

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

*Love Inspired.*

**CHILD OF MINE**  
**BONNIE K. WINN**

A Rosewood, Texas, novel



# **Bonnie K. Winn**

## **Child of Mine**

### **Аннотация**

It was love at first sight when Matt Whitaker opened his door to see a baby in his brother's arms - Matt's nephew, Danny, abandoned by his heartless high-society mother. And then Danny's father was killed in an accident, and Matt, an ill-prepared bachelor, vowed before God to love and protect this child as his own. Danny's mother, Leah Hunter, had been desperately searching for her baby for eight years - ever since his father snatched him. At last, a clue leads her to the small town of Rosewood, Texas and her son's guardian.

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# **Although he'd never expected to be part of raising a baby, Matt had fallen in love with Danny at first sight.**

But while Matt was still learning how to clean up diapers and mix formula, there was a car accident and his brother—Danny's father—died.

And then it was just the two of them. An ill-prepared bachelor and a baby abandoned by his mother. That's when Matt made the promise he never intended to break.

And he'd built two cradles. One for the house, one for the shop. So he could watch over Danny, protect him. He would do anything, give anything to keep his boy safe. Even if it was from the child's own mother.

# BONNIE K. WINN

is a hopeless romantic who's written incessantly since the third grade. So it seemed only natural that she turn to romance writing. A seasoned author of historical and contemporary romance, her bestselling books have won numerous awards. *Affaire de Coeur* chose her as one of the Top Ten Romance Writers in America.

Bonnie loves writing contemporary romance because she can set her stories in the modern cities close to her heart and explore the endlessly fascinating strengths of today's woman.

Living in the foothills of the Rockies gives her plenty of inspiration and a touch of whimsy, as well. She shares her life with her husband, son and a spunky Westie who lends his characteristics to many pets in her stories. Bonnie's keeping mum about anyone else's characteristics she may have borrowed.

# Child of Mine

## Bonnie K. Winn



And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the seashore.

—I Kings 4:29

For Donna Hobbs, friend, sister, keeper of secrets, guardian of memories. You've been there for me through everything. We've shared weddings, babies, dreams and everything in between. I think often of the days we tunneled to lunch, walked to Sam Houston Park, the library. Our connection transcends the miles, but I miss you, dear friend.

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# Prologue

Los Angeles, California

The carton was small. But it was all Kyle had left behind when he'd disappeared eight years ago, taking their precious baby, stealing her hope.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor in the attic of her parents' Brentwood home, Leah Hunter dug through the contents of the carton as she had hundreds of times before. She'd tried to leave it behind when she moved to her own apartment. But she couldn't. She was searching for a clue, any clue that could tell her where Kyle had gone.

She had been nineteen when she'd married him. A naive nineteen, she realized now, because she'd believed Kyle's lies. But she'd never believed he would kidnap baby Danny.

Leah picked up the only unique item in the carton, a hand-carved box. It was so simple it was elegant. She opened the hinged lid and smoothed her fingers over the sleek wood interior, searching for a hidden panel—yet again. But she still couldn't find anything. Like everything else Kyle had left, it was a dead end.

She had been as dazzled by him as he'd been by her parents' money. It was all he'd ever wanted from her. But when they wouldn't hand out the money, he'd taken Danny.

Frustrated, Leah tapped on the side of the box fiercely. A

small drawer, the same size as the base of the box, slid open.

Her heart skipped a beat. Shaking, she lifted it to the light.

The drawer was empty, but engraved on one side was a name: Matt Whitaker. And a place: Rosewood, Texas.

It could just be the name of the person who'd carved the box, Leah realized. But it was the first clue in eight years. And nothing would keep her from trying to find her son. Nothing.

# Chapter One

Rosewood, Texas

Whitaker Woods. Like the box Leah clutched in her hand, the native pine storefront was simple. Pushing open the door, she expected to find small, similar pieces inside. She was surprised instead by the array of large furniture. Dramatic armoires, one-of-a-kind chairs, trunks, chests.

“Can I help you?” An older woman emerged from the back, the wood floor creaking beneath her.

“Yes.” Hope crowding her throat, Leah showed her the box. “I’m trying to locate the sales record for this.”

The woman wiped her freckled hands on the industrial apron she wore. “That I can’t do.”

Leah fought her disappointment.

“Matt only makes these for friends or family,” she continued, picking up the box. “He doesn’t sell them.”

“Oh?”

She turned the box over. “Yes. They’re special.”

Leah seized the new information as if were gold. “Do you by chance know Kyle Johnson?”

“Kyle? No.”

Leah hadn’t really expected that she would. Still... “Could I speak to Mr. Whitaker?”

“Matt’s not here right now. He’ll probably be back in a few

hours. I could have him call you.”

“That would be great.” Leah handed her a card. “This has my cell number. I’m staying at Borbey House just down the street.”

“Annie’s place. I know it.”

Leah smiled. “Thanks for your help.”

“Welcome to Rosewood.”

Matt whistled as he unloaded the pickup truck. He was especially pleased with the custom hall tree he’d just finished. The concept was Victorian. The contemporary design, however, was all his own. He loved working with his hands. Always had. Bringing the wood from one life to another.

Easing the hall tree through the back door of the store, Matt was careful not to scratch the multiple layers of varnish.

“Boss, that you?”

“Yeah.”

Nan walked through the swinging doors that separated the display area from the back room and spotted the hall tree. “Oh, that’s nice!”

He stood back, surveying the piece. “I’m happy with it.”

“Bet it doesn’t last long. And you’ll have a dozen requests for more.”

“You’re better than an ad in the Houston Chronicle.”

Nan grinned. “Glad you noticed.”

“How’s the day been?”

“Steady. Cindy Mallory wants to talk to you about ordering some new furniture for the triplets. Sounds like a pretty big

commission. And I sold that rocking chair I've had my eye on for my youngest daughter. Should have bought it myself when I had the chance."

He chuckled. "I told you to put it aside."

"Sold it to a tourist for full price, Matt."

"Not everything's about the bottom line."

"Good thing I take care of the books," she chided. "Oh, and a pretty young woman came by to see you."

"Ah...wish I'd been here."

"She had one of those special little boxes you make, wanted to see if I could trace it." Nan handed him Leah's card. "And she wanted to know if I knew a Kyle Johnson."

Matt froze.

"Told her that you just made them for special friends. She's staying over at Annie's place. Card has her cell number on it, too. Seemed nice enough. Funny though. Her having the box and not knowing they're special. But I told her I'd ask you to call." Nan paused. "Matt? You okay?"

"Yeah...sure."

"You never used to sell the little boxes, did you?"

"No. Uh...I'd better get back to the house."

"Well, okay. You sure everything's all right?"

"Yeah. Just been a long day."

Nan glanced at her watch. "It's just after two. You want some coffee?"

"No. You go ahead."

Back in his truck Matt studied the card. And eight years crashed away.

Sitting in an overstuffed chair that was so comfortable it should have lulled her into a nap, Leah stared at the phone in her room. A few hours, the clerk had said, before Matt Whitaker would return to the store. She'd unpacked and tried to fiddle away as much time as she could but she still had too much left on her hands. It would be awhile before he called. She pictured her mother back in L.A., anxiously waiting to hear if she had any news. Might as well let her know not to sit by the phone.

Rhonda picked up on the first ring. "Leah?"

"Hi, Mom."

"Have you found out anything?"

"Not yet, but I'm working on it."

"Maybe you should have let the investigators—"

"Not this time, Mom." Leah's jaw tensed. "I have to do this one on my own."

There was a pause. "Maybe you're right. The detectives never found out anything despite all their searching."

No. And though Leah had believed Kyle would bring Danny back, he hadn't. She sighed.

"We could contact the FBI again," Rhonda reminded her.

"It didn't work the last time."

Rhonda's silence told Leah her mother didn't appreciate the comeback. But the silence was short-lived. "How you could have been married to a man who left absolutely no record of his

name...and for you to not have his social security number...”

Leah didn't have an answer. Kyle hadn't held a job while they were married and her mother knew it. And the FBI found that the background he'd told her was fiction—a fairy tale to make a gullible girl fall in love. Which gave them nothing to trace. “What do you want me to say?”

Rhonda must've tapped her rings against her desk, the sound coming clearly through the phone. “I don't suppose there's any point in going over old wounds.”

What did it matter now? They'd already been scraped open. Leah rolled her eyes. She knew her mother was just anxious about Danny. But the woman was cranking her own anxiety level even higher. She struggled to keep her voice calm. “Is everything okay at work, Mom?” Hunter Design was a thriving L.A.-based design firm with an international clientele. Kyle had seen only dollar signs in the family-operated business. Her parents had been willing to hire him, but he hadn't wanted to work. He just wanted the money.

“Jennifer's keeping an eye on your jobs. She's competent, even if she doesn't have your touch.”

Jennifer was Leah's assistant. “She'll be fine.”

“Leah? Don't be too disappointed if this doesn't...well, turn into the lead you're hoping for.”

“I won't, Mom.”

Once she'd said goodbye to her mother, Leah glanced around the storybook room in the quaint bed-and-breakfast. She had

been on hyper-speed since she'd found the secret compartment in the box and decided to pursue this long shot at finding Danny. On edge, she'd flown to Houston, rented a car and driven more than three hours to this small town, hidden in the heart of the Texas hill country. She'd heard it was a beautiful region, but she'd barely seen anything she'd driven past.

The thought of just sitting, without anything to do, was making her crazy. Maybe she could walk off some of her nervous energy.

Stopping at the antique breakfront that served as a desk, Leah rang the bell. Annie, the B and B owner, popped out of the adjoining kitchen, wiping her hands on a cloth. She was more than happy to forward any messages to Leah's cell phone.

The air was clear, delivering early spring's promise of new life, as Leah walked down the old-fashioned boardwalk. Tall elm trees shaded the street. The buildings belonged to a different era, she realized. Enchanting Victorian structures, which all housed working businesses.

She passed a quaint drugstore, hardware store, costume shop and newspaper office before reaching Whitakers Woods. She lingered in front of the wide-paned window, but didn't see a man inside. The door opened and a customer stepped out.

The woman Leah had met earlier called out to her. "Hi, there!" Leah walked inside. "Hello..."

"I'm Nan," she said with a smile. "Should have introduced myself earlier. Matt was here sooner than I thought and I gave

him your card.”

“Great! Then I guess I’ll be hearing from him soon.”

Nan nodded. “Oh, my, yes. Matt’s real good about getting back to people.”

Relieved, Leah smiled. “That’s wonderful. Thanks for your help.”

“Glad to do it. You settling in at Annie’s?”

“Yes. It’s a charming place. Like the town.”

“Thing is, it’s a real town, not put on for tourists like some places. No T-shirt and souvenir shops. Not that we don’t welcome visitors, but this is our home.”

“I got that sense right away.”

“Good. Hope you have a nice stay.”

Leah crossed her fingers. “I’m counting on it.”

Matt sat at his kitchen table staring at Leah’s card. It had to be her. It all fit. L.A. The box John had taken from him...along with Matt’s savings.

“Kyle” she’d called him. Kyle Johnson.

His half brother had always hated his real name. John Litchkyl Johnson. Litchkyl, their mother’s maiden name. He’d been John all his life in Rosewood. His hick life, he’d called it. He must have gone by Kyle once he’d gotten to California and married Leah.

But why was she here now?

She’d abandoned John and their baby when Danny was only six weeks old. What kind of woman did that? Only the lowest kind.

And she had money, John had said. Enough to have hired nannies, people to help out, to make raising her child as easy as possible. Instead she'd left. Said she didn't want the responsibility of a kid.

Matt could still feel the weight of that tiny bundle in his arms the first time he'd held Danny, the clutch of little fingers around his own. The promise he'd made.

He knew John had his faults. His half brother had been immature, irresponsible. But he also knew that a child belonged with his parents. At least the one who cared enough to stay with him. John had abandoned his own dreams of making it in California to come back to Rosewood where his only family remained. Their mother had passed on when John was sixteen, and John's father had died years before. Matt was all he had left.

And though he'd never expected to be part of raising a baby, Matt had fallen in love with Danny at first sight. That had never changed.

But the family dynamics had changed almost immediately. While Matt was still learning how to clean up diapers and mix formula, there was the car accident.

And then it was just the two of them. An ill-prepared bachelor and a motherless child. That's when Matt made the promise he never intended to break.

And he'd built two cradles. One for the house, one for the shop. So he could watch over Danny, protect him. That wasn't going to stop. He would do anything, give anything to keep

his boy safe. Even if it meant taking over as the only father Danny would ever remember. Oh, he'd tell Danny the truth when he was old enough to understand. And he knew none of his neighbors would dare bring up the sensitive subject. Yes, he would keep Danny safe. Even if that meant keeping him from his own mother.

## Chapter Two

“Are you sure there aren’t any messages for me?” Leah asked.

Annie shook her head. “I’m sorry. I double-checked. If I’m out, I have an answering machine. Locals are usually pretty good about leaving messages. I can’t be as sure about out-of-towners...”

“It’s local. Whitaker Woods.”

“Oh, they’re really good about getting back to you.” Annie smiled. “Matt’s stuff is special, isn’t it? People find out about his furniture, drive up here from all over. Usually Nan is at the store most of the time, though.”

“Actually, I need to speak to Mr. Whitaker.”

“I’m surprised he hasn’t followed up with you since yesterday.” Annie glanced at the clock. It was after seven. “Wow. It’s been a day and a half. That’s really not like him. Have you talked to Nan?”

“Repeatedly. Seems he’s out on a commission job.”

Annie nodded sympathetically. “Matt works like an artist, gets all caught up in what he does.” She pointed across the room. “See that bench? He recreated it from some fuzzy old photos for my grandfather. Took great care with every detail. The original was lost in a fire. It was a wedding present to Gramps from my great-grandparents. And it meant so much to him when Matt was able to make another one. He said it brought Granny closer to him

those last years.” Annie cleared her throat. “Anyway, like I said, Matt becomes really caught up in his projects.”

Leah understood, but it wasn't getting her any closer to talking with him. “Thanks anyway.”

Climbing the stairs back to her room, she couldn't help but wonder. Matt usually got back to people quickly. So, why wasn't he getting back to her?

At breakfast the next morning, Leah dawdled over her French toast.

“Do you want another slice?” Annie offered.

“No, thanks. It's delicious, but I shouldn't be eating anything this rich for breakfast.”

Annie chuckled. “The guests usually say that. But they rarely order anything else after they try it. It was my grandmother's recipe.”

“I'm guessing you were close to your grandparents.”

“This was their place. The one that didn't burn down.” Annie lifted the coffeepot. “More coffee?”

“Since I'm the last one in the dining room, why don't you join me, unless I'm keeping you from something?”

“Best offer I've had all morning.”

Leah added more cream to her cup. “Do you ever get tired of having your house full of people?”

Annie hesitated. “You'd think so, wouldn't you?”

“Actually, I've been considering combining work and home spaces—I'm a designer.”

“Really? That must be interesting.”

“I like it. But then I kind of fell into it. It’s my family’s business. A third-generation business.”

“Like mine. This was a bakery during my grandparents’ time.”

“So you know what I mean. I grew up playing with fabric and paint. I thought sample books were toys.”

Annie grinned. “I’d have loved that. I’ve always wanted to do something more with this place.”

“It’s beautiful. Fits perfectly with the period of the building, of the town actually.”

“Thanks. For the most part, these were my grandparents’ furnishings. They used this room for the display area so it was a natural for the dining room. But I’d like to put my stamp on another room.”

“It’s the woman in us,” Leah commiserated.

“True.”

Leah sipped her coffee. “Do you know if Whitaker’s combines its workshop and retail space?”

“Hmm? Oh, there’s a work space at the store, but Matt does most of his work at the shop behind his house.”

“Did you have a particular room in mind to redo, Annie?” Leah asked, picking up on her earlier comment.

“One the public doesn’t have access to, I think,” she mused. “Maybe my bedroom.”

For a few minutes they talked about Annie’s decorating wish list. Leah didn’t want to rush the conversation, but at some point

she intended to ask Annie just where the Whitaker house was.

If Matt Whitaker wouldn't call her, she would have to call on him.

The rambling two-story house was old, well kept and surprisingly cozy-looking. It also appeared to be empty.

First, Leah rang the bell at the front door. Then waited. Then rang it again. And again.

She tried knocking.

She tried the back door.

Not thwarted, she searched out the shop. A tall, wide double door stood open. Apparently theft wasn't an issue in this part of the world.

She found nothing but wood and tools in the orderly, pine-scented shop. She breathed in the smell of newly cut timber and wood dust, but they didn't tell her if Whitaker had been there that day or even that week. She suspected the shop always smelled of freshly cut wood.

Going back to the house, she took out a card, scribbled a message on the back—explaining that she urgently needed to speak to him—and tucked it in the space by the front door.

Leah considered camping out until Matt Whitaker returned, but who knew when that would be?

So she checked again at the store. Nan was apologetic, assuring her that Matt would be in touch at some point.

She waited at Borbey House until after five o'clock and drove out to the Whitaker house again. No one was home.

Frustrated, she returned to the bed-and-breakfast.

Annie was tidying the parlor. “Any luck?”

“None.” Disheartened, she started climbing the stairs.

“Wait.” Annie put down her feather duster. “I know it’s exasperating, I mean, you driving all this way, not being able to get in touch with Matt. Why don’t you come with me this evening to the church supper? It’s always fun. We have games afterward.”

Leah was about to refuse. “And Matt might be there.”

That clinched it for her. “Oh? Are you sure I won’t be in the way?”

“At our church? Never. It’s a potluck and we always have plenty of food and then some.”

Annie was about Leah’s age, and her lively dark eyes were warm and inviting. But Leah didn’t want to take advantage. “Then, can I make a donation?”

“It’s not necessary. Really, everyone’s welcome.”

“Hmm. I couldn’t help noticing that you make a lot of extra pies.”

“This is Borbey House—Hungarian for ‘baker.’ Selling the pies is a holdover tradition from the days when my grandparents ran the bakery.”

“Good. I’d like to buy two, please.”

Annie grinned. “Hungry, are we?”

“I’ll let you pick the flavors.” Leah glanced down at her jeans and frowned. “I didn’t bring a dress.”

“You look about the same size as me. I’ll loan you something.”

“Really?”

“It won’t be a designer label, but if that doesn’t bother you...”

“Annie, you redefine hospitality.”

Rosewood Community Church was located in a beautiful old building. Annie explained that the structure had sustained an electrical fire that had nearly wiped it out a few years earlier. But the membership had come together to rebuild. By using some of the original stones, they had maintained the best of the past, while making sure they had a future.

Leah listened as she clenched and unclenched her sweaty hands, studying the people around them. She leaned close to Annie. “What does Matt Whitaker look like?”

“Um...tall, early thirties, dark brown hair that’s kind of sun-streaked...” She paused. “You know he works with lots of wood and tools, so he’s fit, muscular. Casual dresser. What did I leave out?”

Leah shook her head. “Not much.” But she couldn’t stop staring at every man who passed by.

She didn’t pay much attention to the tables of food, although she followed Annie’s lead and filled her plate, then took a seat. The people were friendly, introducing themselves. She was surprised by their welcome. It was so different than being in the city.

“There’s Matt. About two tables over on the left.” Annie pointed tactfully. “See? Next to that family?”

Leah was relieved to finally see him. She’d begun to think that

even in such a small town she wasn't going to catch up to him. Although she wanted to pin him down now, manners kept her from bothering him until he finished his dinner.

A man and woman sitting at the table between hers and his stood up, clearing her view. It was then she saw the young boy at Matt's side. A boy that looked to be about the same age Danny would be. Leah swallowed.

She always noticed young boys, wondering how her own son had turned out. Still... She watched father and son together. Their postures were nearly identical. Their gestures similar. Matt paid careful attention to the boy.

"Dessert, Leah?" Annie asked.

"No, thanks."

"There's a cheesecake over there calling out to me. I don't want to be rude, so I think I'll go answer."

"Mmm."

Annie shrugged and walked over to the dessert table.

Leah watched Matt Whitaker and the child. Although she couldn't hear what they were saying, the two heads were bent together and she could see the boy's grin, Matt's quick smile.

They were close. It was evident in the easy body language, the looks they exchanged.

Surely a man who loved his son this much would understand her quest.

As Leah watched, the boy jumped up from the table, hugged Matt and then ran to join the other kids his age in the games

that were beginning. Leah found it difficult to take her gaze from him, watching until he and the other children left the fellowship hall with a basketball, probably to go to the gymnasium.

Annie had returned with her cheesecake, extra happy that she'd found chocolate sauce to go with it. She urged Leah to go over to see Matt.

He was still at the table, finishing his meal, when she approached.

“Mr. Whitaker?”

He glanced up.

“I’m Leah Hunter.”

His expression turned wary. “Yes?”

“I’ve been trying to reach you at your store. Sorry to ambush you here.” Leah smiled, trying to take the businesslike edge from her words. “I’m with Annie. I mean, she invited me to the church supper, being a stranger in town and all.”

Not a word from him.

“And me being at loose ends,” Leah continued, filling in the awkward silence. “I wasn’t planning to be in Rosewood long. I just came to talk to you. I think Nan gave you my card.”

The silence was so protracted she wondered if he would speak.

When he finally did, his voice was deep, somber. “She gave it to me.”

Which told her nothing. “So...” Leah studied his unblinking gaze. “I’m trying to trace down a box I have—”

“Nan told you we don’t keep records on the boxes.”

“She said you only make the boxes for family or special friends  
—”

“Miss Hunter, my friends don’t sell their boxes.”

“I didn’t say I’d bought it.”

“You’ve come a long way for nothing then.” He stood, stepping aside and pushing his chair up to the table.

“No, Mr. Whitaker, I haven’t.” She pulled the box from her purse. “This is the first clue I’ve had to finding my son in eight years and you’re not going to just dismiss me.” She held it up. “This belonged to Kyle Johnson. Did you know him?”

His expression was at first startled, then guarded. His lips thin, pressed tightly together. One word finally emerged, as though it were painful to say. “Yes.”

Her hope, thready at best, flared. She bit her lower lip to stave off tears. “Oh, Mr. Whitaker, you don’t know what this means to me.” Despite her effort, one tear slipped down her cheek and she wiped it away. “Where can I find him? I know he’s difficult to pin down.”

“Not anymore.”

“No?”

“He’s dead.”

## Chapter Three

Reeling, Leah stared at Matt's back as he walked away. She'd never let herself believe Kyle could be dead. Because if he were, that meant...

But the investigators had never found Kyle's death certificate. Whitaker had to be wrong.

"Wait! Please!" She ran to catch up to him. "When did Kyle die?"

He stopped and turned to her, his words clipped. "Eight years ago."

She gasped. Shaking, she felt the last remnants of her self-control slip away. "That can't be. We've been checking for years and never found a death certificate."

"His first name was John. Kyle was part of his middle name—Litchkyl."

All of Kyle's lies. Even his name. He'd signed their marriage certificate as Kyle Johnson. He'd cheapened every single thing about their marriage.

She closed her eyes, afraid to ask. Hope and despair warred in her heart. Swallowing, she lifted her chin. "And the baby? The boy?"

He hesitated.

And her heart nearly stopped.

"Is safe."

“Where is he?”

Matt stared at her.

“Please, if you know anything.” She took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I haven’t explained myself very well. I was married to Kyle. The baby, the boy, I mean, is mine. I’ve been looking for him. That’s why I’m here, why I’m trying to trace the box. So, if you can tell me anything...”

“It’s too late. You made your choice.”

She gaped at him. Where did he get off...? “I understand loyalty to a deceased friend, but you don’t understand the circumstances—”

“I understand plenty.”

There was derision in his tone, but she had no idea why. “I don’t know what Kyle told you—”

“The truth.”

She shook her head. “His version. Despite what he may have said, I need to find my son. You’re a father. You must understand that.”

“I understand you walked away once. Do the best thing for your son again. Walk away now.”

Stunned, Leah watched as Matt Whitaker crossed the room and headed out the door.

Back at the bed-and-breakfast, Leah sat in one of the overstuffed chairs near her bedroom window. She still couldn’t believe Matt Whitaker’s reaction. And she never would have imagined that Kyle could elicit such loyalty.

Kyle dead. For all her anger, it wasn't something she would have wished. He'd been so young.

Who was raising her son? Had he been legally adopted?

Throat dry, she considered the possibilities—along with Matt Whitaker's harsh response. Getting his help wasn't going to be easy. But she would really need it to find Danny, especially if there'd been a private adoption. That wasn't something that could be simply traced.

Staring out at the quiet street, she knew she wouldn't sleep that night. Her mind was filled with too many questions.

Leah watched for Whitaker's truck. From her vantage point at the parlor window in the bed-and-breakfast, she could see the traffic going down Main Street.

Persistence paid off by midafternoon. As soon as he parked in front of his store, Leah bounded outside and down the boardwalk.

Matt was alone in the display area, his back to her. "Be with you in a minute."

"Fine."

He stiffened and turned around slowly.

"Mr. Whitaker...Matt, please, let me tell you about my relationship with Kyle...John."

"I know all I need to."

"Obviously not, or you wouldn't be shutting me out. I was nineteen years old when we got married. I believed everything he told me—"

The bell over the door clanged as it opened. A group of young boys piled in, talking and laughing. The one she recognized as Whitaker's son ran up to him.

"Dad! Billy's dad's gonna take everybody for pizza after soccer practice. Can I go?"

Distracted, Matt glanced down at him. "Who's driving?"

"Billy and Dustin's dads. Is it okay?"

Leah watched the boy, able to see him close-up for the first time. He was animated, eager. Then he turned and she could see his face more clearly. As she studied his features, she saw that his eyes were a unique shade of green, like her own. Even their shape was similar to hers. So was his mouth. He looked up at her and the impact of recognition hit her.

Matt glanced at her, then down at his son. "It's all right, but home right after the pizza. And mind Billy's and Dustin's dads."

"Okay," the boy agreed. "Thanks, Dad."

"Come on, Danny," the others called.

Leah shivered as she watched him dash out with his friends. She'd been almost certain when she saw his eyes. The name confirmed it.

No wonder Matt had been avoiding her, putting her off. It all made sense. Perfect, horrible sense.

Anger, hot and raw, clawed through her. "How could you?" She turned on Matt with every bit of righteous pain and accusation she could muster. "I've heard of slime like you. How could you steal my child and then have the gall to pretend that

you didn't know where he was?"

"Steal? Just how is it a person steals an abandoned baby? You're a real piece of work. What? Did you decide after eight years that it might be fun to play mommy? Forget it. Danny's done just fine without you until now. Go with your original instincts. Pretend he doesn't exist."

"Abandoned?" Leah shrieked. "Abandoned?"

"Boss, is everything okay in here?" Nan rushed in from the rear entrance. "I just got back from the post office and it sounds like someone's plucking live turkeys. You can hear it all the way outside."

Breathing hard, Leah and Matt paused.

"Yeah," Matt said in the awkward silence. Then he slammed out the door, got in his truck and roared away.

Leah was left in the heavy silence.

Embarrassed, Nan cleared her throat. "Sorry to interrupt."

"No. If anyone should apologize, it's me, I was the one yelling." Leah tried to calm her breathing. "Will you tell me one thing?"

"If I can."

"Did you know a John Johnson?"

"John? Sure. He was Matt's younger brother. Half brother, really. Matt was always looking out for him."

And still was, apparently.

Leah allowed enough time to collect herself before driving to Matt's house. His truck was parked out front. He didn't answer

the door, so she walked around back to the shop.

He was sitting at his work bench, a piece of alder wood in his hands. Although she was sure he heard her, he didn't stir.

And she didn't bother with greetings. "You could have told me about Kyle being your brother."

"It didn't take you long to figure it out."

"I shouldn't have had to."

Matt put the wood down on the bench. "Why would you want to come back now? You're a stranger to Danny."

That stung. Badly. "Through no fault of my own. Kyle wanted money from my parents. They expected him to work for it. That wasn't in his plans, so he took Danny. Then he called and asked for half a million dollars. He said it was to set him up in his own business. He wanted to be a big-time real estate mogul just when the market was hitting bottom. My parents refused. I thought he'd give up and bring Danny home, but he didn't."

"I don't believe you."

"Danny was an infant! Barely six weeks old."

Matt met her gaze. "I'm the one who fed him. Changed his diapers. Rocked him to sleep. Held him when he cried."

Leah's chest constricted. "You think I didn't want to?"

"No."

"Because Kyle, who lied about everything, told you so?"

Matt stood. "You knew him, what? A year? I knew him all his life."

"Then you should have known he was chasing one half-baked

idea after another. He didn't care about family, about establishing a real life together. All he wanted was a great big handout from my parents, and when that didn't happen he stole my son."

"He was pursuing his dreams, which he gave up to raise his son when you abandoned him."

She shook her head. "You can't really believe that."

"Because you say it isn't true?"

"I'm his mother."

"Which hasn't meant squat."

"This isn't going to end with your say-so. Danny is my son. That means legally, no matter what steps you may have taken."

"So you'll just rip him away from everything and everyone he knows and loves without a qualm."

Leah swallowed. "I know my rights."

"Kyle said that money ruled your conscience."

She gasped. "That isn't true."

"Then think about Danny instead of yourself." He walked toward her.

Automatically, Leah took a step backward.

Matt continued advancing. "He's not a baby anymore. He'll ask questions. About where you were."

"I'll tell him the truth."

Matt scoffed. "And he'll believe you? Why?"

"Because I'm his mother." Even as she spoke, Leah recognized the futility of the words. Danny didn't feel any connection to her. He would believe Matt. "You're not going to

dissuade me.” She could feel the pressure, the tightening in her chest, the ache against the back of her throat. But she wouldn’t give into tears in front of this man. “I’ll be back.”

Trying to look as though she were still in control, she fled before her emotions exploded. Back in the car, she drove only a short distance from his house before she pulled off the road onto a deserted cattle crossing. Then she let the tears flow. Ugly, painful sobs clutched her chest and scraped her throat.

Her baby.

He didn’t know her. He thought she’d tossed him aside. How was she going to fix that? And how was she going to explain that she had to take him away from the only parent he’d ever known?

## Chapter Four

Leah picked at her oatmeal the following morning. She'd considered calling her parents' attorney, but Matt Whitaker's words echoed through her mind.

Then it occurred to her that she had only his version of how Danny had arrived in Rosewood.

"More coffee?" Annie asked.

"Thanks."

"You're awfully quiet. Everything okay?"

Leah glanced around the dining room and saw that the only other guests remaining, an older couple, were gathering their things to leave for the day. "Not really."

"I'm sorry. Anything I can do?"

"Do you have a minute?"

"Sure."

Annie put the coffeepot on the sideboard, waved goodbye to the other guests and joined her.

Leah twisted the linen napkin, wondering how to begin.

Annie waited patiently.

"I need to know something."

"I'll tell you if I can."

"Did you know John Johnson?"

Annie nodded. "Yes. It's been a long time. He died...I'm not sure...seems like almost ten years ago."

“Do you know anything about his child?”

She sighed. “Saddest thing. John met a girl in California. They got married and had a baby, but she ran out on him when the baby was just tiny. So John brought the baby back here, but he got killed in a car crash not long after he came home. His brother raised the boy like he was his own. He’s Matt Whitaker—the man you came here to talk to.” Her eyes widened.

Leah lowered her chin. “Is that what the whole town believes?”

Annie nodded slowly. “Leah?”

“Yes. I’m the girl. But it’s not true.” She looked into Annie’s honest eyes. “I need someone to trust.”

“I can keep your confidences...but, Leah, you have to know... the town feels really strongly about this. Everyone backs Matt. They admire how he took in the baby.”

“But they don’t know the truth.”

“It’s the truth everyone’s lived with for nearly a decade,” Annie reminded her gently. “Even if it wasn’t true to begin with, it’s going to be hard to convince people otherwise, especially after seeing a big strong guy like Matt with a baby. He’s raised Danny by himself.... He never married.”

Leah’s heart caught as she thought of all the time she’d missed, all the firsts, all the accomplishments.

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

So Leah told her.

“John wasn’t exactly wild,” Annie remembered. “But he didn’t run with my kind of crowd. He was a year ahead in school, but

I remember he was different. Actually, I can see him taking off for California. So, if you didn't abandon Danny, that means you have legal rights."

"Yes."

"But if you take him away from everything he knows..."

Leah sighed heavily.

"If it helps," Annie said, "Matt seems to be a great father."

"I'm not sure it does. Of course, I wouldn't want to know Danny had been miserable. But his relationship with Matt complicates everything. I've always known that if I found him, it wouldn't be simple. But the reality is a lot harder than I ever imagined." And Leah was longing to put her arms around her little boy, to hug him close, to tell him that he was hers...to let him know how much she loved him. Instead, she sat drinking coffee, not even sure where he went to school.

Annie plucked the petals from one of the daisies on the table.

"There's another way."

Leah met her gaze.

"Stay here in Rosewood. Get to know Danny. Establish some trust before you tell him who you are."

"Do you think Matt would let that happen?"

"I've seen Matt with him. I don't think he could hurt Danny by telling him the truth right now."

For all the other objections Leah might have about Matt, she couldn't deny his love for Danny.

She would do what it took to restore her maternal rights to her

son, to convince Danny that she loved him. “Thank you, Annie. You’ve got a full-time guest.”

Leah learned that Danny attended the Community Church’s elementary school. No wonder his name had never appeared in public school records. Then she found out that he went by Danny Whitaker. In a small-town private school, a birth certificate hadn’t been necessary, she guessed.

Or maybe Matt had taken the legal steps and adopted him.

She didn’t have the heart to find that out just yet.

Instead, she decided to put her design skills to their best use. She made an appointment with the principal, explained that she was taking a break from her stressful job in L.A. but would love to volunteer at the school to give herself something to do while in Rosewood.

“Miss Hunter, we’d be delighted to have you,” Principal Gunderland said after their meeting. She was taking Leah to see the lounge she had agreed to work on.

“Leah. And I’m pleased that I can be of help.”

“An actual designer to help redecorate our teachers’ lounge. The last time we tried to do anything with the room, we wound up painting it ghastly pink. No one liked it, so we repainted it institutional green, which is just as awful, maybe worse.”

“I’ll try for something a little more aesthetically pleasing,” Leah murmured, struggling not to be obvious as she peeked into the classrooms they were passing.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but we’ll be thrilled with

anything.”

Leah spotted a room full of children who looked to be about the right age, but she didn't see Danny among them. She needed to know what grade he was in. “Um...anything?”

“As long as it's in keeping with the church school.”

Leah glanced into another classroom. “Of course. Tasteful, I understand.”

“Mr. Whitaker!” the principal said in a delighted voice.

“Whitaker?” Leah echoed, jerking her gaze back to see Matt stalking down the hall toward them.

“Yes, he's one of our best supporters and volunteers.”

Of course.

And he was glowering at her.

“Mr. Whitaker, is something wrong?” Principal Gunderland asked. “I saw the new bookcase in the library. It looks wonderful.”

“Good.”

The principal seemed surprised by his curt reply. “Oh, this is Miss Hunter. She's a new volunteer, and you won't believe it—she's a professional designer!”

Leah smiled sweetly.

“We've met,” he muttered.

“Then you know how lucky we are to have her,” she exclaimed.

“Yeah, lucky.”

“Miss Hunter, you'll be working quite a bit with Mr. Whitaker

since he coordinates most of our redecorating.”

The school secretary came hurrying up to them. There was an important call for the principal.

“Mr. Whitaker, would you mind escorting Miss Hunter to the teachers’ lounge?” Mrs. Gunderland asked. “I’ll meet you there in a few minutes.”

He could hardly leave her there like a lump of hot coal, Leah realized, but she could tell he was seething as the two women walked away.

“What are you doing here?” Matt asked as he led her into the lounge.

“Checking out my son’s school.”

“How did you find out this is Danny’s school?”

“It was hardly rocket science. Rosewood’s a pretty small town. There aren’t too many choices.”

Matt wasn’t satisfied. “Did you bring investigators to town?”

“Professionals wouldn’t have stumbled around for two days to find out about Danny.”

“I don’t want you here.”

“You don’t have any choice.”

“I could pull Danny out of this school.”

“From everything he knows and enjoys?” she replied evenly.

“So, what? You’re going to play at this until you get bored again?”

Leah wanted to shake him. “No. I’m going to stay in Rosewood until I get to know my son better.”

“You won’t last a week. This isn’t L.A. We don’t have fancy boutiques or clubs.”

“You don’t know me, Whitaker. Not everyone from L.A. is a party girl.”

He snorted.

“I don’t spend my days shopping and playing tennis,” she informed him. “I have a job.”

“Don’t you need to get back to it?”

“I’m on a leave of absence.”

Matt looked at her suspiciously. “Just like that?”

“It was easier because my parents own the firm,” she admitted. “But that doesn’t make my work any less of a real job.”

“Sure.”

“Look. I don’t have to prove anything to you. You’re the one who didn’t bother to check out Kyle’s story.” She saw the principal heading back toward them. “This isn’t the place for this discussion.”

“This isn’t the place for you.”

Leah kept a grip on her temper.

“So, what do you think of our teachers’ lounge?” the principal asked, huffing a bit as she hurried toward them.

Leah hadn’t even glanced at the room. Now that she did, she realized the principal was right. The lounge was ghastly.

“It could use some tender loving care.”

Mrs. Gunderland laughed. “Said diplomatically. Don’t you think so, Mr. Whitaker?”

Leah gave him her attention, too, just to needle him.

He noticed.

“We haven’t done anything to the lounge since it was painted,” he replied.

Avoiding the question, she noticed.

“We don’t have much of a budget for redecorating,” Mrs. Gunderland apologized.

“I have access to overrun materials through my work. Most I can get just for shipping costs.” Leah thought of all the extra stock in the warehouse. Her parents would be happy to donate what was needed for a good cause. “There shouldn’t be a problem.”

The principal brightened. “Wow, you truly are an answer to prayer.”

Leah thought of all her searching, all the years of wondering if she’d ever find Danny. “Thanks. That’s how I feel about being here, too.”

The following day Leah stretched out her time at the school, making different sketches of the teachers’ lounge until recess. When the bell rang and the classes were dismissed, she watched eagerly until she finally spotted Danny filing out of his classroom.

Although he stayed in line as he was instructed, she could see the restrained energy, the animation she’d noticed before. She absorbed every detail. His hair was dark brown like Kyle’s had been, but with the same sun streaks as Matt’s. And he had

freckles.

She swallowed. Silly. Freckles shouldn't make her come unglued.

But they were so precious.

And his eyes. They'd been so easy to recognize because they were like hers and like her father's.

Leah smiled, imagining Leland Hunter as a child, imagining him with his grandson.

Danny was a beautiful child, just as she'd known he would be. And he seemed so happy, easily smiling, laughing. Matt was right about one thing. She couldn't take him away.

But he was wrong about her commitment.

She would last far more than a week.

She would last as long as it took.

## Chapter Five

“Dad? Where’s Timbuktu?” Danny asked, sitting at the kitchen table, doing his homework.

Matt chuckled. “Where’d you hear about Timbuktu?”

“At school. Miss Randolph said that’s where she’s gonna go on her next vacation.”

“I think Miss Randolph was joking. How many more reading questions do you have?”

“Two.”

Miss Randolph must have been having a bad day, but kids could drive the most patient adult batty. Matt remembered when Danny was about three, an age when he was questioning everything. He went through a period of asking about everyone he saw. Everyone they passed on the street, walking or driving. And even though Rosewood was a small town, that was a lot of “who’s that?” Matt smiled to himself. But the little guy had been so excited to see every new face.

Every stage had been a revelation to Matt. He’d seen the world through new eyes.

Danny put his books and notebook into his backpack, then hung it on the hook near the door.

In the adjoining great room, Matt sat on a thick rug that was anchored by a heavy coffee table. On it, he and Danny had assembled an elaborate dinosaur settlement. Danny joined him,

but seemed preoccupied as he adjusted the volcano.

Matt hoped Leah hadn't said anything. "Something bothering you, pal?"

Danny shrugged. "Billy's gonna have a baby brother or sister."

Matt could hear the dejected note in his son's voice. "You don't sound very excited."

"Billy was my only friend like me. You know, who didn't have any brothers or sisters."

Matt sighed. "I see." In the past he'd told Danny that it took both a mother and father in a marriage for siblings. He had impressed upon him the value of family, the sanctity of marriage. But he didn't want to bring up the subject of Danny's mother right now. He'd always told Danny that he didn't know where she was. "Billy's always been a good friend to you, hasn't he?"

"Uh-huh."

"And he's happy about having a new brother or sister?"

Danny pushed a toy brontosaurus close to a tall, plastic palm tree. "Uh-huh."

"Then, how should a good friend feel for him?"

Danny was quiet for a while. "Happy?"

"Yes, even though that's not very easy. But, what do we know about the right thing to do?"

"That it's not always easy."

Matt leaned over to hug him, his heart tightening. He believed everything he'd taught his son and what he was telling him now. But he also believed everything he'd told Leah Hunter. He

couldn't let her snatch Danny away from everything he knew and loved until she tired of whatever she was playing at. For all John's failings, Matt couldn't accept that he would have lied about something so important.

John's father had been a weak man, but Matt and John's mother had been a woman of deep faith and strong values. And Matt was convinced that John would have matured into a responsible man had he lived.

"Dad, do you think you might get married sometime?"

Matt cleared his throat. There hadn't been much time for anyone in his life except Danny. And now... "I don't know," he replied honestly. "But I can't get married just so you'll have a little brother or sister. It has to be someone I love."

Danny's eyes were so serious. "Do you love anyone?"

"You betcha." Matt tousled his dark hair. "I love you, buddy."

Danny giggled. "I know that!"

"Good." Matt reached across the table, adjusting one of the toy dinosaurs. "Your tyrannosaurus rex is about to eat that palm tree."

"Nah! A rex doesn't eat trees!"

Soon they were engrossed in the dinosaur valley and remained so until bath and bedtime. After a story and prayers, Matt tucked Danny in.

He looked so young as his eyelids grew heavy and he fought the last surrender to sleep. So young and innocent. How would it affect his son if he and Leah waged a legal battle over him?

Sighing, Matt smoothed the hair back on Danny's forehead. He straightened the blanket, then turned the lamp off. But he left a small night-light on as he'd always done.

Back in the kitchen, he reached in the refrigerator for a Coke when he heard a quiet knock on the back door. Opening it, he was glad to see his old friend. "Hey, Roger."

"It's not story or bath time, is it?"

"Nope, Danny just got to sleep."

"Wish I hadn't missed seeing him, but I'm glad I'm not interrupting. Can I borrow your router?"

"Sure." Matt held up his can of cola. "Want something to drink?"

"Sounds good."

Matt pulled out another Coke and handed it to his friend. "I'm sorry I didn't bring that bookcase over today."

Roger shrugged as he straddled one of the bar stools. "I figured you got busy."

"I got paranoid."

Pausing midway in opening the soft drink, Roger glanced at his friend. "That doesn't sound like you."

"Danny's mother's in town."

"What?"

Matt took the stool across the counter. "No warning. Just showed up."

"What does she want?"

"Danny."

Roger reared back. “Just like that?”

Matt recounted Leah’s story. “And now, showing up at the school...”

“That’s not exactly sinister. If she’s on the level, it’d make sense that she’d want to see where and how he’s being educated.”

“Or how she can get to him,” Matt replied darkly.

“You think she’s planning to snatch him?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “It’s what I’ve been asking myself ever since she showed up.”

“But then she’d be opening herself up to a legal nightmare.” Roger shook his head. “Unless she’s completely stupid, that wouldn’t make any sense.”

“Hmm.”

“Have you considered that she could be good for Danny?”

“In what possible way?”

“Every kid wants a mother, Matt. She may not be perfect, but she is his mother.”

“Not perfect? What if she gets to know him, gets bored and walks away again? No. I’m not going to let Danny get hurt like that. He deserves the best, and up till now that’s what I’ve tried to give him. She could tear all that down, make him doubt the foundation he’s always trusted.”

“Are you sure she’s really as bad as all that? I mean, you said she just got into town. How do you know what kind of person she is? It’s been eight years. She could have changed. Sounds like she was just a kid herself when she had him.”

“She’s going to say all the right things,” Matt protested.

“Have you got a choice? At least here, it’s on your turf. If you get into lawyers, she could win. Mothers always have the edge in custody cases, even when they shouldn’t. Think about it. What better place is there to learn who the real Leah is?”

Matt didn’t want to learn who the real Leah was. He kept picturing his brother when he’d returned home, shaky, almost frightened.

But Roger was right. He had a better chance of uncovering the real Leah here in Rosewood than anywhere else.

Within a few days, Leah had discovered which classroom Danny was in and had met his teacher. One of the younger teachers, Miss Randolph was open and friendly. But then Leah had found that the entire staff was pretty much that way. As part of the Community Church, the school reflected the church’s attitude, Annie had explained.

When Leah volunteered to help out in the class, Miss Randolph was happy to have her. Nervous about her first day, Leah brought cupcakes to smooth the way. Annie, now her staunch supporter, had offered both the use of her kitchen and her grandmother’s cake recipe. But Leah had painted the faces on the cupcakes herself with layers of multicolored icing. Tigers, lions, giraffes, bears.

Now that the time had come to offer them to the children, Miss Randolph clapped her hands together. “Okay, let’s line up for treats.”

Accustomed to the routine, the kids got into an orderly line. As prearranged, Leah held the large platter of cupcakes. The kids were used to treats, but eyes widened when they saw the elaborate animal faces with realistic whiskers and expressions.

Pleased, Leah relaxed somewhat. But it was difficult to pull her focus from Danny. She wanted to watch his every move. Knowing she couldn't single out one child for her attention, she tried to be casual, tried not to stare.

But he was so lively. And interested in everything.

All of the children were intrigued by the unusual treats and took care choosing just which animal they wanted. When it was Danny's turn, he scrunched his face into concentrated lines, then picked the lion.

"Thanks," he said politely with an upturned grin. "These are cool."

"You're welcome."

"Did you make 'em?"

"Yes," she replied, wanting to say more, but knowing she couldn't. Especially since she felt the sting of tears. The cupcake was the first thing she'd given him...the first thing he'd been able to thank her for. Such a simple, ordinary occurrence.

And it meant the world.

She kept it together as she handed out the rest of the treats and then did cleanup duty. But her gaze continued to stray until the teacher divided the children into reading groups. Leah was supposed to help anyone who needed it.

Since the class, like all the others in the school, was small, so were the individual groups. Leah rotated between them as Miss Randolph had instructed, but she was drawn to Danny's.

Danny read his section aloud without error.

It was a little girl named Lily's turn. She was obviously much shyer. "The water hit the wall with a big..." She paused, trying to decipher the word.

"Splash," Danny whispered.

Lily smiled. "Splash," she said aloud, then continued reading.

Leah was pleased to see that he was kind to the children who didn't work at his level. That behavior could come naturally.

Or from what he'd been taught.

She had to acknowledge the truth. Danny's upbringing had been a good one. And that was because of Matt.

Beneath the man's glower and glare, there must be something else. Something that had shaped Danny.

By late evening most of the guests at the bed-and-breakfast were either upstairs in their rooms or relaxing in the main parlor. The spacious old house had a small rear parlor off the kitchen that was Annie's private space, one that she invited Leah to share.

"These old Victorian houses are great," Leah said, relaxing in a bentwood rocking chair.

"Some people are put off because they're too big. I think they're cozy. Especially here by the kitchen."

Leah smiled. "I always thought it would be nice to have a sturdy table right in the middle of the kitchen, the family

gathering around for meals.”

“That not what you’re used to?”

“Oh, my mother likes things more formal, dinner in the dining room, using the china and crystal.” Leah shrugged, her eyes softening. “This just seems warmer, homier.”

“Do you have a very big family?”

“No. I’m an only child. My parents had me kind of late, when they were in their forties. And when I didn’t come along in the expected time line, I think they gave up. So I was a surprise. And by then they were used to giving dinner parties, entertaining clientele.”

“Sounds lonely.”

“I didn’t mean it to. They doted on me. Because they were older, their friends were, too, so I had lots of attention. We traveled, which was great. It’s just that, sometimes, I wondered about places, well, like Rosewood. Elegant is beautiful, but I wondered about simpler places where rustic is okay, too.” Embarrassed, Leah laughed. “Listen to me.”

“I’m enjoying it. I don’t have many friends from outside of Rosewood and I know practically nothing about city living.”

“How about you? How did you come to be the one who inherited your grandparents’ house? No siblings to share it with?”

Annie’s dark eyes saddened. “When I was a baby, my parents and older brother and sister were killed in a car accident. I was here with my grandparents.”

Horrified, Leah stopped rocking and laid one hand over

Annie's. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have pried."

"It's part of who I am." Annie's face was drawn. "Part of the family curse."

"Curse?"

"I don't know what else to call it. I told you my grandparents' first home burned. Their other child, my mother's only brother, died in the fire."

"That doesn't mean your family's cursed, Annie."

"When I was twenty-one I met...the most wonderful man in the world." Annie's voice thickened. "He wasn't from here. He was a tourist just passing through. But after we met...well, anyway, we fell in love. And we got engaged. The day after, I was waiting for him so we could call his parents. When he didn't show up, I got worried and went over to the hotel. He didn't answer when I knocked on his door. The manager finally got the key, and when he opened the door, David was inside. At first I couldn't understand how he could sleep through both of us banging on the door." Annie paused, remembering. "He had died in the night. His heart. The doctor said he must have had a preexisting condition. He was twenty-five years old. I knew then what the preexisting condition was—my family curse."

"Oh, Annie, no! It was a terrible thing to happen, but it wasn't your fault."

"If he'd just kept driving, hadn't met me—"

"You can't believe that!"

Annie leaned back in her chair. "I keep praying it isn't true."

But it isn't safe for anyone to become part of my family. Look what happens."

"So you intend to live alone the rest of your life?"

"No. I turned the bakery into a bed-and-breakfast so I have company." Annie smiled, trying, but still not hiding her pain. "And sometimes, when I'm lucky, guests are as good as family."

"I don't believe in curses, and I've always wanted a sister. So, I'll sign on."

Annie's smile faltered. "Don't even joke."

"I'm not. I took a huge leap of faith by trusting you with the most important secret I have. You proved that was the right thing to do. Let me prove this to you."

"Oh, I don't know, Leah. You haven't lived with this fear."

"I've lived with the fear of thinking I might not find my son alive every day of the last eight years. There isn't a greater fear."

Annie's lips trembled. "I've prayed that this curse isn't real."

Leah held out her hand. "Sisters?"

Annie hesitated, then reached out, as well. "Sisters."

## Chapter Six

For the next few weeks, work on the teachers' lounge was progressing to Leah's satisfaction. The walls were freshly painted the color of sunwashed sand, and she'd done the trim in bright, clean white, with sections stained a deep mahogany for contrast. It was a drastic change from the dreary institutional green.

An ugly column stood in the middle of the room, and rather than trying to blend it in, Leah decided to make it a focal point. Using a trompe l'oeil technique, she turned it into a graceful willow tree, with a trunk, branches and leaves that reached around all four sides.

Continuing the theme, she used the same method to paint willow trees that faded in to the corners of the room, as well. The windowless, odd-shaped room was now open and inviting. The teachers were thrilled and there wasn't a stick of furniture inside yet. That required Matt's involvement.

He was the furniture man. She didn't want to delay finishing the job, but she didn't want to speak to him.

Problem.

She'd hoped to tiptoe around him by dealing with Nan at the store. But the older woman had cheerfully offered to have her boss get back to Leah.

Leah had come to the school that morning to complete a few touch-ups. The lounge door was propped open to allow the

paint to dry, and she could hear footsteps, sure and distinctive, approaching from down the hall.

Instinctively, Leah knew it was him. She braced herself before facing him.

He wasn't smiling. He never did around her. Not that she expected him to.

For an instant she wondered how it felt to be in his shoes. To have raised Danny, to have had him at his side all this time. To wonder if he would be taken away.

Something in her softened. "Thanks for coming," she said as he walked in to the room

"I was close by. Nan gave me your message." He glanced around. "The place looks a lot different."

"Better, I hope."

He cocked his head, examining the center column. "Yeah."

More pleased than she would have expected, Leah smiled. "I was hoping we could replace the rectangular tables with some round ones, if that's possible. Hopefully in varied sizes."

"The school doesn't keep a huge inventory of furniture in stock."

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