pieces of the still-

unassembled kite. “Are you going to help me finish this?”

“Can’t right now, Thomas.” Haley swayed the baby back and forth in her arms.

Thomas looked dejected, as though the new baby intruded on his turf. Creed supposed she had. To tell the truth, he was so glad for the distraction that Creed said, “I’m a pretty fair kite builder. Want me to help?”

He should leave. He needed to leave. But he didn’t. Behind Thomas’s thick glasses, Creed spotted an irresistible gleam of excitement.

“Would you?” Thomas asked. “That would be cool. I bet you know a lot about how stuff flies.”

“You mean aerodynamics?”

“Yeah, that stuff.”

“More than we need to know to get this kite up in the air. Let me see what you’ve got there.”

He led them to the table, too aware that Haley followed, the baby now bouncing against her shoulder while she patted the tiny back. He tried not to notice Haley’s bare feet and the way her reddish hair curved against her cheek. Try being the operative word.

“It’s just a cheap kite from the dollar store. I hope it will fly,” she said.

“We’ll make it work.” To Thomas, he said, “You ever heard of Bernoulli?”

“No.”

“Well, you will. He was a famous scientist.”

“Did he invent the kite?”

Creed grinned. Cute kid. “No, but his theories explain why something flies.”

“Even a helicopter?”

“Right. Same principle. Let’s get the dowel rods in place first and I’ll show you what I mean.”

He helped Thomas spread the plastic diamond on the table and insert the balsam rods from point to point. Together, they tied the strings to hold the sticks in place. In minutes, the kite was formed.

Haley lurked at his elbow, watching, commenting. He felt her there, smelled her garden fresh scent and heard the soft murmurs she made to the baby.

Try as he might to remember his mission—the baby and a kite—Haley’s presence made him itchy, as if he’d rolled in poison ivy in her yard. Considering the jungle out there, maybe he had.

“You can put the tail and string on in a minute, but first let me show you something.” Holding the center rod, he lifted the kite parallel to the table. “Here’s where Bernoulli’s law comes in.” He passed his hand over and under the kite. “There’s air in this room all around the kite. But the kite divides the air so the air underneath is blocked and slowed down. When the wind is blowing, the pressure builds up against the bottom of the kite until—” he tilted the kite upward as if it was about to fly “—you have lift.”

“Did you learn that in pilot school?”

“Actually, I learned it in Mr. Winton’s junior high science class. But I studied it more in pilot school. Helicopters and planes fly the same way.”

“Wow.” Thomas took the unfinished kite and holding the frame as Creed had, sailed the plastic dragon around the room. “I want to fly, too.”

“He’s fascinated by helicopters,” Haley said and looked none too happy at the admission. “Every time you fly over, he runs outside and waves.”

Creed winked at the blushing boy. “I’ll wave back next time.”

“You will?”

“I’m a man of my word.” To Haley, he said, “Is she asleep again?”

“Fed, changed and sleeping.” Gently, she placed the baby in the blanket-lined basket. “Sleeping is what she’s good at so far. I have a feeling tonight may not be as easy as the day.”

“Don’t you have a regular bed for her?” He watched as Thomas fashioned a kite tail out of strips of cloth. Those, he knew, didn’t come with a cheap kite. Haley must have cut them for the boy.

“This bassinet is a loan from social services. It’ll work fine for the time she’s here. I don’t expect to have her long.”

He’d been enjoying himself, but now the fun leached out. Rose Petal, a temporary name for a nameless child, slept in a loaner bed because she was only passing through. “Doesn’t seem right.”

“Maybe not, but that’s the way foster care operates. Deciding her fate is not my job. That’s up to the courts.”

“Don’t you care what happens to her?”

Her eyebrows dipped together. “Of course I care. I wouldn’t be a foster parent if I didn’t.”

He wasn’t sure he believed her. “I need to go. Sorry for bothering you.”

He started toward the door but stopped when Thomas said, “Aren’t we going to fly the kite?”

Creed smothered a sigh. A glance outside gave him an excuse to decline, though in truth, he wanted to get away from Haley and the weird feelings he’d had all day. “Getting dark now, pal. Sorry.”

“Tomorrow? Will you come back tomorrow?”

Creed shoved a hand in his pants pocket. He wasn’t an overly emotional man, but today had wrung him out. Looking into Thomas’s pleading blue eyes wasn’t helping matters at all. “I don’t want to bother your...Haley. She’s pretty busy with the new baby.”

Thomas gazed at him and then at his foster mom. “It’s okay if he comes over again, isn’t it, Haley?”

Haley looked everywhere but at him. “Creed is probably too busy.”

She didn’t want to invite him back, a fact that bugged Creed more than he wanted it to. Women usually liked having him around. What was the trouble with earth mother Haley that made

her so prickly where he was concerned?

The stubborn streak his parents had battled through junior high raised its petty head.

“Have the string on and ready to fly tomorrow evening,” he said to Thomas. “I’ll be here by six.”

Chapter Three

The next evening, after the dinner dishes were put away and homework completed, Haley found herself watching the clock. Would Creed really show up? If he didn’t, would Thomas be disappointed?

At ten minutes until six, Thomas laid his kite and string on the table. The cheap kite had turned out well thanks to Creed Carter. A bright blue-and-red dragon with a tail made from scraps of cloth she’d cut from an old shirt, to Thomas the toy was the next best thing to an airplane.

“Creed will be here any minute,” he said with that absolute certainty only a ten-year-old could have. “He said six o’clock and Creed’s a man of his word. He told me so.”

A better question would have been, how disappointed will he be when the flyboy doesn’t show up?

She glanced at the clock again. Five more minutes and the man was toast.

She’d not particularly wanted Creed to come over tonight, but now she’d be furious if he didn’t. Thomas had enough disappointments in his life.

She’d thought about the flyboy too much today. About the

way he looked so military-neat and masculine-handsome. About the way he'd fretted over Rose Petal. But especially about that tingly moment when they'd been feeding the baby. Haley knew all about tingly moments with a guy, enough that she'd long ago decided attraction was grossly overrated. Especially after Creed had insulted her yesterday and made it clear he thought she was unfit to foster Rose Petal.

But he'd better show up tonight or else be prepared to receive a very irate phone call tomorrow.

She poked a finger in the potted seedlings growing by the kitchen window, finding the dirt still moist. In another week or two, she'd transplant the gourds outside and hope this year's crop did better than last year's. She caught her bottom lip between her teeth. More important than the seedlings were the unfinished pieces in her work room. An artist couldn't sell what wasn't finished.

"He's here!" The shout from Thomas jolted her from her worry.

Following the sound of male voices, she entered the living room to find Creed Carter standing inside the front door. She needed to have a talk with Thomas about letting men into her house!

"You came," she said.

Creed, wearing a black Carter's Charters T-shirt, gave her a long, piercing look. "I said I would."

She tilted her chin. "So you did."

If Thomas caught the sizzle of antagonism between the adults, he was too excited to be bothered.

“I put the string and tail on like you told me to. See?”

“She looks like a worthy vessel,” Creed said. “Ready to fly her?”

“Yes!” Thomas didn’t need any other invitation. Kite in hand, he led the way through the kitchen and out onto the back porch. The adults followed.

“He’s been bouncy all day,” Haley said. “Very excited.”

“Flying a kite is no big deal.”

Haley fought an eye roll. He’d probably come from the perfect family where disappointments were rare. But her foster son hadn’t. Creed didn’t understand. Flying the kite wasn’t the issue. Having a man care enough to show up was. “It’s important to him.”

And to her. For Thomas’s sake. She eased around the troubling pilot, careful not to let her arm brush his in the narrow hallway. She didn’t want a repeat of last night’s touchy-feely episode.

As they passed through the kitchen, Creed glanced toward the table. “Where’s the baby? Rose Petal.”

“I moved the bassinet into my bedroom.” As Haley had expected, Rose Petal had cried off and on all night.

“How’s she doing?”

“Fine.” Her answers were short and to the point, maybe even abrupt, but the flyboy was too close in the small kitchen. And he

smelled good. And looked all spit and polished. For crying out loud, had he gone home after work and showered?

She'd been in the garden most of the morning and in the work room all afternoon when she hadn't been caring for Rose Petal. She probably smelled like a combo of Miracle-Gro and acrylic paint. Or baby formula.

Once outside, Creed's focus, thankfully, was on Thomas, not her. Haley let out a tight sigh.

"Have you ever flown a kite before?" Creed asked, one hand on Thomas's shoulder as he surveyed the spacious backyard.

Thomas shook his head. The pale blond cowlick quivered.

"Okay, then, here's how it works. Check out the space above you first. A pilot never flies unless he has smooth sailing. Safety first. See any electric wires or trees?"

Her backyard was a mass of trees and plants with a single electric line slicing through the center. Not exactly kite-flying territory.

Thomas's chin tilted upward. "Yeah, but there's not any over that way."

"Then, that's our flight path." Creed took Thomas's arm and pointed. "Look down your arm. See it? Smooth sailing."

"Yep. Smooth sailing."

Smiling, Haley settled on the top step to listen as Creed talked in his rich, manly voice about wind direction and air speed. Behind his thick glasses, Thomas listened enrapt.

"Ready?"

Eagerly, Thomas nodded and the males, one small and pale, one dark and fit, moved across her long backyard. Creed held the kite and Thomas the string, slowly letting out the length until the diamond-shaped plastic caught the wind.

“We have liftoff!” Creed cried, teeth flashing against dark skin.

“It’s flying. It’s flying! Look, Haley, our kite is flying!” The boy was practically levitating from joy. Any moment she expected him to take flight along with his kite.

Such a simple thing, Haley thought, to make a child so happy. And, she admitted grudgingly, Creed Carter had made it happen.

From her perch on the back porch, she clapped. “Awesome!”

“Come on,” Thomas shouted. “You’ll have fun.”

Unable to resist the boy’s sweet pleasure, she leaped up and jogged to him, her bare toes tickled by the soft, new grass that smelled of moist earth and blue sky.

In his enthusiasm, Thomas lost control. The kite dipped, floundering. In wide-eyed panic, he shouted, “I’m gonna crash!”

Calm and cool as a fresh snowfall, Creed placed his wider hand atop Thomas’s to assist. “Feel that tug? That’s when you know to give her more string. She’s eager to ascend.”

Tension gripped Thomas’s voice. “Like this?”

“That’s the way. Catch the updraft.” Creed’s hand dropped away. He stood observing, ready to help, but letting the success belong to Thomas.

Even though she didn’t want to, Haley liked him for that.

The dark blue diamond rose higher and higher until the kite looked like a child's colorful sticker pasted against the soft blue sky. Gradually, Thomas's thin shoulders relaxed and his intensity turned to a smile.

"I'm doing it, aren't I, Creed? I'm flying. Now I can fly anytime I want."

"Whenever there's enough breeze."

Rapt, Thomas followed his kite across the open field, slowly reeling and unreeling string as he left the adults behind.

Haley stood at Creed's elbow, more aware of him than she wanted to be. "You made that look easy."

He slid a glance in her direction. "Flying a kite is easy."

"Never was for me."

"Then why did you buy him one?"

She raised a shoulder. "He wanted one so badly. I had to try."

He gave her another of those cool looks she didn't understand. He did that a lot, she noticed, as if she were from another planet and any minute he expected her green scales to show.

But his conversation was remarkably normal. "Thomas is a nice boy."

"Yes, and a valiant spirit." The child had endured loss and pain but hadn't grown bitter or angry. At least not yet. She hoped and prayed he never would, but she was also a realist. Whatever happened happened.

Haley crossed her ankles and settled onto the grass.

Thomas had the kite well in hand now, his blond head tilted

back to watch the spectacle.

Creed crossed his arms over the yellow helicopter logo but didn't join her on the grass. "How long has he been in foster care?"

"Off and on most of his life. His mother has mental health issues." Haley plucked a dandelion blossom and stuck the bright yellow flower behind one ear. "When she's well, she's a good mother. She's also wise enough to know when she's going downhill."

"What do you mean?"

A bumblebee buzzed past. Haley gently waved her hand to send it on its way. "She forgets to feed him, forgets he's even there, so she calls social services to pick him up."

Creed whistled softly and turned a thoughtful gaze to the boy. A muscle in his jaw flexed. "Must be tough."

"He's strong about it." So far. "He misses his mom, but he's seen her spiral downward. Her illness scares him. He worries about her."

"A kid shouldn't have to deal with that."

"Mental illness isn't a choice, Creed. His mother can't help being sick." But sometimes Haley wondered why a good God didn't change things. Why people had to suffer. Why children were tossed in and out of the social system. Why some mothers' needs were more important than their children's. Foolish thoughts. Life was just that way. Good today and bad tomorrow.

She yanked another dandelion. “Did you know these are edible?” she said, more to stop thinking than because she cared to share her knowledge of dandelions.

His expression was amused. “Yum.”

“No, I’m serious. The lowly dandelion is one of the most useful plants God created.”

“Really?” He dipped his head and looked at her from beneath raised eyebrows.

She could see he didn’t believe her. He probably thought she was a space cadet. Not that she cared. Still, she felt compelled to prove her point.

“The flower can be battered and fried, made into wine or jelly and a lot of other things. The leaves—” she yanked a handful and held them up “—when tender are similar to spinach. Toss them into a bowl with feta cheese, add vinaigrette and voilà, you have salad. Even the roots can be dried and ground into a coffee substitute.”

Creed chuckled. “No one will starve with you around. You should sign up for a survivor show.”

Let him laugh. She knew what she knew. Haley pushed up from the grass, watching the leaves flutter to the ground. Creed moved as if to offer a hand but she shied away. “I should run inside and make sure Rose Petal is still sleeping. Want something to drink?”

“Fresh ground dandelion coffee?”

She made a face at him. “You’re not funny.”

Yet, as she walked away from the handsome pilot, she giggled inside. She didn't want to like him, but he was kind of charming.

* * *

Creed pivoted so that he had one eye on Thomas and the other on the woman striding with a lithe, easy swing of her arms toward the back porch. Tonight she wore khaki shorts and a white tank top beneath a gray zip-up hoodie. Beneath the hem of the shorts her legs weren't long but they were...nice. Lightly tanned. Shapely. Come to think of it, so was the rest of her.

All her silly talk about dandelions had confirmed his suspicions. Haley Blanchard was a throwback flower child. Flakey but harmless. And pretty cute.

"Looking good out there," he called to Thomas.

The boy, both hands firmly on the twine reel, grinned. "My arms are getting kind of tired."

"Ready to land that bird?"

"I don't want to tear it up."

The kite was cheap to make and easily replaceable, but to a boy who'd never had one, taking care of the thin plastic mattered.

Creed's heart squeezed.

"Tell you what," he said, coming up beside Thomas. "You reel her in. I'll catch her before she hits the ground. Deal?"

Thomas nodded. "Okay."

By the time they'd safely landed the kite, Haley exited the back door, Rose Petal in her arms. "The baby's awake and hungry. You can come inside if you want to."

The invitation wasn't the most enthusiastic he'd ever received, but Creed was going to accept, anyway. He'd dreamed about Rose Petal last night, waking with a knot in his throat. In his dream, he'd skipped his usual prayer time and no one had been at church to find the baby. She'd been alone and helpless and crying hysterically.

The memory clung to him like the scent of mint clung to the backyard as he fell into step with Thomas and his kite. Haley waited on the porch, baby in arms.

The plastic kite crinkled and fluttered in Thomas's hands. "I had fun."

Creed grinned down at the boy. "Flying's the best. Even if you're on the ground."

"Yeah."

"Do you have a safe place to store your mighty dragon?"

"I'll keep it on my dresser. Well, the dresser is Haley's, but you know what I mean. I hope I can take it with me when mama comes."

"The kite? Sure, you can. It's yours."

"If Mama says I can. Some things freak her out."

"Oh." Creed didn't know where to go with that one so he kept quiet.

Sharply sweet smells rose from a half barrel of red flowers as they joined Haley on the porch, their shoes thudding on the hollow wood. Creed sniffed, liking the smell. Geraniums, he thought, and some other flowery things he didn't recognize. Mom

grew geraniums, though not in nearly as much abundance.

No one on the planet crowded as many flowers and green things into a pot or a spot as Haley Blanchard. A cord strung across one end of the porch held some brown, odd-shaped squash-looking things. Gourds maybe?

With an inner smile, he wondered if she ate those, too.

Thomas reached the door first and opened it, waiting politely while Haley carried Rose Petal inside.

“Nice job, ladies’ man.” Creed said the last to make Thomas laugh and was rewarded with a display of crooked teeth.

Inside the apple-green kitchen, Haley jostled the fussing infant against her chest while attempting to prepare formula with one hand. More of the brown, odd-shaped fruits—or whatever they were—were scattered on newspapers along the short countertop. Haley elbowed them to the back.

“Thomas, grab a snack if you want one. You’ll have plenty of time to read a book before your bath.”

Thomas groaned. “A bath!”

Creed felt his pain. No ten-year-old liked baths. He scruffed Thomas’s hair. “Someday you’ll enjoy smelling good.”

“So I can be a ladies’ man?”

Creed laughed at Haley’s surprised expression. “Want me to hold her while you do that?”

He’d never been a guy who went around holding babies, but Rose Petal was different. She’d stolen a corner of his heart yesterday morning and he hadn’t gotten it back yet. That a tiny

infant wielded such power felt nothing short of weird.

He reached for Rose. His fingers collided with Haley's soft smooth skin. The bizarre tingle came again, raising the hairs on his arms. His pulse jumped. He took Rose and stepped back, bothered.

He wasn't attracted to this earth mother hippie. He couldn't be.

"Ladies' man?" Haley asked, oblivious to his discomfort as she repeated last night's scene of pouring white powdery stuff into a baby bottle. "What have you been saying to Thomas?"

Creed shot Thomas a conspiratorial wink. "Guy talk."

The ten-year-old puffed out his chest. "Yeah, guy talk. Can I have some cookies?"

Haley shook her head. "No more cookies. Try the yogurt or a banana and a glass of milk."

At least she knew how to feed a kid properly. His mom would approve.

Odd that he would think that. Why would he care if his mother approved of a woman he barely knew?

Getting that itchy feeling again, Creed turned his attention to the soft bundle in his arms. She was squirming and red-faced, her dark blue eyes squinted but staring a hole through him. Both elbows were bent and her fists were tight against her cheeks.

"Hey, little girl. Remember me?" Creed stroked one tiny fist and was gratified when the infant clutched his finger. The action was an innate reflex, but his insides warmed, anyway. "Why do

you think her mother left her?"

He hadn't meant to ask, but the question had haunted him all day.

Haley took the baby and stuck the bottle in her mouth. "I don't know. I try not to think about it."

He couldn't think of anything else. The fact that Haley didn't only proved how different they were.

He definitely wasn't attracted to her. Not one bit.

She led the way down a short hall into the living room. Furnished in mismatched chairs and a floral couch like one he remembered in his grandmother's farmhouse, the room was painted a sunny yellow. Green things sprouted from brown clay pots arranged beneath an east window. A framed mirror on one wall reflected the back of Haley's auburn waves and her slender shoulders.

"I promised you something to drink," she said. "But you'll have to get it yourself. Rose Petal comes first at the moment."

He waved her off, not sure if he should sit down or wait to be asked. "Don't worry about me. I'll live."

"What?" Her lips curled in a teasing grin. "You aren't pining for my dandelion tea?"

"I thought it was coffee."

Her teeth flashed, accenting the small mole on her cheek. She had a pretty smile. "Could be both. But tonight I'm making neither. Will you settle for green tea? I could use a cup myself."

Green tea? Creed fought a grimace but knew he'd failed when

Haley laughed.

“Water, perhaps?” she asked.

“The perfect drink. I’ll get it.” He escaped to the kitchen, finding Thomas there.

The boy swigged the last of his milk and backhanded his mouth. “I had fun.”

He’d said that already. About a dozen times.

“Great.” Creed didn’t know much about little kids, but he remembered being a boy. A sometimes lonely boy. Not that his life was hard like Thomas’s, but an only child living in the country spent a lot of time alone with only his imagination for company.

“Will you come back? Maybe next time we can make a box kite. I read about them at school today. The teacher has this big book about different kites.”

Creed started to refuse, to make an excuse of all the reasons he didn’t want to hang around flakey Haley or get involved with a baby that wasn’t his or a foster child with an uncertain future, but the expression in Thomas’s eyes stopped him cold.

“That’s up to Haley.”

“She won’t care.”

Creed didn’t quite agree. He ruffled Thomas’s hair. “We’ll see. Okay?”

Thomas hitched one shoulder. “Okay.”

But Creed knew the boy was disappointed. Wrestling with his conscience, he scored two glasses of water and headed back to the living room and Haley. “Here you go.”

Haley shook her head. “Put mine on the table. I’m going to change Rose Petal and lay her down. We had hours of rocking last night and my arms are sore. I’ll be back in a minute.”

She took Rose Petal down a hall and went into a room he couldn’t see from here.

Thomas appeared in the opposite doorway. “Want to play UNO?” he asked hopefully.

Man. He really needed to get out of here. He’d come to fly a kite with Thomas and check on Rose Petal. That was all. Time to leave. “I should probably hit the road.”

“Oh.” Thomas’s body sagged. He turned back toward the kitchen.

The quiet acceptance hit Creed squarely in the cardiac muscle. “Maybe one game?”

The boy whipped around so fast that his cowlick waved like a wind sock. “Really?”

“If Haley says it’s okay.”

“She won’t care. She gets bored of playing games.” With a hop in his step, Thomas rushed out of the room, presumably to score the UNO cards.

From down the hall, Creed heard a baby’s cry followed by Haley’s soft murmurs. He couldn’t tell what she was saying but the crying ceased. He swigged his water and swallowed hard, wondering what it would be like to drift down the hall and peek inside that room, to watch while Haley settled Rose Petal for the night.

Feeling itchy again, he rotated the damp glass between his fingers. One game of UNO and he was out of here.

Haley returned, rolling her head as if her shoulders and neck ached. He wondered who massaged her sore muscles, who she leaned on, who cared for her while she was caring for someone else's children. Did Haley have a boyfriend?

Creed mentally shook himself. Where were these random thoughts coming from?

"I hope she sleeps better tonight." She rubbed at her right shoulder.

"Bad night last night?" What a stupid question. Fatigue rimmed Haley's eyes. The woman was dead-tired.

"She doesn't have a routine yet, but she'll get one eventually. I was up every hour or two."

"Brutal."

"Tell me about it. After a while I gave up trying to sleep and went to work." She took the glass of water from a scratched coffee table and drank deeply. Her throat flexed. The pale, smooth column looked soft and touchable.

Creed pried his eyes away. "You worked last night? Where?"

"I didn't run off and leave Thomas and Rose Petal alone, if that's what you're thinking," she said a bit hotly. "I work at home. I'm a folk artist. Gourd art mostly."

Were those the odd-looking fruits he'd seen in the kitchen?

"Gourds." Unable to formulate a more coherent reply, he sipped at his water. What did an artist do with gourds? And how

did he ask that question without getting kicked out of her house? The neon “flakey Haley” sign flashed in his head.

“Thomas asked me to play UNO,” he said instead. “Does that work for you?”

If she was surprised by his change of subjects, she didn’t let on. “You’ll be his hero and maybe mine. If I never play another game of colors and numbers I’ll die happy.”

“See?” Thomas said, coming into the room. “I told you.”

Haley gave him a mock scowl. “You weren’t supposed to hear that.”

The boy’s slender shoulder arched. “I already knew.”

Thomas plopped down in front of the coffee table and began doling out cards. “We each get seven. You know how to play, don’t you?”

“Sure. In the military, we played all kinds of card games.”

“Even UNO? I thought it was a kids’ game.”

“What?” Creed cried, pretending amazement. “No way.”

Being a helicopter pilot for the army was one part boredom and the rest pure adrenaline. They played any kind of game they could get their hands on.

He gathered his cards, sorted the colors and pairs. “You go first.”

With a sly grin, Thomas slapped down a draw four card and the game was on.

“He’s an ace at UNO, Creed. Watch your back.”

“I see that.” In truth, UNO was a simple game that required

minimal concentration but Thomas played well. “When I was a kid I drove my dad nuts wanting him to play games with me.”

“Did he?” Haley asked. She’d taken the chair adjacent to the couch and curled her feet beneath her.

“Yeah. He was great. Well, he still is, but I don’t bug him to play as much as I used to.” He grinned.

“He sounds like a good dad.” There was something wistful in her voice.

“The best.” He added a blue seven to the pile. Thomas groaned and drew a card. “What about you?”

“No dad. Just a mom.” Again that wistful sound that had him wondering.

“Does she live in Whisper Falls?”

“Last time I heard from her, she was in Michigan. Before that Virginia. She moves around a lot.” Haley took one of the bright throw pillows and hugged it to her chest. “I’ve lived in more places than most people can name.”

Maybe that explained the free-spirit element. “How long have you lived in Whisper Falls?”

“A long time for me.” She looked upward, calculating. “Nearly seven years. What about you? Is Whisper Falls your hometown?”

Thomas played a lose-a-turn card. Creed’s hard-eyed scowl earned a giggle.

“Lived here all my life.” Well, most of his life. The only home he’d ever known was three miles out of town nestled in a grove of trees with a view of Blackberry Mountain. “Mom and Dad have

lived in the same house for nearly forty years.”

Again that wistful expression. She gnawed the side of her thumb. “I can’t imagine staying in the same place all my life.”

“Don’t you like this town?”

“I love Whisper Falls, but you know how it goes. Nothing lasts forever.”

He cocked his head, interested, curious. Was she a will-o’-the-wisp that could flit from one situation to another, never putting down roots? “Some things do.”

She leaned forward, elbows on her knees and chin in her hands. “Like what?”

“Love, for one. God, for another.”

A beat of silence occurred, broken only by the snick of Thomas’s card against the discard pile.

Haley’s brown-sugar eyes studied him. The wheels were turning in her head. He could tell and wondered.

“You take your faith very seriously, don’t you?”

“Try to.” He slid a yellow two atop Thomas’s yellow six. “God took me seriously when He sent His Son to die for me. I figure the least I can do is love Him and let Him love me. What about you?”

She shrugged. “I believe in God, but most of the time I think He gets people started and then we’re pretty much on our own until we get to heaven. Church just makes us feel like we belong to something.”

Heavy topic, but he was never one to shy away from

discussions about God. In truth, he never shied away from much of anything. But his faith was number one.

“Not me. I take people’s lives up in my chopper every day. I need to know God is up there with me.”

“Christians die in crashes. How do you explain that?”

“I don’t.” He reached for his glass and downed the last of the water. “If I understood the mysteries of life and faith, I’d be God. I leave the hard stuff to Him.”

“Don’t you ever get scared?” She sat back against the couch, her reddish hair blending with the wild flowers on the couch. “Up there, I mean.”

“Not usually. God is with me whether I live or die. I have that promise. So, it’s all good.” He was down to two cards. Thomas still had three. “I’ll get you on the next round, Thomas. Better look out.”

The boy stared at his cards, saying nothing and for half a beat, Creed regretted his threat. He probably should let the kid win.

“UNO!” Thomas yelled as he slapped down three cards in fast succession.

“Hey!”

Thomas giggled.

“Told you he was good.” Haley leaned forward and patted Thomas on the back. “Great job, bud.”

“Want to play again?” Thomas’s blue eyes danced with pleasure.

“Will you let me win this time?”

The answer did exactly as Creed intended. Thomas tumbled backward onto the floor. Arms over his middle, he drew his knees up and belly laughed.

The adults exchanged amused glances, the heavy conversation tabled for the time being. The next time he was here, he wanted to talk more. Creed caught himself mid-thought. Would there be a next time?

While he mulled the idea, torn between wanting to be here and wondering what had come over him, someone knocked at the front door.

Haley glanced at the clock. "Who would that be this late?"

With a shrug, she popped up from the chair and went to answer.

When she opened the door, a man stepped inside. He was dressed in a business suit and carried a bouquet of brightly colored flowers.

Thomas, busy organizing his cards, made a soft hissing noise. Creed shot him a questioning look.

"Mr. Henderson," he whispered. "I think he's Haley's boyfriend."

Chapter Four

"Brent." Haley bit back a sigh. Her evening had been going unusually well. She should have known something would happen to spoil it.

"May I come in?"

What could she say? He was her landlord. The house belonged

to him. She stepped to the side and let him in.

“I hope you aren’t still upset with me,” he said.

She was, but she was smart enough not to say so.

He held out a bouquet. “Your favorite.”

Haley had lots of favorites but Brent wasn’t one of them. The flowers, however, were a rainbow of gerbera daisies. She took them, stuck her nose in and sniffed. “They’re nice. Thank you. I’ll get them in some water.”

Bouquet in hand, she was eager to make the escape and figure out a way to avoid the topic of rent. Or eviction. She owed him money and Brent wasn’t one to be patient. Her close friend Cassie Blackwell would loan her the rent money, but she’d borrowed before. Haley didn’t want to ask again.

Creed extended a hand to the newcomer. “Brent Henderson, right? Creed Carter.”

Well, of course they’d know each other. They’d both grown up in this tiny place, though Brent was maybe ten years older.

“Carter,” Brent said, his eyes questioning. If Creed noticed, he chose to ignore the obvious. Brent wanted to know what he was doing here. Haley wasn’t going to satisfy him with an answer. She hoped Creed wouldn’t, either.

“I’ll be right back,” she said.

She returned to find Brent ensconced on her best chair—the only one she hadn’t bought at a thrift shop—and Creed Carter standing at the front door.

“You’re not leaving?” she said before she realized how that

sounded.

“My day starts early. Thanks for the evening.”

Thomas had followed him to the door. Creed scuffed the boy’s wild blond hair and winked. “Thanks for the UNO lesson.”

Thomas grinned. “Wave at me tomorrow?”

“You got it.” And then he was gone.

Men, Haley thought, are the strangest creatures.

“What was he doing here?” Brent asked without preamble.

Haley gave him a cool look. “Visiting.”

Did he actually think it was any of his business if she had a guest?

“Creed helped me fly my kite,” Thomas said. “We built it, too. Last night. Creed’s a pilot. Did you know that?”

Thomas was not usually a chatty-patty, but his words had a strange effect on her landlord. He sat up straight and stiff, his Adam’s apple protruding beneath a very tight jaw.

“Creed was here last night, as well?”

Haley was tempted to tell him to go suck a lemon. Wisdom and the need for a roof over her head reined in the urge. After living on this small acreage on the edge of town for years, she’d put down the deepest roots of her life. She loved it here. She’d spent countless hours and too much money on plants and pots and paint to improve the place. Everything she needed was here. Even the work space for her art, though small, was the best she’d ever had.

She could not afford to alienate Brent Henderson. She’d give

anything if his father, Elbert, hadn't given his son control over his real estate business.

"Would you like some tea, Brent? I was about to have a cup."

"Thank you. Tea would be nice." He stood as if to follow her into the kitchen. "I thought you were going to paint the living room."

Haley stopped in the doorway.

"I am." When she got the money for more paint. "Did you notice the landscaping work on the south side of the house? I removed that dead tree myself."

"Nice."

That was all he could say? Nice? She'd saved him several hundred dollars by doing the job herself. Elbert Henderson had allowed her credit for the improvements she'd done. Brent was not inclined to appreciate her labors.

"Why don't you sit down and relax, Brent? I'll get the tea. Thomas will entertain you. Won't you, Thomas?"

She widened her eyes at the boy to telegraph her meaning. Thomas was smart and intuitive. He'd get the message. The last time Brent had followed her into the kitchen he'd crowded her against the sink and kissed her. She didn't want to lose her home, but there would not be a repeat of that episode.

Trooper that he was, Thomas slid down beside the coffee table. As she hurried into the kitchen, she heard him ask, "Want to play UNO?"

* * *

An hour later, Haley leaned against the front door and sent a prayer of thanks as Brent drove away. Thomas, who'd played the innocent chaperone, yawned.

“Are you gonna marry him?”

Haley's eyes widened. “What? No. Never. Why would you ask that?”

“He brought flowers. Guys on TV do that when they want to get married.”

“The flowers were an apology for saying something he shouldn't have.” And for kissing me without my consent.

“I like Creed better, anyway. If he brought flowers, would you marry him?”

“Thomas! I'm not going to marry anyone. Ever.” She pressed both hands against her cheeks. Foster kids often asked the craziest questions. She supposed all kids did, but her experience was with the temporaries. “Now, go take your bath and head for bed.”

“Can I invite Creed over again?”

Her belly quivered. “I'll think about it. Now go on. School comes early.”

He emitted a resigned huff and slouched out of the living room.

Once she had him settled in his bed and had checked on Rose Petal, Haley made her way to the small room off the side of the kitchen. In the original farmhouse, this space had been a screened-in porch. Over the years, the room had been remodeled

into a sunroom which served her needs as an artist. Plenty of good, natural light, enough space to spread out and the soaring vista of Blackberry Mountain in the distance. At this time of night the sun was gone and Blackberry Mountain was an invisible promise. Not that either mattered when the paints and ideas called to her.

Even though tired to the bone, working relaxed her enough to sleep. At least, she hoped she got to sleep tonight. That was up to Rose Petal.

She pulled out her paints and the birdhouse in progress. With meticulous care, she painted in a flower she'd outlined earlier in the day. One of her more ambitious projects to date, when she finished, the once-dull, brown gourd would be transformed into a glossy, whimsical birdhouse cottage befitting a fairy-tale character. Anyway, that was her plan. The work didn't always turn out the way she imagined.

Tongue between her teeth, she stroked a cluster of tiny green leaves. Her fingers felt stiff tonight. So did her shoulders. Tension, she supposed. Brent had that effect on her. So did Creed, come to think of it, but in a different way.

She painted a vine, curling the greenery up and around the brown, oval door, trying hard to concentrate on the art, but her thoughts kept turning to the two men. Thomas's questions had given her pause. Poor little kid. He wasn't comfortable with Brent, and she understood that. She wasn't, either. For the most part Brent ignored him. He'd rebuffed Thomas's offer to play

UNO and had barely glanced at the kite Thomas had eagerly brought from his bedroom. The latter annoyed her to no end.

The tip of her brush slipped. Paint streaked down the front of the gourd. With an exasperated sigh, she put the brush in solvent and carefully wiped down the mistake.

Maybe she was too tired to create tonight. She rolled her head around her shoulders, muscles tense and achy.

When she'd made that telltale motion earlier this evening, Brent had offered to massage her neck. She shuddered, pretty sure where that would have led. Her landlord was too pushy, too obvious, and she wasn't sure if he wanted to abuse their landlord-tenant relationship or if he honestly liked her.

Either way, she wasn't attracted enough to find out.

Creed Carter's face flashed in her memory. Okay, so she'd liked him better than she'd expected to. But she'd probably seen the last of him. Like a good Christian he'd done his duty. He'd come to see the baby. He'd kept his promise to Thomas. Now the flyboy could forget them all. Upon Brent's arrival, he'd slithered away like a threatened snake. Typical. So typical.

Men, like foster children, were only passing through, a nasty truth she'd learned from experience. Don't get too involved. Prepare for the inevitable goodbye and guard her heart. Be careful. Be oh, so careful.

For some reason, maybe a combination of fatigue and worry over the rent, tonight that hard-learned truth settled in her chest like a boulder.

* * *

On a damp Saturday, a few days later, Creed parked along the curb outside Whisper Falls' senior citizen housing complex. With a scenic tour booked in an hour, he hurried up the neatly trimmed walkway to Grandma Carter's apartment, a bag of groceries in tow. As always when he paid his visits, Grandma was waiting at the front door. Leaning on her walker with one hand, she unlocked the glass enclosure with the other.

Love warmed Creed's chest.

Once inside, he bent to kiss her soft paper-thin cheek. She smelled exactly as she had for as long as he could remember—of face powder and Chanel No. 5. He should know. He bought the perfume for her every Christmas. "How's my best girl?"

"Fit as a fiddle. Did you get my medicine?"

"Yep. Stopped at the pharmacy on the way. Your pills are in here, along with the groceries on your list."

She scooted the walker around, leaning more heavily than she had last week and slowly scraped along toward the plaid blanket-clad lift chair. With a twinge of guilt, Creed regretted not coming by all week. But with his business hopping and the two evenings at flakey Haley's house, he hadn't. Last evening, a couple had booked a romantic sunset flight, and by the time the heli was serviced and put away, he'd not gotten back to his apartment until late.

"Your daddy took to me to see Dr. Ron yesterday," Grandma said, the words whooshing out with a grunt as she lowered herself

into the recliner.

“What did he say?”

“My knee’s shot. Just as we figured. He wants to send me down to Little Rock for a knee replacement.”

Creed set the bag of groceries on the counter. Her tiny apartment had a combined living room and kitchen with a bedroom and bath off one side. That was it. A tiny place that was easy for her aging body to maneuver in.

“When?”

“I’m still deciding, honey. Your old granny is wearing out. Putting a fake knee inside of my leg won’t turn back the clock.”

“But a new knee will keep you mobile.”

“Oh, I reckon.” She nodded, the still-thick hair as iron-gray and fluffy as a storm cloud. “But all that recuperation time, I’ll be stuck in a strange city in some rehab center.”

He smiled, understanding. Granny had lived her whole life in the rural mountains, had drawn water from a well and lived without electricity or modern convenience. A depression-era hill woman, cities scared her. “I’ll come visit you and bring Mom and Dad in the chopper. Aunt Darlene lives close to Little Rock. She and her kids will come.”

“I know it, but I still don’t like to be gone from home that long.” She rocked a little. “You think I should do this?”

“Do you want to work in your roses again?”

Chuckling, she pointed a gnarled finger at him. “You know right where to get me, don’t you?”

Grandma Carter had grown roses of every kind until arthritis and age had forced her to give up her old farmhouse in the hills and move into town. Even though she didn't complain, he knew she missed the country. And the roses.

"I talked to the unit manager a few days ago. She said you can plant flowers out in front as long as you take care of them. As soon as you're ready, say the word and I'll dig up a space to get you going."

"Will you take me out to the farm for cuttings?"

"When you get that new knee, I'll take you anywhere you want to go."

She shook her fist at him. "Oh, you are a sly one."

From his spot in the kitchenette, he winked at her. "Love you, too, Grandma."

The grocery bag crinkled as he emptied the contents, putting each item in its proper place in the cabinets or refrigerator. Granny kept her things orderly, the way he liked.

The talk of flowers and order sent his thoughts to Haley and her disorderly tangle of vines and plants and flowers. "Do you know Haley Blanchard?"

"Well, let's see." Grandma propped a palm against her cheek. "Seems like I've heard the name. Why?"

"No reason, really. She grows flowers like you do."

"You sweet on her?"

In spite of himself, heat rushed up the back of his neck. "No way. She's too hippielike for me. She takes in foster kids."

And according to Thomas and the icy stares from Brent Henderson, Haley had a boyfriend.

“Ah.”

What did that mean? Ah?

“Don’t read anything into it, Grandma. Haley is fostering the little baby I found at church.”

Grandma’s crooked hand pressed to her heart. “How’s that precious child doing? Poor little lamb. Just breaks a body’s heart.”

“Doing good. Anyway, she was the last time I stopped in.”

“So you been visiting her? This Haley woman?”

“The abandoned baby.”

“The baby.” She rocked some more. “Ah.”

That one little, heavily loaded sound was starting to wear on him. Visiting an abandoned baby was not the result of some deep-seated, psychological need rising from his own personal situation. Nor was the visit a quest for romance.

“I brought you some peanut brittle from Evie’s Sweets and Eats.”

“Well, get it out of that sack, child. Let’s eat it. I know you want some.” She shot him an ornery grin. “I also know you don’t want to talk about this Haley or the baby.”

Creed shook his head. “How did Grandpa survive fifty years?”

Grandma snickered.

Grinning, Creed took the candy from the paper sack and handed her the smaller zippered bag of candy. While her

arthritis-twisted fingers sought the opening, a white truck pulled up outside. “Dad’s here.”

“That son of mine can smell peanut candy a mile away. Better hide it quick.”

When he snorted at her, she laughed again. Grandma was a spitfire even now, and she loved nothing more than a good laugh. Strong and solid as the mountains and as full of God as the sky, she’d lost a daughter and three grandchildren, nursed a bedridden husband for ten years and still found the good and beautiful in everyday life. Even though her blood didn’t run in Creed’s veins, he hoped he’d gained some of her qualities.

His father walked through the door, also carrying a grocery sack though Creed suspected his held Mama’s home cooking. “Creed, son, I was planning to come by your office.”

“What’s up?”

“Nothing in particular.” He set the paper bag on the counter next to the plastic sacks. “I thought we might have lunch if you aren’t too busy.”

Creed checked his watch. “I have a tour in about thirty minutes, but unless I get a walk-in, noon is clear. Want to meet up at the Iron Horse or Clemson’s Café?”

Whisper Falls boasted only a handful of eating places. Other than the Pizza Pan and a couple of burger hangouts, choices were thin. Some people wanted to keep it that way, to keep out the big-box stores and restaurants. Even though he appreciated the provincial atmosphere of their little mountain town, progress

meant business. Business meant more people to charter his helicopter services.

“The Iron Horse sounds good. I’ve got a hankering for Miss Evelyn’s apple pie.” His father, as tall and angular as Abe Lincoln, wore black-framed glasses and still had no gray in his dark brown hair, a fact that drove his mother, jokingly, to despair. She’d been coloring hers as long as Creed could remember.

Dad pecked Grandma on the cheek. “Looking pretty today, Mama. Did Cassie come by and fix your hair?”

She swatted his arm. “Now, Larry, you quit buttering me up. I know you’re after my candy.”

“I thought I smelled peanuts when I turned the corner.”

“I knew it. Creed, your daddy is a pure-dee mooch. I swear I raised him better.” She fumbled with the bag another minute and finally managed to tug the sides apart to dole out jagged slabs of the peanut brittle. “Mmm-hmm. So good. Sticks to my dentures, but who cares.”

“Grandma wants to plant roses again.”

“Good idea.”

“Creed’s girlfriend likes to grow things, too. I think he’s trying to get my approval. Why don’t you bring her by sometime?”

Dad’s peanut brittle froze midway to his lips. “What’s this? A new girlfriend? Why didn’t I know?”

“Because there is nothing to know, Dad. Grandma’s being...grandma.” But again that flush of heat swamped Creed’s

neck. “Haley Blanchard, the foster mother. I told you about her on the phone.”

“Yes, I know who she is. Your mom bought a birdhouse from her last fall at Pumpkin Fest. Isn’t she the one caring for the abandoned baby?”

Creed nodded. “I stopped by a couple of times.”

“To see Haley or the baby?”

Grandma laughed. Creed scowled.

He wasn’t a man who encroached on another man’s territory. The other night with Brent Henderson had been less-than-comfortable. Even though he’d not gone to Haley’s house with thoughts of romance, Brent clearly had. Besides, flakey Haley was not his type.

“The baby, Dad. What happened bothers me, you know. A little baby dumped like that.”

His grandma and his father exchanged looks. Dad cleared his throat and wiped his fingers together to divest them of crumbs. Creed knew what they were thinking and he didn’t like it. He also thought neither wanted to talk about his situation. His parents had always been straight with him. He’d always known, and he rarely thought about the fact that he had not been born a Carter. He was happy, well-adjusted and loved his family. End of story. Being adopted didn’t have a thing to do with his feelings for Rose Petal.

Chapter Five

A chopper whirp-whirped overhead. It was him. Again. Was her house an FAA flight path or something?

“Look, Haley!” Thomas’s excited voice confirmed the identity of the sound and the pilot. “It’s Creed.”

Thomas hopped up and down waving his skinny hand off and yelping Creed’s name as if anyone could hear over that racket.

Haley crossed her arms tightly against her jean jacket and chanced a quick look skyward. As she did, the chopper dipped slightly so she could make out the yellow logo on the side. She also spotted a darkly handsome form in the pilot’s seat.

“Wave, Haley. Creed’s waving at us.”

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