

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired

His Holiday Family

Margaret Daley



A town called
Hope



Margaret Daley

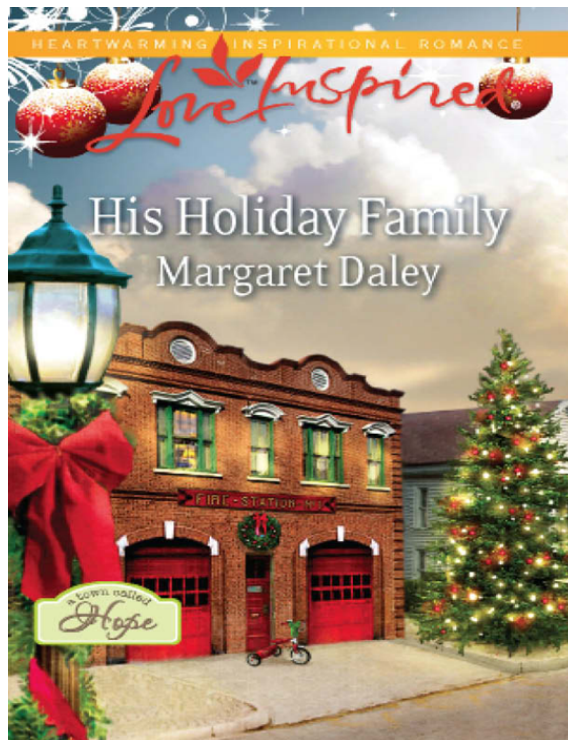
His Holiday Family

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When Hurricane Naomi tears through a small Mississippi town, a daring rescue unites two heroes. Nurse Kathleen Hart is a single mom racked by guilt over her husband's death. Firefighter Gideon O'Brien— orphaned as a young boy—has lost too many people he cared for. To rise above the storm's devastation, Gideon helps Kathleen and her sons rebuild their home. As Christmas approaches, they discover that even the strongest of storms can't destroy a romance built on the foundation of faith.



Brought together by courage...

When Hurricane Naomi tears through a small Mississippi town, a daring rescue unites two heroes. Nurse Kathleen Hart is a single mom racked with guilt over her husband's death. Firefighter Gideon O'Brien— orphaned as a young boy—has lost too many people he cared for.

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When the hairs on his nape stood up, he knew that Kathleen had come into the kitchen.

Gideon felt her gaze and straightened his shoulders, resisting the urge to peer back at her. He dated women all the time, but none of them had caught his attention the way she had.

Deep down he sensed a connection, as if she knew what it was to be hurt deeply and had held herself back from others because of that. Like him. Was that why he got the bright idea to bring dinner to her tonight?

No, it was her sons. They reminded Gideon of himself and his younger brother growing up.

He pivoted toward her, transfixed by the soft blue of her eyes. Run. The word set off an alarm bell in his mind. His chest constricted.

In the distance he heard her son Kip speaking to him, but Gideon couldn't tear his eyes from Kathleen, her delicate features forming a beautiful picture that could haunt him if he allowed her to get too close. But he wouldn't do that.

MARGARET DALEY

feels she has been blessed. She has been married more than thirty years to her husband, Mike, whom she met in college. He is a terrific support and her best friend. They have one son, Shaun. Margaret has been writing for many years and loves to tell a story. When she was a little girl, she would play with her dolls and make up stories about their lives. Now she writes these stories down. She especially enjoys weaving stories about families and how faith in God can sustain a person when things get tough. When she isn't writing, she is fortunate to be a teacher for students with special needs. Margaret has taught for more than twenty years and loves working with her students. She has also been a Special Olympics coach and has participated in many sports with her students.

Margaret Daley
His Holiday Family



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Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth: my flesh also shall rest in hope.

—Psalms 16:9

To Joe, thank you for your support

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Chapter One

Gideon O'Brien hopped down from Engine Two and assessed the chaos in front of him. Strapping on his air pack, he started toward his captain. A hand gripped his arm and stopped his forward progress. He turned toward the blonde woman who held him, her large blue eyes glistening with tears. She looked familiar, but he couldn't place where he knew her from. His neighbor's daughter, perhaps?

"My two sons and my cousin—their babysitter—must still be inside. I don't see them outside with the other tenants." Her voice quivered. She tightened her hand on his arm and scanned the crowd. "I'm Kathleen Hart. My sons are Jared and Kip. I tried Sally's cell but she didn't answer. Please get them out." A tear slipped down her cheek.

"Where are they?" Gideon moved toward his captain, his palm at the small of her back, guiding her in the direction he wanted her to go. Yes, he realized, she was his neighbor Ruth Coleman's daughter.

"Sally's second-floor apartment is on the east side, the fourth one down on your right. Number 212. Hurry." Her round eyes fastened on the fire consuming the three-story apartment building on Magnolia Street.

Gideon paused in front of Captain Fox. "Mrs. Hart says her sons and babysitter are still inside. Pete and I can go in and get them." He looked toward the west end of the large structure where the men of Engine One were fighting the flames eating their way through the top level. "There's still time."

“Okay.” His captain surveyed the east end. “But hurry. It won’t be long before this whole building goes up.”

The scent of smoke hung heavy in the air. The hissing sound of water hitting Magnolia Street Apartments vied with the roar of the blaze. Gideon turned toward the mother of the two boys. “We’ll find them.” He gave her a smile then searched the firefighters for Pete.

When Gideon found him a few feet away, he covered the distance quickly. “Let’s go. There are three people trapped on the second floor. East end.”

At the main entrance into the building Gideon fixed his mask in place, glancing back at the blonde woman standing near his captain. He had seen that same look of fear and worry many times over his career as a firefighter. He wouldn’t let anything happen to her sons and Sally.

Gideon switched on his voice amplifier and headed into the furnace with Pete following close behind him. Through the thick cloud suspended from the ceiling in the foyer, the stairs to the second floor loomed. Crouching, he scrambled up the steps. The higher he went, the hotter it became.

On the landing, he peered to the right, a wall of steely smoke obscuring his view. To the left, the way he needed to go, the gunmetal gray fog hovered in the hallway, denser at the top.

Gideon dropped to his hands and knees and crawled toward Sally’s apartment. Sweat coated his body from the adrenaline pumping through him and the soaring temperature. The building groaned. Visibility only three feet in front of him, he hugged the wall, his heart pounding. He sucked air into his lungs, conscious of the limited amount of oxygen in his tank.

Calm down. Not much time. In and out.

Mindful of every inhalation, he counted the doors they passed in the corridor. One. Two. Three. The next apartment was Sally’s. His breathing evened out as he neared his goal.

At number 212’s door, Gideon tried the handle. Locked. He rose and swung his ax into the wooden obstruction, the sound of it striking its target reverberating in the smoke-filled air.

When a big enough hole appeared, Pete reached inside and opened the door. A pearly haze, not as heavy as in the corridor, engulfed the room. His partner rushed into the apartment, Gideon right behind him. In the small foyer, he noticed a large television on in the living room but didn’t see anyone in there.

“I’ll take the left. You the right,” Gideon said, making his way down the short hallway to the first bedroom. “Fire department, is anyone here?” His gaze riveted to a double bed. He quickly searched everywhere two young boys might hide. Nothing.

For a few seconds a memory intruded into his mind, taking his focus off what needed to be done. He shoved it away, went back in the hall and crossed to the other bedroom. After checking it, he came back out into the corridor and opened the last door to a bathroom. Empty.

He pictured his neighbor’s daughter next to his captain, waiting for them to bring her sons out safely. The thought that he might not be able to quickened his breathing for a moment.

When he met up with Pete in the small entryway, his partner said, “All clear in the kitchen as well as the living and dining rooms.”

“The same in the bedrooms.”

“Gideon, Pete, get out. Mrs. Hart sees her children and their babysitter. They just arrived and are safe,” his captain’s deep gravelly voice came over the radio.

“We’re on our way.” Relieved the two boys and Sally were all right, Gideon and Pete made their way back into the main hallway.

The smoke had grown thicker, darker. The crackling and popping sounds of the fire overrode the rumbling noise from the water continually bombarding the structure. A warning went off, signaling Pete only had five minutes of air left in his tank.

Our time is running out.

As those words flashed into Gideon’s thoughts, his breathing sped up for a few seconds before he reined it in. He’d been in similar situations. They would make it.

Gideon gestured to his friend to go first. Every second counted. Pete came out of the apartment and got down on all fours, hurriedly heading for the stairs. Gideon crept along a body length behind his partner. As he crawled past the second apartment, his low-pressure air alarm alerted him to the need to move even faster.

But the nearer he came to the stairs, the soupier his surroundings were. He barely made out the back of Pete only a foot in front of him.

Gideon's shoulder brushed against the door frame of the apartment nearest to the steps. Almost there. His inhalations slowed even more to conserve as much oxygen as possible. But heat warmed the inside of his protective suit, and sweat rolled down his face. Its salty drops stung his eyes. He blinked, his vision blurring for a few seconds.

Then suddenly from above, wood and debris came tumbling down. Gideon lost sight of Pete in the dense smoke and dust. The crashing sound of a beam boomed through the air.

Lord, help.

Rolling onto his back, Gideon reached for his radio when another metallic moan cut through the noise of the fire. A piece of timber landed across his chest, knocking his radio from his hand. A sharp pain lanced a path through his upper torso. Then a second slab of lumber fell on top of the first. Gideon stared up as the rest of the ceiling plummeted. Air rushed out of his lungs, and blackness swirled before his eyes.

Holding her two sons' hands, Kathleen Hart watched them carry a firefighter out of the burning building. Fear bombarded her from all sides. He could die because she'd mistakenly thought her children and Sally were inside. She relived the few seconds when she'd seen Jared and Kip racing toward her with Sally Nance right behind them. The elation they weren't trapped took hold. Then the knowledge she had unnecessarily sent two men into a blaze to find the trio swept away the joy. Now one of them was injured. Because of her.

She turned to Sally. "Please keep the boys with you. I need to see how the firefighter is doing."

"Sure. I'm so sorry you didn't realize I took Jared and Kip to the park. When the weather's good, we've been doing that. With the storm coming, I didn't know when we would get another chance anytime soon. I never in a thousand years thought my apartment building would catch fire and..." Her cousin gulped back the rest of her words and stared at the man on the stretcher being attended to by the paramedics.

"I know, Sally." Kathleen looked down at her sons, whose eyes were round and huge in their pale faces. "We'll talk later." She squeezed their hands gently, drawing their attention. "Stay with Sally. I'm going to check on the firefighter."

Tears shone in Kip's eyes. "Tell him we're sorry."

She stooped and grasped her nine-year-old's upper arms. "Honey, it isn't your fault."

And it isn't my fault, either. It was an unfortunate accident. If only she could believe that.

Even knowing that in her mind didn't make her feel any better as she rose and headed toward the ambulance into which the paramedics were loading the firefighter.

One of the paramedics hopped into the back of the emergency vehicle while the other shut the doors and started toward the front of the truck. She knew the paramedic because she worked as a nurse at Hope Memorial Hospital. Kathleen hurried her steps and caught up with the driver before he climbed into the cab.

"How is he, Samuel?"

"O'Brien may have some internal injuries." Samuel gave her a once-over. "Did you just come from the hospital?"

Still dressed in her scrubs, Kathleen nodded. "Will he make it?"

"He should, barring any complications." The paramedic jumped up into the ambulance.

Kathleen backed away from the vehicle and watched it leave the scene. She squeezed her eyes closed, still seeing the flashing lights in her mind. She couldn't shake the tragedy of the situation—one she'd had a part in. Just like another one, not long ago.

She tried to clear her mind of the memory. When would this go away?

Someone tugged on her arm. She looked down at Jared, her seven-year-old son, with worry in his expression. "Sally said he went in searching for us. Is that true?"

"Yes. When I didn't see you outside with the other tenants, I thought you all were still inside."

"Is he going to be okay?" Kip asked as he approached her. Sally followed right behind her son.

"The paramedic thinks so." She hoped Samuel was right.

"Mom, he's got to be." Kip's lower lip quivered. "I begged Sally to take us to the park."

"Honey, you didn't know what might happen." She needed to listen to her own words, but that wasn't as easy as it sounded. "Let's get you two to Nana's, and then I'll go back to the hospital and check on him after the doctor has had time to see him in the E.R." Kathleen shifted toward her twenty-three-year-old cousin. "I'm so sorry about this, Sally. Do you want to go to Mom's?" She threw a glance toward the blaze. "It doesn't look like much will be left. You'll need a place to stay. You're welcome to stay with me and the boys."

"I appreciate the offer, but I can go to my mom's. I need to stay and talk with some of my neighbors. See what happened. Then I'll give Mom a call and have her come pick me up. She should be home. With Hurricane Naomi bearing down on us, I would have stayed at Mom's anyway." Sally looked south toward the water only a few blocks from the apartment building.

Kathleen couldn't think of that. The storm in the Gulf was still several days away from Hope, Mississippi, a quaint town of twenty thousand between Mobile and New Orleans. Her hometown of stately antebellum homes along the water thrived on tourism and the fishing industry. But anything could happen between now and the date the National Weather Service projected Naomi would come ashore in the vicinity of Hope.

"I called your cell earlier when I arrived. All I could do was leave a message."

Sally dug into her jean pocket and withdrew her phone. She winced. "Sorry. I had the sound off." Her cousin peered off to Kathleen's side. "Will Kip and Jared be okay?"

Kathleen followed the direction of Sally's attention. Both of her sons' gazes were glued to the commotion taking place at the Magnolia Street Apartments. Kip chewed his lower lip while her younger son took several feet forward. "I'd better get them away before Jared is in the middle of the chaos. I'll talk to you later. If you need any help, please call." She hugged her cousin, then made her way to her children, who were entranced by the plume of smoke bellowing into the sky being chased by yellow-orange flames.

Her mother would watch them while she went to check on the firefighter. She owed him that much for what he did for her. Kathleen clasped first Jared's hand, then Kip's. "We need to go to Nana's."

"But, Mom, I want to see what happens." He had told her on a number of occasions he wanted to be a firefighter.

"No. They don't need any more people here watching." Kathleen scanned the crowd that had gathered across the street from the apartments. "Besides, if Nana hears about this, she'll get worried."

"Will she even be back from Biloxi yet?" Kip trudged toward her car parked several buildings away.

"I hope so." Because she needed to go to the hospital. The firefighter had to be all right.

Will he make it?

The question plagued Kathleen the whole way into the E.R. thirty minutes later after she'd left her mother's house. Luckily her mother had returned from her weekly visit to her friend in a nursing home in Biloxi. Activity and tension met Kathleen as she came through the double doors. Ashley,

an E.R. nurse who had befriended her when she'd begun working at Hope Memorial six weeks ago, hurried from behind the counter, saw her and came toward her.

"Thank the Lord you are here. We need a hand. One of the nurses got sick and had to go home. Can you help me with a patient? I have two that need attention." Ashley held up several vials of medicines and an IV bag.

"Is one of them the firefighter from the fire on Magnolia Street?" She rushed behind the counter and disposed of her purse in a drawer.

"Yes, he's in room two."

"I'll take him. I just came from the fire. My cousin lives in those apartments. I wanted to check to see how he is."

"I think he'll be all right. I haven't had much time with him yet. Besides him, there was a wreck on Interstate 10. Three injuries. It's been hopping around here. I don't want to even think about how it will be if Naomi hits here."

Neither did Kathleen. As a child, she had gone through two minor hurricanes that had gotten her out of school for a couple of days but, other than that, hadn't changed her life much at all. But Naomi was gathering speed and her winds were increasing.

Ashley thrust an IV bag into her hands. "He needs this."

Her breath caught in her throat, Kathleen took it and started for the second door on the left. "What are his injuries?"

Ashley slanted a look at Kathleen and said, "I think several broken or cracked ribs, possible internal bleeding and smoke inhalation," then entered E.R. unit number four.

When Kathleen went into room two, she stared at the firefighter lying on the bed. His damp black hair was plastered against his head, and there were dark smudges on his tan face. His steely gray eyes locked on her and seized her full attention.

"Pete. What about Pete? Did my partner get out okay?" His raspy voice weakened with each word he uttered.

"Yes, there were no other injuries at the fire." Guilt swamped her at seeing the man she'd sent into the fire hurting, pain reflected in his gaze. The feeling was familiar. Hadn't her husband, Derek, blamed her for causing his stress that led to his heart attack? Shaking away the memory, Kathleen hung an IV drip on the pole and hooked up his line.

"I'll be fine." The firefighter struggled to sit up. His eyes clouded, his face twisting into a frown.

Kathleen rushed forward to restrain the patient's movements. "You need to lie down."

"You're the lady with the boys. Ruth's daughter." He swung one leg to the floor.

"Yes." Kathleen touched his left arm to stop him.

He flinched but proceeded with putting his other leg on the tiles, pushing himself upright. With a moan, he sank to the floor. Kathleen caught him as he went down and lessened his impact with the tiles. Kneeling next to him, she supported his back with her arm.

His head rested against the bottom of the bed. He fixed his weary gaze on her, pain dominating it. "I guess I'm not all right."

"Let's get you back in bed. The doctor will be here soon."

"Yeah, sure." His eyes fluttered and closed.

With her attention fastened on his face, Kathleen settled him on the floor and pressed the emergency call button.

"I thought you left here a couple of hours ago," Mildred Wyman, the floor supervisor, said as Kathleen exited the elevator and walked toward the nurses' station.

"I did, but there was a fire at the Magnolia Street Apartments where my cousin lives." She filled her in on the details. "When I came back to the hospital, Ashley recruited me to help until another nurse was able to come in. She just arrived so I wanted to see if Gideon O'Brien was settled into his room before I go home for sure this time."

“He’s in room 345. He was asleep a little while ago.”

“I’ll peek in. See if he’s up. If he needs anything.”

Kathleen strolled toward the last room on the west wing’s third floor. The memory of the look on Gideon O’Brien’s face wouldn’t leave her thoughts. Clearly he’d been in pain but he tried to deny the seriousness of his injuries. If only she had known that Sally had taken the boys to the park, Gideon O’Brien wouldn’t be hurt.

She rapped on the door. When she didn’t hear anything, she inched it open to see if he was still asleep. The dimly lit room beckoned her. She stepped inside and found him, lying on his bed, his head lolled to the side, his eyes closed.

With the black smudges cleaned from his face, his features fit together into a pleasing picture. High cheekbones, the beginnings of a dark stubble, strong jaw. His features drew her forward until she stood by his side, watching him sleep. She could remember seeing him a couple of times jogging past her mother’s house when she had visited. When she’d told her mother who the injured firefighter was, her mom had said Gideon O’Brien had moved in down the street several years before.

“He sure is a handsome lad. Single, too.” Her mother’s words came back to taunt Kathleen. Before she’d had time to say goodbye to her sons so she could return to the hospital, her mother had ushered her out the door without further questions—which was unusual for her mom. Kathleen knew what was going through her mother’s mind. A nice young man would solve all of Kathleen’s problems. She would discourage her mother of that thought when she went back to pick up her sons.

Her glance ran down Gideon’s length, categorizing his injuries. Two cracked ribs, wrapped but very painful, a broken arm above his left wrist, which would be set tomorrow, and an assortment of bruises. The doctor was still concerned about internal bleeding and wanted to keep a close eye on him overnight.

When her survey returned to his face, it connected with his gaze. Molten silver, framed by long, thick black eyelashes. Captivating. Powerful. Those thoughts sent warmth to her cheeks that she was sure rivaled the fire he’d fought.

Kathleen looked away. “I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“You didn’t,” Gideon said in a scratchy voice. “You were at the fire. In the E.R. Ruth’s daughter.”

She nodded. “I’m so sorry you and Pete went into the building after my children.” She reconnected with him visually. “They were supposed to be there. I had come to pick them up. I didn’t know Sally had taken them to the park and was running late getting them back to her apartment.”

He shifted, gritting his teeth. “I’m glad they’re safe.”

“But—”

“So why are you up here?”

She wanted to say so much more to him, but a closed expression descended over his pain-filled features. “I wanted to make sure you were all right before I left.”

“Define all right.” One corner of his mouth lifted for a second then fell back into a neutral line. He tried to reach for the plastic cup of water on his nightstand and winced.

“Let me get it for you.” Kathleen picked up the cup and held it to his lips so he could take a few sips. The scent of smoke clung to his dark hair. “Is your pain manageable?”

“I’ve had worse.”

“You have?” She’d heard from other patients in the past how much broken or cracked ribs could hurt.

“Afraid so.” Creases in his forehead deepened. Gideon gulped in a breath of air and started coughing. Agony contorted his features, his eyes shiny. “That hurt.”

“Let me see if you can have more pain meds.” Anything to help make him feel better. Then maybe she wouldn’t feel so guilty.

He coughed again. His pale face urged her to hurry. She left his room and hastened to the nurses' station. "Mildred, can Gideon O'Brien have any more of his pain medication?"

"I'll check and take care of it. I was just coming to get you. Your mother called and said you need to get home right away. Something about Jared falling off the side of the house."

"Is he okay?"

"She didn't say. But she sounded shook up."

Kathleen rushed to the elevator, punching the down button. Seconds ticked by so slowly she started for the stairs when the doors swished open. This day was quickly going from bad to worse.

Two minutes later, after retrieving her purse in the E.R., she hastened out to the parking lot while digging for her cell. She slipped behind the steering wheel of her eight-year-old Dodge and punched in her mom's number.

"How's Jared?" In the background Kathleen heard her son crying, and her grip tightened on the phone.

"I don't know. He's holding his arm. He might have broken it."

"I'll be there soon." She flipped her cell closed and pulled out of the parking space.

Ten minutes later Kathleen turned onto Oceanview Drive. Her seven-year-old son was too adventurous for his own good. She guessed he was going from climbing trees to houses now. Next he'd want to try flying off the roof. The thought sent panic through her as she drove into the driveway and parked.

The front door banged open, and Kip came racing out of the two-story stone house. "Mom, Jared climbed up there." He pointed toward the second floor. "You should have seen him. I can't believe he did it."

"Did you dare him?" Kathleen charged up the steps to the porch. At the door Kip's silence prompted her to glance back at him. "You did."

"Aw, Mom. I didn't think he would really do it."

"We'll talk later." Kathleen entered her childhood home and headed toward the kitchen where the crying was coming from.

Kathleen's mother stood over her son, her face leached of color. "I'm so glad you're here." Relief flooded her features. "If you need me, I'll be—"

"Mom, I'll take care of this. Don't worry." Her mom never did well when someone was hurt or even sick. She usually fell apart. She certainly hadn't gotten her desire to be a nurse from her mother.

Jared sat cross-legged on the tile floor, cradling his left arm to his chest, tears streaking down his face. His look whisked away any anger she had at him attempting something dangerous.

Kathleen stooped down, putting her hand on his shoulder. "Honey, where does it hurt?"

He sniffled. "Here." He lifted his arm and pointed at his wrist. "Nana thinks I broke it."

When Kathleen gently probed his injury, Jared yelped and tried to pull away.

"Let's take you to the doctor. You'll need an X-ray."

"Am I gonna get a shot?" Jared's brown eyes grew round and large.

"I don't know."

"I am! I don't want to go." Jared scooted back from her. "I can tough it out."

"If it's broken, it needs to be fixed. It'll hurt a lot more than a shot if you don't get it taken care of."

"Don't be a baby," Kip said behind Kathleen.

She threw a warning look over her shoulder. "I'm sure you have homework. Go do it. Have Nana help you if you need it."

Jared stopped moving away from her. He peered down at his wrist, sniffed and then locked gazes with her. "I'm not a baby." He pushed to his feet, tears swimming in his eyes. Blinking, he ran his right hand across his face, scrubbing away the evidence of his crying. "I'm ready," he announced as if he were being led away to some horrible fate.

While Jared trudged toward the front door, Kathleen spied Kip sitting on the stairs. Before her older son could open his mouth, she followed Jared into the foyer. Jared went outside on the porch, sticking his tongue out at his brother as he left.

Kathleen swept around, her hand resting on her waist. “Don’t forget you and I need to have a talk. This fighting between you two has got to stop.”

“We don’t fight.”

She arched her eyebrow. “Oh, since when?”

“We’re playing.”

Gesturing toward the den, she said, “Homework. I want to see it finished by the time I get back to Nana’s to pick you up.”

Kip leaped to his feet and stomped toward the den, making enough racket to wake up anyone who was within a several house radius.

As Kathleen covered the distance to the den to tell her mother what she was going to do, her mom said, “Glory be. This is great news.”

Kathleen stepped through the entrance into the room. “What is?” she asked, swinging her attention to The Weather Channel on TV. She could certainly use some good news.

Her mom muted the announcer. “Hurricane Naomi has changed course. I think we’re going to miss most of it. Maybe get a touch of the western tip, but not like they had predicted.”

“We don’t have to board up our house now?” Kip sat down at the gaming table with his book bag.

“It’s not looking like we do.” Her mom peered at her. “I know it’s not good news for someone else, but maybe it will peter out before it reaches Florida.”

Kathleen doubted it from the information she had heard. “Mom, I’m taking Jared to the minor emergency clinic. I don’t know when I’ll be back to pick up Kip.”

“Fine. Kip and I will put away all the supplies I bought for the hurricane, especially all those boxes of tape I got for the windows, which I really don’t need. Don’t know why I bought them.”

“I’ll take a box, Nana,” Kip announced while digging into his bag for his homework.

“Sure. Just don’t tape up Jared with it.” Her mother rose and moved toward Kip. “Kathleen, when you get back we’ll order something for dinner. We’re celebrating tonight. No Naomi.”

Kathleen left her mom’s, not feeling the least bit in the mood to celebrate anything—even the fact the town would avoid Naomi. Her cousin’s apartment burned today. She could have lost Sally and her sons. A firefighter went into a burning building because of her insistence her family was still inside.

Her life continued to come apart at the seams, starting with the last year of her marriage to Derek. She had wanted coming home to be a new start but hadn’t counted on her sons’ rebellion against moving to Hope. There was no going back to Denver, however. She couldn’t afford to live there, financially or emotionally.

Chapter Two

The crashing sounds of the falling timbers and the crackling of the fire haunted Gideon when he tried to sleep at the hospital. He remembered being put into the ambulance and glancing at the Magnolia Street Apartments as the structure caved in on itself, flames shooting upward as the blaze rampaged through it.

The noises around him amplified in volume. The antiseptic smell of the hospital overwhelmed him. Sweat popped out on his forehead. His breathing became shallow, his throat raw.

Finally, Gideon inhaled a deeper breath and regretted it the second he did. A sharp pain pierced through his chest. He clenched his jaw and rode the wave until it subsided to a throbbing ache. In spite of how he felt, restlessness churned through him. Scanning the hospital room, he resisted the impulse to walk away. The doctor should be here within a few hours to give him the okay to leave.

But as he stared at the clock on the wall across from his bed, the second hand seemed to be moving in slow motion.

The sound of the door opening lured his attention away from watching time inch forward. Kathleen Hart—last night he'd finally remembered she'd told him her name at the fire—entered his room. Her long blond hair pulled back in a ponytail emphasized her delicate features—large, blue eyes like the Gulf off the shores of Hope, lips with a rosy tint that wasn't from lipstick, and two dimples in her cheeks as she smiled at him.

Dressed in blue scrubs, she approached his bed carrying a little plastic cup with his meds. "How are you doing today?"

"Well enough to go home." He held out his right palm for his pills.

"Dr. Adams should be here soon. He does rounds after lunch." Dark shadows under her eyes attested to not enough rest.

He recalled her apology and hoped what had happened at the fire hadn't caused her a sleepless night. "Where did you go yesterday? Nurse Ratched brought me my meds. She wouldn't tell me what happened to you."

"I won't tell Mildred you called her that."

He grinned. "She's definitely a no-nonsense nurse. I'm glad you came back today."

"I work on this floor. I had to."

"Ouch. I think my ego was just wounded."

"Only think?" A twinkle danced briefly in her tired eyes.

The shadow in her gaze tugged at him. He wanted to prolong the light tone of the conversation, but he needed her to understand how he felt. His injuries weren't her fault. "You were upset yesterday. Are you all right today?"

"The more important question is, are you?"

"I will be in time."

"You shouldn't be here right now. If only I had waited a little..." Her voice faded into silence, and she glanced away, swallowing hard.

"I would rather err on the side of caution than have someone trapped in a burning building. What I did yesterday is part of my job. Occasionally we go into a fire looking for a person who isn't there. It happens. You are not to blame." He would never forget the firefighters who had rescued him and his younger brother from a fire when he was eight. If they hadn't come into his burning house, he and Zach wouldn't be alive today. "No more guilt over yesterday. I'm glad your sons are safe."

With her gaze still averted, she nodded.

He wasn't totally convinced she wasn't blaming herself anymore, not if the furrowed forehead and the darkening of the blue in her eyes were any indication. "I've been hurt before. I won't let a few cracked ribs and a broken arm get me down."

She swiveled her attention back to him, her expression evening out, but the dark circles under her eyes were still there. "Tell that to my son. He broke a bone in his wrist yesterday after I took him to his grandmother's while I came to the hospital. That's where I had to go. He told me at the doctor's office that he wanted to see the hurricane coming in the Gulf. He thought the view would be better from the roof."

"I heard it turned toward Florida. We might get some high tides and rain, but hopefully that will be all." He shifted in the bed and caused another shaft of pain to constrict his breath, but he tried to keep from flinching. He didn't succeed.

"Are you all right?" The wrinkled forehead returned with a slight tensing.

"Just a twinge. Nothing that won't go away with time. So how did he get to the roof? Ladder?"

"That would have been safer. But he climbed the side of the house on a dare from his older brother. He didn't make it. He fell while trying to hoist himself onto the roof."

Gideon whistled. “You’ve got a daredevil on your hands. What did your husband say about it?” The second he asked the question he wanted to snatch it back. He didn’t see a wedding ring on her left hand, but there was paler skin where one would have been. He couldn’t remember Ruth saying anything to him about her son-in-law, but then he and Ruth were only passing acquaintances on Oceanview Drive.

“Derek died last year.”

“I’m so sorry. I...” He didn’t know what else to say.

“Is there anything I can do for you before I leave?” A professional facade fell into place as she checked his IV drip.

He could respect that she wanted to shut down the subject of her husband. Losing a loved one was difficult. Although he had never been married, he’d lost too many people in his life not to feel a kinship with her.

He grinned, wanting to see the light back in her eyes. “Other than get me out of here, no.”

“Sorry, but Dr. Adams might take exception to that. Just as soon as he signs your discharge papers, you can escape.”

“A hospital isn’t my favorite place.” Again he was reminded of his parents’ deaths. His father had died in the fire, but his mother with third degree burns had lingered for a day in the hospital. He had only been able to say goodbye to her at the end when she was unconscious. He would never forget that last time he saw her.

“It usually isn’t for most people.” Her smile reappeared on her face, a sparkle shining in her eyes—making him forget where he was for a moment. “If you need anything, use your call button.”

He watched her saunter out of his room. Occasionally he and Ruth would talk when they saw each other on the street, but with his crazy schedule, it wasn’t often. She had mentioned she had only one child, and then this August she had talked about her daughter returning home in September to live in Hope. Other than Ruth being excited her two grandsons would be close, she hadn’t gone into details about the move.

From his and Kathleen’s few exchanges, he had sensed a deep hurt and now that he knew about her husband dying, he figured that must be why. One more reason he didn’t get too involved in people’s lives. He found after being shuffled between one foster family and another that it was safer to stay emotionally apart from others. Much safer.

After passing out the medication to her patients, Kathleen came back to the nurses’ station to write in their charts. Dr. Adams nodded to her as he headed down the hall toward Gideon’s room. She smiled, thinking about how the man would finally be able to leave. Even with his injuries, he had exuded restlessness. When he had told her about a hospital not being one of his favorite places, she’d heard pain behind the words though he’d no doubt tried to hide it.

Although he had reassured her she wasn’t at fault for his being hurt, she had been married to a man who had blamed her for all his woes. Even with some of his last words to her right before he slipped away after having a massive heart attack at the age of thirty-five, he’d blamed her for the stress he’d lived under. No matter how much she told herself that she hadn’t wanted him to take all the money out of their savings for Kip and Jared’s college fund to invest in the stock market in risky companies, it didn’t ease the guilt. In fact, she hadn’t even known about it until after his death. The stocks hadn’t done what her husband had dreamed they would. In fact, when he’d had his heart attack, she had discovered Derek had put the family thirty thousand dollars into debt and just that day had gotten notification the bank was foreclosing on their house if the mortgage wasn’t paid. She’d tried to do that, but it hadn’t been enough.

She shook the past from her mind. Coming to Hope was a fresh start, even if she still had twenty-eight thousand dollars to pay back. When she had lived here, she had flourished in the small-town feel and kindness of others. She desperately needed that now.

An orderly went by her desk and entered Gideon's room. Not long after that she saw Gideon appear in the hallway, dressed to leave, sitting in a wheelchair.

At the nurses' station he had the orderly stop. "Thank everyone for me for their excellent but brief care," he told her with a smile.

"I see Nate is helping break you out of here."

"Yep. I was getting ready to walk out of the hospital when he showed up."

"Oh, we cannot have that. Against Hope Memorial's policy," she said in dead seriousness, but the second the words came out she chuckled. "You aren't the first who has threatened that."

He motioned her to bend down closer to him, then he whispered, "Now my only complaint is that I would have liked a prettier escort. Too bad you're busy." Gideon winked and flashed her a grin before the orderly wheeled him toward the elevator.

Kathleen touched her cheek. It felt hot beneath her fingertips. She hadn't blushed in years and this was the second time since meeting Gideon. The injured firefighter was charming, but that was all he was. She didn't have the emotional energy to get involved with anyone, even if she felt guilty for his injuries. Raising her sons and slowly paying off the mountain of bills her husband had left her were enough to deal with.

Her mother kept telling her to turn it over to the Lord. She used to, but in the past two years she hadn't seen any evidence of the Lord in her life. Her prayers for help had gone unanswered. She was still in debt. Her sons desperately needed a man's influence. They hated being in Hope. They fought all the time. Then to top it all off, she felt responsible for Gideon's injuries, no matter what he said.

Which means I'll make sure he's comfortable while he's recuperating at home. That's the least I can do. Then maybe I won't feel so bad when I see him in a cast and wincing from pain.

Kathleen came into the house by the back door, thankful that her car had made it at least to her mom's, although she'd had doubts several blocks away when it died on her yet again. After the third time cranking the engine, it turned over and started.

Her mother told her to use her kitchen to make Gideon something to eat, then she could just walk down a few houses and give it to him. This was something Kathleen could do for him. She'd grown up with neighbors helping neighbors. That was part of Hope's charm. With one arm in the cast it would be hard for Gideon at first learning to do things one-handed. He didn't need to worry about making something to eat.

Kathleen set the bag of food she'd gotten to make her Mexican chicken dish on the counter. After emptying the sack, she placed the pieces of chicken in water to cook. Then she went in search of her sons to see what kind of homework they had. When her mother didn't go see her friend in Biloxi, she watched Jared and Kip after school until Kathleen got off work and could pick them up. And when her mother couldn't watch her sons, Sally would fill in, no charge. That was a huge help to her because she couldn't afford to pay childcare along with everything else to raise two growing boys.

"Mom, do you know where Jared and Kip are?" Kathleen asked when she entered the den where her mother was watching The Weather Channel.

She peered toward Kathleen. "I didn't hear you come in. Been glued to the T.V. I'm charting the progress of Naomi even if it is going to miss us."

Kathleen wasn't surprised by that fact. Her mom had done that for years. She had a stack of charts of past hurricanes that had come into the Gulf. "I'm going to fix some Mexican chicken for us and take some to Gideon O'Brien down the street like I mentioned to you."

"I'm sure he'll enjoy that. He seems quite lonely to me."

Before her mother had her fixed up on a date with Gideon, Kathleen asked, "Where are the boys? They need to get their homework done. After dinner they are useless. I can't get much out of them then as far as schoolwork."

"They said something about riding those old bikes I had in the garage. I told them they could but not to go farther than this block and not to ride in the streets."

Kathleen glimpsed the time on the clock above the mantel. "It's getting late. I'd better round them up and see where they stand with their homework."

"We'll need to pray for the people in Panama City." Her mother listened to the reporter on the T.V. give the latest coordinates of the hurricane and jotted them down. "I'm sure you'll see the boys if you go outside and look."

That was assuming her sons obeyed their grandmother when she babysat them. Lately there was no guarantee they would. Kathleen made her way toward the front door. Outside on the lawn she looked to the left and saw no one. Then she peered toward the right and thought she saw a bike that was like the one she'd ridden as a child lying on the sidewalk three houses down where Gideon lived.

She remembered Kip's questions the night before about the firefighter who had been hurt in the Magnolia Street Apartments fire. He had wanted to know if he would be all right. Who was he? Could he and Jared make get-well cards for him? She'd kissed her boys good-night and told them she would talk to them today when she got home from work.

She charged down the street. Knowing them, they had taken matters into their own hands without waiting to discuss it with her.

At Gideon's one-story white house with a neat yard, she skirted around both of her mom's old bikes and headed straight for the front door. After ringing the bell, she waited, trying to temper her anger that Kip and Jared would disturb a man recovering from some painful injuries.

Her older son opened the door. "Hey, Mom. Come in."

"No, I think you all have stayed long enough. You and Jared need to come back to Nana's. You're both supposed to have your homework finished by dinner." Haven't we done enough to disrupt this man's life?

"Aw, Mom, Gideon was telling us about some of the rescues he's done."

"Why are you answering his door?" She swung open the screen, the one standing between her and Kip.

"Gideon doesn't move too fast. I told him I'd get it."

Kathleen glanced over her son's shoulder at the slow-moving firefighter making his way toward them with a small white dog with a curly tail. His stiff movements coupled with the sight of his cast only reinforced why the man was in the pain he was.

"Hello, Kathleen. Your sons came over to give me their get-well cards. I asked them to stay if it was okay with you. They assured me it was." Gideon's gaze swept from Kip to Jared, who had joined them in the foyer.

Her younger son poked his head around Gideon. "He has a cast just like me. Isn't that neat? We're twins."

"And that is Butch. He's so sweet," Kip added, pointing to the dog near Gideon.

"It's time for you two to come back to Nana's and get your homework done."

"Mooomm, can't we stay for a while longer?" Kip's mouth formed his classic pout that he had stood in front of the mirror one day to perfect.

"Another time, guys. This is a school night, and you've got work to do." Gideon tousled Jared's, then Kip's hair.

Jared giggled then scooted out the front door.

But Kip remained where he was standing. "Will you tell us some more stories about being a firefighter?"

"Well, sure, anytime it's all right with your mother." Gideon flashed her a grin that melted any irritation she had toward her sons for bothering the man.

"Great. Call if you need us to do anything for you. After school we stay with Nana until Mom comes to pick us up." Kip raced past Kathleen and stamped down the porch steps.

While her sons grabbed their bikes and rode them toward her mother's house, Kathleen faced Gideon. "I know how tired you must be. Your body has gone through a trauma and needs rest, not my sons bothering you. I'm sorry—"

He held up his palm to still her words. "I enjoyed their visit. I was resting on the couch, getting more bored by the second when they came and rescued me from my boredom. I hope you'll let them come again."

She completely surrendered to the kindness in his eyes. Her legs grew weak, and she clutched the door frame to steady herself. "Only as long as they don't pester you." The pale cast to his skin spoke of the strain of standing. "Let me help you back to that couch."

He shook his head. "As much as I'd like a pretty lady to hold me, I can make my own way there."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Do you need to watch to make sure I don't falter halfway there?"

She grinned. "I'll take your word for it. Besides, I need to get home and make you a dinner, which I plan to bring you if that's okay with you."

"Normally I would jump at the chance to have someone fix me dinner, but you should see my refrigerator. There is nothing like good ole Southern hospitality. I don't think I'll be able to eat half the dishes stuffed in it. The ladies at my church decided they would stock it for me, so I wouldn't have to worry about what to eat for the next week. Well, more like several."

"Then I'll wait until later when you've run out of their dishes. I know it takes a while for ribs to heal, and they can be painful."

"Like I said, I don't usually turn down a home-cooked meal, so you'll get no argument from me. When it's my time to cook at the fire station, I've actually heard some groans from the other firefighters."

She chuckled. "If you need anything, I only live two blocks away. Down the hill and around the corner."

"On Bayview Avenue?"

"Yeah, the yellow cottage. One of Mom's rentals. Good night." Which was the main reason she could save a little money to pay off her debt. Her mother didn't charge her rent, but Kathleen had insisted on paying all the utilities and other bills connected to the house.

He stood in his doorway with his dog next to him as she descended the porch steps. She felt his gaze on her the whole way down his sidewalk. Heat flared into her cheeks. She couldn't resist glancing over her shoulder, only to find him staring at her, as she thought. He nodded, then swung his door closed.

Kathleen hurried to the foyer to answer the door. When she opened it, her breath caught for a few seconds. Although she'd found herself thinking about Gideon several times since she'd seen him yesterday, she hadn't thought she would see him this soon. "This is a surprise. What brings you by here?"

He lifted two large pizza boxes. "I came bearing dinner. I couldn't stand staying in my home another moment. I immediately thought of you and your sons. You were kind to want to fix me dinner. I thought I would beat you to the punch. I called earlier to see if y'all would be home and Kip said yes. I asked him if you had started dinner. He said you had to run next door and were behind schedule." He handed her the boxes. "He was supposed to tell you I was bringing dinner."

"A minor detail he forgot. I wondered why he kept coming up with things I had to do before starting dinner. You didn't have to bring pizza. I owe you a dinner, not the other way around. Remember?"

"I'm not used to inactivity. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision. I figured the boys would like pizza."

She smiled. "Pizza and just about every other junk food there is." Stepping to the side, Kathleen opened the door wider. "Come on in."

As Gideon entered the house, one corner of his mouth hiked up. “I was hoping you wouldn’t send me home with all this pizza.”

“You may change your mind after being here a while.” She started for the kitchen at the back of the house. “I should warn you. My sons have been fighting most of the day. At the moment they are in time-out. And we’ve only been home an hour.”

“Sounds like a few boys I have in my youth group at church.”

“Youth group?”

“I help out when I can with the group for eight- to twelve-year-olds. When I’m not working, we sometimes play a game or two of basketball in the evening at the park near the Hope Community Church. There are several courts there. By the time they go home, they’re too exhausted to fight each other. A couple of the dads have joined our little games, too.”

“Is that Broussard Park on the Point?”

“Yeah. I like to run there sometimes.”

Memories intruded into her mind. Memories of happier times before her father had been killed in an accident at the shipyard. “When I was a child, my family used to go to the Point to watch the sun set and have a picnic dinner.”

“Since I came here, I’ve seen some beautiful sunsets on the Point.”

Kathleen went into the kitchen with Gideon following close behind her. After placing the boxes on the table, she peered over her shoulder at him. “Where are you from?”

“New Orleans, originally. I’ve been here for five years.”

“How long have you been a firefighter?”

“Fifteen years.”

“Why did you decide to become one?”

He opened his mouth but a few seconds later snapped it closed. A nerve in his jaw twitched. Claspings his hands so tightly his knuckles whitened, he stared straight ahead at a spot over her shoulder. “Someone needs to fight fires.”

Behind what he’d said there was a wealth of words left unspoken, but his stiff posture and steely expression told her the subject was off-limits. What was really behind him being a firefighter? On the surface he seemed open and friendly, but deep down she felt his need for privacy as though he were used to being alone and liked it that way. She could respect his need for that.

She’d felt the same way when she’d discovered the extent of Derek’s debt and betrayal after he died. Leaving her to deal with the aftermath. Alone. So yes, she was used to dealing with her problems alone.

For a long moment an uncomfortable silence vibrated in the air between them.

Gideon cleared his throat. “I’ve filled in as a paramedic when they’ve needed me. I’m surprised I haven’t met you before at the hospital.”

Covering the distance to the refrigerator, she took out a carton of milk and a pitcher of iced tea. “That’s because I started working at Hope Memorial Hospital a little over six weeks ago. Knowing your aversion to a hospital, I doubt you hung around once you delivered your patients to the E.R.”

“Ah, you know me too well. Where did you move from?”

“Denver, Colorado.” Kathleen poured milk into two large glasses.

“Can I help you set the table or something?”

“No, I’ve got this. You brought the dinner. That’s enough, and my sons will be ecstatic they aren’t having what I planned tonight—tuna casserole.”

“I ran into your mother as I was leaving my house. She asked me where I was going when I should be resting. I told her I was feeling better and decided to take dinner to you and the boys. She gave her stamp of approval.”

I’m sure she did. Her mother was a romantic at heart and had encouraged Kathleen to start dating almost immediately after returning home. “She goes out every Thursday night with Mildred.”

“Not Nurse Ratched?”

“The one and the same.”

Gideon rubbed the back of his neck, his forehead creased. “She’s a friend of the family?”

“Yes.”

“That will teach me to keep my mouth shut.”

“She comes across tough and no-nonsense, but she really has a very loving heart. That is, once you get to know her.” Kathleen pressed her lips together to keep from smiling at the sheepish look on his face. “I tell you what. You can get the plates down from that cabinet and napkins from that drawer—” she pointed to the locations “—and I’ll go get the boys before this pizza gets cold.”

As she strolled from the kitchen, the sensation that he was staring at her sent a tingling wave through her. Goose bumps rose on her arms. She quickened her pace down the hallway to Jared and Kip’s room. She’d had her younger son go into the bedroom the boys shared while Kip was in hers. Time-out in the same room only escalated their skirmishes, which had been growing worse since they’d moved to Hope.

When she opened the door to the boys’ bedroom, Jared sat on his twin bed, chunking paper wads into the trashcan. A whole notebook, almost gone, littered the floor.

“Jared!”

He glanced at her, grinned and said, “Watch me, Mom.” He tore the last sheet from the pad and scrunched it up into a ball, then tossed it toward the basket. It bounced off the rim and dropped into the pile of other missed shots. He frowned. “Maybe I should move it closer.”

“No, maybe you should clean this mess up and then come to dinner. We’re having pizza.”

“Not tuna? Yay!” He scooted off the bed, taking half the covers with him. “The only reason I didn’t make many baskets was cause I can’t use both arms.”

“Then I would refrain from climbing houses.”

He bent over and picked up the first wad, frowning at his cast on his left arm. “This is gonna take forever.”

“You should have thought about that before you decided to make the mess.” She turned away before he saw her smile. Natural consequences were great teachers, but her son could have broken something much worse than his wrist.

Across the hall, she found Kip at the door listening to her and Jared. She peeked into her room to make sure he hadn’t left a similar mess.

He looked up at her with those big brown eyes and long eyelashes and said sweetly, “I’m sorry I fought with Jared, but he was bugging me. I had to do something to shut him up.”

“Getting into a wrestling match isn’t an option. Dinner is ready.”

“I heard the doorbell. Did Gideon come with pizzas?”

“Yes.”

“Sweet.” Kip hurried ahead of her toward the kitchen.

“Next time, young man, warn me when someone is coming over, especially with dinner.”

Jared came out of his room and followed behind Kathleen. “Why did he bring pizza?”

Kathleen waited for Jared, cradling his cast to his chest. “To see you all.”

“Really? Us?”

“I think he enjoyed your visit yesterday. He thought you and Kip might enjoy pizza.”

“Kip talked his ear off. I hardly got to say anything. He was constantly asking him about what a firefighter did.”

When she and Jared entered the kitchen, Kip was already seated at his place with three pieces of pizza with all the toppings on it. “I’m starved, Mom.”

“We’re coming.” Her gaze latched on to Gideon standing by the counter. She crossed to the table and took a seat. Gideon moved behind her and helped her scoot her chair forward before he sat. She couldn’t remember the last time a man had done that for her.

After Jared plopped down in the last place between Gideon and Kip, Gideon looked at each boy. “I remember Kip mentioning how much he loved pizza yesterday. Earlier that sounded good to me, so I thought I would share some with y’all.”

“Pizza is okay.” Jared dug into the box nearest him and pulled out four pieces, piling them on his plate.

“Hold it. You never eat that many.” Kathleen clasped her hands into fists in her lap. “Take one at a time.”

“Kip has three pieces,” Jared whined.

“The same goes for him, too.” Kathleen pinned her older son with a stare that told him to behave.

“Sorry.” Kip began to put his slices back.

“Leave them. You’ve already put them on your plate, but next time one piece at a time. I expect you two to eat every last bite of what you have on your plate.” Lord, give me patience. “Remember your manners. We have a guest tonight.”

Both of her sons hung their heads but exchanged narrow-eyed glances.

“Jared, it’s your turn to say the blessing.” Kathleen uncurled her hands.

“Bless this food. Amen.” Jared jerked up his head, grabbed his first piece and took a big bite.

When Gideon reached for a slice of Canadian Bacon, her favorite, Jared’s gaze fixed on his cast on his left arm that came down to his wrist but allowed him the use of his hand.

“No one has signed your cast,” he said with a full mouth of food. Kathleen gave him the look, and Jared immediately chewed his pizza and swallowed before adding, “I’ve got most of my friends to sign mine at school. Annie wanted to, but I wouldn’t let her.” He held up his arm as though he had a trophy in his grasp.

“Why not?” Gideon poured some iced tea into his glass.

“A girl? No way. I would never hear the end of it.” Jared’s mouth pinched together, and he tilted his head in a thoughtful look. “Can you work with that cast? I’m having trouble doing things with mine.”

A fleeting frown flitted across Gideon’s features. “Not where I want to be. I’ll be stuck behind a desk at headquarters until this comes off.”

“I have to wear mine for six weeks. How about you?”

“Seven or eight weeks.”

“Bummer,” Kip said, pulling Gideon’s attention to him. “That sounds boring.”

“Yep. But I’m not much use to the team with only one arm fully functioning. That’s why it’s important to be as careful as you can, so you don’t end up in a situation like this.” Gideon tapped his cast. “Not fun.”

“Can I sign your cast? I want to be the first.” Kip jumped up and headed for the desk to retrieve a red marker.

“Sure. I noticed it was a little bare after seeing yours, Jared.”

“Can I sign yours, too? I’ll let you do mine.”

Kathleen relaxed back against the chair while the boys wrote their names on Gideon’s cast. As he searched Jared’s cast for a blank space to put his signature, her throat tightened. Lately her two sons hadn’t done anything together without launching into a fight. When Kip finally spotted a place for Gideon to scribble his name, Kathleen lowered her head and blinked away the moisture in her eyes. How could she let something as simple as this get to her?

Chapter Three

Later that evening, with darkness beyond the porch light, Kathleen drew in a deep breath of the cool air with a salty tang to it. The Gulf of Mexico was one block away. She could almost hear the waves crashing against the shore. When she got a chance, she loved to run on the beach early in the morning before the town woke up. It had become her haven since she’d come back to Hope.

Still in her scrubs from work, she rubbed her hands up and down her arms. “It’s starting to finally feel like fall some. I’d gotten used to having four seasons in Colorado.”

Gideon came up behind her and leaned back on the railing. “I’m going to hate seeing October end next week. It’s one of my favorite months. In the middle of football season. Not as oppressively hot as in the summer. But I’ll take that over cold weather any day. I’m a New Orleans native—hot and muggy is what I’m used to.”

“Jared and Kip won’t like the fact it rarely snows here. When I was growing up in Hope, it only did once. An inch. Shut down the whole town for a day until it melted.”

“Do they know that?”

“I’m not telling them.”

The sound of his chuckle filled the space between them, warming Kathleen. His gaze roamed over her features and for a few seconds wiped all thoughts from her mind, except the man who had shared a dinner with them and entertained her sons with stories about his job. Kip had hung on every word Gideon had said. Even Jared had listened until he couldn’t sit still any longer. He’d lasted fifteen minutes, five minutes longer than usual.

“Thanks for bringing the pizzas over. You’re a big hit with my sons.”

“They’re good kids.”

She opened her mouth to agree with him when she heard a scream then, “Mom!”

She rushed into the house and hurried down the hallway, Gideon right behind her. Past calamities caused by her sons zipped through her thoughts. Jared ran out of his bedroom with Kip on his heels. Her older son tackled his brother to the floor.

“You’re dead meat. How many times do I have to tell you not to touch my stuff?” Kip sat on Jared’s chest, pinning his brother’s arms to the carpet with his knees. He raised his hands and balled them.

“Kip, get off Jared.”

Kip flashed her a scowl, his fists still hovering over Jared’s face. “He tore up my notebook. I had my homework in it for school tomorrow.”

Kathleen settled her hand on Kip’s shoulder. “I’ll take it from here.”

“But, Mom, I’ve got to do my homework over. It’s all torn up. It was hard. I hate math, and now I’ve got to figure it all out again.”

Gideon stepped into Kip’s line of vision. “You know I’m pretty good with math. I’ll help you while your mom and Jared have a talk.”

Kip’s eyes grew round. “You will?”

Gideon nodded.

“I’ll get my book. There’s paper in the desk in the kitchen.” Kip bounced once on his brother’s stomach, which produced a grunt from Jared, then stood.

Scrambling to his feet, Jared grimaced, holding his middle. “Mom, did you see him? He hurt me. On purpose.”

Kathleen waited to answer him until Kip and Gideon disappeared down the hallway, then she whirled to face Jared. “You used your brother’s school notebook to make paper wads?”

He suddenly found a spot on the floor by his feet extremely interesting. Scuffing his tennis shoe against the carpet, he murmured, “He hadn’t finished his homework. He only had four problems done. He’d told Nana he had done more than he had after school.”

“That’s not the point. You have to respect your brother’s things.”

Jared lifted his head. “I want my own room like I had in Colorado. I hate sharing with him. He’s always bothering my stuff. He always has to be first. He always has to have the last word.”

“That isn’t going to happen anytime soon.”

“Why did we move here? I hate this place. I miss my friends.” Tears glistening in his eyes, he curled his fingers into tight balls, his face screwed up into a frown.

“I had to sell our house in Colorado. We needed a place to live. I grew up here, and I thought you all would enjoy it like I did.”

The frown deepened into a scowl. “You’re a girl. All my friends are back home. Not here.”

“You’ve got friends. How about Charlie down the street? How about the kids who signed your cast?”

A teardrop shone on his eyelash then rolled down his cheek. He knuckled it away. “It’s not the same.” He spun on his heel and raced into his room, throwing himself on his bed and burying his face in his pillow.

After entering, Kathleen sat next to her son and laid her hand on his arm. “Honey, I know this house is small, but it’s all I can afford. One day we’ll get to move to a bigger place.”

Jared popped back up, his eyes flaring wide in hope. “Back home?”

“No. We’re staying in Hope. I need my family around me.”

“They can come visit. I’ll even let Nana have my room when she does and share with Kip.”

“Honey, that’s not possible.”

Jared turned his back on her and hugged his pillow to his chest. “You don’t care about what I want. We were fine where we were.”

Coming to Hope hadn’t been an easy decision. She’d hated asking for help, but she’d had no choice. She’d needed a support system and a means to save money to pay off the debts. “I’ll always care, but we had to move. The cost of living was too high in Colorado.”

Still facing away from her, he murmured, “Cost of living?”

“How much it takes to pay for things you need.”

“I don’t have to have ice cream, and you can forget I want a new bike for Christmas. The one at Nana’s is just fine, even if it’s a girl’s.” He twisted toward her. “And I can wear Kip’s clothes when he can’t anymore. Can we move back?”

“As much as I appreciate your offers, we still can’t move back to Denver. This is our home now.”

The frown returned, and he faced away from her. “You never listen to me. Only Kip.”

“One day you’ll understand there are some things that can’t be changed no matter how much you want otherwise.” Something she had learned painfully the past couple of years. She sat for a few more minutes, but when Jared didn’t say anything else, she pushed to her feet. “You need to apologize to your brother. If you bother his things anymore, you’ll be grounded next time. Understand?”

“Yeah, you love him more than me.”

She leaned over and kissed the side of his head. “I love you both the same. Don’t forget to tell your brother you’re sorry.”

Jared scrubbed her kiss away and put his pillow over his head.

Kathleen walked from the bedroom, releasing a long sigh. Lord, I need help.

With his tongue sticking out the side of his mouth, Kip wrote down the answer and waited to see if Gideon said it was right. When he did, Kip beamed. “Thanks, Gideon, I think I get this long division now.”

“I’m glad. I used to struggle with math until one year I had this teacher who I connected with. I finally understood what I was supposed to do. After that, math has come easy to me.”

“I’ve only got one more problem. I’ve never done my homework this fast.”

Gideon watched him finish his math sheet. When the hairs on his nape stood up, he knew that Kathleen had come into the kitchen. He felt her gaze on him and straightened his shoulders, resisting the urge to peer back at her. He dated women all the time, but none of them had caught his attention like she had.

Deep down he sensed a connection as if she knew what it was to be hurt deeply and had held herself back from others because of that. Like him. Was that why he’d gotten the bright idea to bring dinner to her tonight?

No, it was her sons. When he'd talked to them there was something that reminded him of his younger brother and him growing up in foster homes—until one day a family had adopted Zach, leaving Gideon alone. It was obvious she needed help with her sons, and for the next seven weeks or so, he would have more time on his hands than usual while he recovered from his injuries and finally could return to full duty.

He pivoted toward her, transfixed by the soft blue of her eyes. Run. The one word set off an alarm bell in his mind. His chest constricted.

"Is this right, Gideon?"

In the distance he heard Kip speaking to him, but Gideon couldn't tear his eyes from Kathleen, her delicate features forming a beautiful picture that could haunt him if he allowed her to get too close. But he wouldn't do that.

Run. Now.

He wrenched his gaze away and glanced down at the last problem. "Sure. You did great. I'd better be going. I imagine you need to go to bed early with school tomorrow, and I have a lot to do in the morning. I..." He clamped his jaws closed before he made a fool of himself with his ramblings.

"I'm going to show Gideon out, Kip. You stay in here. Do not go to your bedroom until I get back."

"Can I have some ice cream? I finished my homework, and it's all correct. Gideon said so."

"One small bowl."

As Kip jumped up and went to the refrigerator, Kathleen swung around and exited the kitchen.

"See you soon, sport. I'll see about that tour of the station." Gideon left and found Kathleen in the foyer, waiting for him. "I told Kip I'll arrange a tour of Station Two for him—for all of you. But only if you say it's okay."

"He wants to be a firefighter or a doctor. He hasn't made up his mind."

"I'd say he has a few years to do that. How about Jared?"

She shrugged. "He hasn't said anything. But the way he's going, I could see him being a test pilot or some other kind of job that is daring. Danger means nothing to him while I'm getting gray hairs at the young age of thirty-two."

"How about professional mountain climber?"

"Please don't mention that. Sides of houses are enough for me," she said with a laugh.

He liked seeing her two dimples appear in her cheeks when she laughed. Her eyes lit with a bright gleam that transformed her. "I enjoyed tonight. Of course, I'm not sure what I'm going to do until they allow me to work behind the desk at headquarters."

"Read a good book."

"I'm more an action kind of guy. Reading is too sedate for me. I tried today to circumvent procedures by reporting for desk duty and was told by the chief in no uncertain terms to stay away until I get the go-ahead from the doc. That should be in three days."

"Does that mean your ribs aren't hurting? That's quick."

"I didn't say that." As he stood in the foyer, his cracked ribs were protesting all the activity he'd done that day, but he wasn't going to let that stop him.

She shook her head. "Men. You and Jared are too much alike. I wouldn't be surprised if he tried climbing the house again with his cast on."

He crossed to the door and opened it. "I wouldn't be surprised, either."

"I was hoping you would disagree with me." Kathleen came out onto the porch. "Now every time the phone rings, I'll wonder what else he has gotten himself into."

"My little brother used to be the same way. I had to get him out of a lot of scrapes."

"Does he live here? New Orleans?"

This was the reason he didn't like to talk about himself. So often it led to questions he didn't want to answer. "I haven't seen him since he was four."

The front door swung open and Kip, with his eyes huge, thrust the phone into Kathleen's hands. "It's Nana. She says Hurricane Naomi has made an almost one-hundred-eighty-degree turn and picked up speed—lots of speed—and is heading straight for Hope. It should be here by tomorrow night."

Chapter Four

Kathleen clutched the phone with a trembling hand, hoping somehow Kip hadn't heard her mother right. "Mom, what's going on?"

"Exactly what Kip told you. The hurricane is coming right for us. It has picked up speed. This time I don't think we're going to dodge the bullet."

Kathleen's eyes closed, and she drew in a deep, fortifying breath. "He said tomorrow night—early or late?"

"It will start by early evening, and the eye should be going over us right after midnight if it continues to move at the same speed it is now."

"I guess you don't have to put up those supplies after all. We'll take care of this house and come over to help you after that."

Kathleen hung up and passed the phone to Kip. "You and your brother need to go to bed. First thing tomorrow, we'll have to board and tape up this house then help Nana."

Kip's eyes widened. "How bad will it be?"

Gideon stepped forward. "A lot of wind and rain."

"Like a bad thunderstorm?" Her son gripped the phone tighter.

Gideon settled his hand on Kip's shoulder. "Yeah. You'll be okay."

"Does this mean we don't have school tomorrow?"

"Yes. We'll be busy getting ready as will everyone else." Kathleen opened the screen door.

"Cool. Wait till Jared hears this."

"I don't want any more fighting between you and Jared. We have other things to deal with right now. Okay?"

Kip spun around and charged back into the house, saying, "Yes."

Turning to face Gideon, she let the screen door bang closed. "The last time I was in a hurricane was over twenty years ago. I've forgotten what to do. I remember Mom filling the bathtub and other containers with water. Getting candles, lanterns, batteries for a radio and flashlights..." With memories racing through her mind, it went blank.

"Stock up on food you don't have to refrigerate. We will most likely lose our electricity. Bring indoors everything that can be picked up by high winds. Since this house doesn't have hurricane shutters, tape or board the windows. Then pray. Are you going to stay here?"

"I don't know. I might go to Mom's."

"I think that would be better. If there is a big storm surge, this house could be flooded. It's nearer the beach than your mom's."

"Then that's where we'll be."

Gideon stared down at his cast. "If it wasn't for this, I'd be at the fire station." Frustration edged his voice.

"I'm on the B team at the hospital. I work post-hurricane. I'll contact work tomorrow morning and see when they want me to come in. There's so much to be done. This house isn't prepared."

He took her hand. "Get a good night's sleep, and I'll come over and help tomorrow morning first thing."

"Only if you'll let me help you."

"I have hurricane shutters, which will cut down on what I have to do. Let's get your house and your mom's prepared first. There shouldn't be too much to do with mine."

"I'll have breakfast ready at 6:30. At least let me feed you before you work."

He squeezed her hand then dropped it and turned toward the steps. "You've got yourself a date. See you at 6:30."

Kathleen stood on her porch and watched him stroll down her sidewalk, hop into his Jeep and leave. As his taillights disappeared down the street, she peered up at the sky. Roiling clouds obscured the moon. It had begun.

The next morning, using the electric screwdriver that Gideon brought, Kathleen secured a large board over the picture window in the living room while Gideon held it in place for her. When she finished with the last screw, she descended the ladder and stepped back. “I hope that will hold.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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