

A close-up photograph of a man and a woman. The man, on the left, is wearing a light-colored straw hat with a dark band and has a serious expression. The woman, on the right, has blonde hair and is wearing large hoop earrings, leaning her head against the man's shoulder. A semi-transparent pink banner is at the bottom, containing the title and author's name. A large white ampersand is on the left side of the banner, and a white rose is on the right side.

AT HOME IN
STONE CREEK

LINDA LAEL MILLER

Cherish

Linda Miller Lael
At Home in Stone Creek
Серия «Mills & Boon Cherish»

Аннотация

The only single woman in Stone Creek Everyone in Ashley O'Ballivan's life is marrying and starting families – except her. But what date can compare to Jack McCall, the man who broke her heart years ago? And now he's mysteriously back. But he isn't who she thinks he is. After a dangerous mission, security expert Jack McCall rents a room in Ashley's bed-and-breakfast. For her sake, he must keep his distance. But his feelings for her are so powerful that only his heart remains off-limits. To protect her – from his enemies and himself – he has to leave...vowing to fight his way home to her and Stone Creek forever.

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Praise for the novels of LINDA LAEL MILLER

“As hot as the noontime desert.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *The Rustler*

“This story creates lasting memories of soul-searing redemption and the belief in goodness and hope.”

—*Romantic Times BOOKreviews* on *The Rustler*

“Loaded with hot lead, steamy sex and surprising plot twists.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *A Wanted Man*

“Miller’s prose is smart, and her tough Eastwoodian cowboy cuts a sharp, unexpectedly funny figure in a classroom full of rambunctious frontier kids.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *The Man from Stone Creek*

“[Miller] paints a brilliant portrait of the good, the bad and the ugly, the lost and the lonely, and the power of love to bring light into the darkest of souls. This is western romance at its finest.”

—*Romantic Times BOOKreviews* on *The Man from Stone Creek*

“Sweet, homespun, and touched with angelic Christmas magic, this holiday romance reprises characters from Miller’s popular McKettrick series and is a perfect stocking stuffer for her fans.”

—*Library Journal* on *A McKettrick Christmas*

“An engrossing, contemporary western romance...Miller’s masterful ability to create living, breathing characters never flags...combined with a taut story line and vivid prose, Miller’s romance won’t disappoint.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *McKettrick’s Pride* (starred review)

“Linda Lael Miller creates vibrant characters and stories I defy you to forget.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Debbie Macomber

At Home In Stone Creek

By

Linda Lael Miller



www.millsandboon.co.uk

The daughter of a town marshal, **LINDA LAEL MILLER** grew up in rural Washington. The self-confessed barn goddess was inspired to pursue a career as an author after an elementary school teacher said the stories she was writing might be good enough to be published.

Linda broke into publishing in the early 1980s. She is now the *New York Times* bestselling author of more than sixty contemporary, romantic suspense and historical novels, including *McKetrick's Choice*, *The Man from Stone Creek* and *Deadly Gamble*. When not writing, Linda enjoys riding her horses and playing with her cats and dogs. Through her Linda Lael Miller Scholarships for Women, she provides grants to women who seek to improve their lot in life through education.

For more information about Linda, her scholarships and her novels, visit www.lindalaelmiller.com.

MILLS & BOON

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For Karen Beaty, with love.

Dear Reader,

It is my joy and pleasure to welcome you back to Stone Creek, Arizona, the town I originally created for *The Man from Stone Creek*. To think I thought it would be a one-time visit when I wrote that first book

The saga continues with *At Home in Stone Creek*, a wintry story in which you will renew your acquaintance with all these contemporary characters *and* get to know Ashley O'Ballivan, Brad and Olivia's sister, and her mysterious, now-you-see-him-now-you-don't man, Jack McCall. Is that even his real name? Hard to tell, with a man like Jack.

I hope you'll enjoy this latest O'Ballivan adventure, and there's at least one more in the works, *Return to Stone Creek*, starring

Ashley's twin sister, Melissa, and linking the O'Ballivans with yet another of my favorite families, the Creeds.

With love,

Linda

Chapter One

Ashley O’Ballivan dropped the last string of Christmas lights into a plastic storage container, resisting an uncharacteristic urge to kick the thing into the corner of the attic instead of stacking it with the others. For her, the holidays had been anything *but* merry and bright; in fact, the whole year had basically sucked. But for her brother, Brad, and sister Olivia, it qualified as a personal best—both of them were happily married. Even her workaholic twin, Melissa, had had a date for New Year’s Eve.

Ashley, on the other hand, had spent the night alone, sipping nonalcoholic wine in front of the portable TV set in her study, waiting for the ball to drop in Times Square.

How lame was that?

It was worse than lame—it was *pathetic*.

She wasn’t even thirty yet, and she was well on her way to old age.

With a sigh, Ashley turned from the dusty hodgepodge surrounding her—she went all out, at the Mountain View Bed and Breakfast, for every red-letter day on the calendar—and headed for the attic stairs. As she reached the bottom, stepping into the corridor just off the kitchen, a familiar car horn sounded from the driveway in front of the detached garage. It could only be Olivia’s ancient Suburban.

Ashley had mixed feelings as she hoisted the ladder-steep

steps back up into the ceiling. She loved her older sister dearly and was delighted that Olivia had found true love with Tanner Quinn, but since their mother's funeral a few months before, there had been a strain between them.

Neither Brad nor Olivia nor Melissa had shed a single tear for Delia O'Ballivan—not during the church service or the graveside ceremony or the wake. Okay, so there wasn't a greeting card category for the kind of mother Delia had been—she'd deserted the family long ago, and gradually destroyed herself through a long series of tragically bad choices. For all that, she'd still been the woman who had given birth to them all.

Didn't that count for something?

A rap sounded at the back door, as distinctive as the car horn, and Olivia's glowing, pregnancy-rounded face filled one of the frost-trimmed panes in the window.

Oddly self-conscious in her jeans and T-shirt and an ancient flannel shirt from the back of her closet, Ashley mouthed, "It's not locked."

Beaming, Olivia opened the door and waddled across the threshold. She was due to deliver her and Tanner's first child in a matter of days, if not hours, and from the looks of her, Ashley surmised she was carrying either quadruplets or a Sumo wrestler.

"You know you don't have to knock," Ashley said, keeping her distance.

Olivia smiled, a bit wistfully it seemed to Ashley, and opened their grandfather Big John's old barn coat to reveal a small white

cat with one blue eye and one green one.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Ashley bristled.

Olivia, a veterinarian as well as Stone Creek, Arizona’s one and only real-deal animal communicator, bent awkwardly to set the kitten on Ashley’s immaculate kitchen floor, where it meowed pitifully and turned in a little circle, pursuing its fluffy tail. Every stray dog, cat or bird in the county seemed to find its way to Olivia eventually, like immigrants gravitating toward the Statue of Liberty.

Two years ago, at Christmas, she’d even been approached by a reindeer named Rodney.

“Meet Mrs. Wiggins,” Olivia chimed, undaunted. Her china-blue eyes danced beneath the dark, sleek fringe of her bangs, but there was a wary look in them that bothered Ashley...even shamed her a little. The two of them had always been close. Did Olivia think Ashley was jealous of her new life with Tanner and his precocious fourteen-year-old daughter, Sophie?

“I suppose she’s already told you her life story,” Ashley said, nodding toward the cat, scrubbing her hands down the thighs of her jeans once and then heading for the sink to wash up before filling the electric kettle. At least *that* hadn’t changed—they always had tea together, whenever Olivia dropped by—which was less and less often these days.

After all, unlike Ashley, Olivia had a life.

Olivia crooked up a corner of her mouth and began struggling out of the old plaid woolen coat, flecked, as always, with bits of

straw. Some things never changed—even with Tanner's money, Olivia still dressed like what she was, a country veterinarian.

"Not much to tell," Livie answered with a slight lift of one shoulder, as nonchalantly as if telepathic exchanges with all manner of finned, feathered and furred creatures were commonplace. "She's only fourteen weeks old, so she hasn't had time to build up much of an autobiography."

"I do not want a cat," Ashley informed her sister.

Olivia hauled back a chair at the table and collapsed into it. She was wearing gum boots, as usual, and they looked none too clean. "You only *think* you don't want Mrs. Wiggins," she said. "She needs you and, whether you know it or not, you need her."

Ashley turned back to the kettle, trying to ignore the ball of cuteness chasing its tail in the middle of the kitchen floor. She was irritated, but worried, too. She looked back at Olivia over one stiff shoulder. "Should you be out and about, as pregnant as you are?"

Olivia smiled, serene as a Botticelli Madonna. "Pregnancy isn't a matter of degrees, Ash," she said. "One either is or isn't."

"You're pale," Ashley fretted. She'd lost so many loved ones—both parents, her beloved granddad, Big John. If anything happened to any of her siblings, whatever their differences, she wouldn't be able to bear it.

"Just brew the tea," Olivia said quietly. "I'm perfectly all right."

While Ashley didn't have her sister's gift for talking to

animals, she *was* intuitive, and her nerves felt all twitchy, a clear sign that something unexpected was about to happen. She plugged in the kettle and joined Olivia at the table. “Is anything wrong?”

“Funny you should ask,” Olivia answered, and though the soft smile still rested on her lips, her eyes were solemn. “I came here to ask *you* the same question. Even though I already know the answer.”

As much as she hated the uneasiness that had sprung up between herself and her sisters and brother, Ashley tended to bounce away from any mention of the subject like a pinball in a lively game. She sprang right up out of her chair and crossed to the antique breakfront to fetch two delicate china cups from behind the glass doors, full of strange urgency.

“Ash,” Olivia said patiently.

Ashley kept her back to her sister and lowered her head. “I’ve just been a little blue lately, Liv,” she admitted softly. “That’s all.”

She would never get to know her mother.

The holidays had been a downer.

Not a single guest had checked into her Victorian bed-and-breakfast since before Thanksgiving, which meant she was two payments behind on the private mortgage Brad had given her to buy the place several years before. It wasn’t that her brother had been pressing her for the money—he’d offered her the deed, free and clear, the day the deal was closed, but she’d insisted on repaying him every cent.

On top of all that, she hadn't heard a word from Jack McCall since his last visit, six months ago. He'd suddenly packed his bags and left one sultry summer night, while she was sleeping off their most recent bout of lovemaking, without so much as a good-bye.

Would it have killed him to wake her up and explain? Or just leave a damn note? Maybe pick up a phone?

"It's because of Mom," Olivia said. "You're grieving for the woman she never was, and that's okay, Ashley. But it might help if you talked to one of us about how you feel."

Weary rage surged through Ashley. She spun around to face Olivia, causing her sneakers to make a squeaking sound against the freshly waxed floor, remembered that her sister was about to have a baby, and sucked all her frustration and fury back in on one ragged breath.

"Let's not go there, Livie," she said.

The kitten scabbled at one leg of Ashley's jeans and, without thinking, she bent to scoop the tiny creature up into her arms. Minute, silky ears twitched under her chin, and Mrs. Wiggins purred as though powered by batteries, snuggling against her neck.

Olivia smiled again, still wistful. "You're pretty angry with us, aren't you?" she asked gently. "Brad and Melissa and me, I mean."

"No," Ashley lied, wanting to put the kitten down but unable to do so. Somehow, nearly weightless as that cat was, it made her feel anchored instead of set adrift.

“Come on,” Olivia challenged quietly. “If I weren’t nine and a half months along, you’d be in my face right now.”

Ashley bit down hard on her lower lip and said nothing.

“Things can’t change if we don’t talk,” Olivia persisted.

Ashley swallowed painfully. Anything she said would probably come out sounding like self-pity, and Ashley was too proud to feel sorry for herself, but she also knew her sister. Olivia wasn’t about to let her off the hook, squirm though she might. “It’s just that nothing seems to be working,” she confessed, blinking back tears. “The business. Jack. That damn computer you insisted I needed.”

The kettle boiled, emitting a shrill whistle and clouds of steam.

Still cradling the kitten under her chin, Ashley unplugged the cord with a wrenching motion of her free hand.

“Sit down,” Olivia said, rising laboriously from her chair. “I’ll make the tea.”

“No, you won’t!”

“I’m pregnant, Ashley,” Olivia replied, “not incapacitated.”

Ashley skulked back to the table, sat down, the tea forgotten. The kitten inched down her flannel work shirt to her lap and made a graceful leap to the floor.

“Talk to me,” Olivia prodded, trundling toward the counter.

Ashley’s vision seemed to narrow to a pinpoint, and when it widened again, she swayed in her chair, suddenly dizzy. If her blond hair hadn’t been pulled back into its customary French braid, she’d have shoved her hands through it. “It must be an

awful thing,” she murmured, “to die the way Mom did.”

Cups rattled against saucers at the periphery of Ashley’s awareness. Olivia returned to the table but stood beside Ashley instead of sitting down again. Rested a hand on her shoulder. “Delia wasn’t in her right mind, Ashley. She didn’t suffer.”

“No one cared,” Ashley reflected, in a miserable whisper. “She died and no one even *cared*.”

Olivia didn’t sigh, but she might as well have. “You were little when Delia left,” she said, after a long time. “You don’t remember how it was.”

“I remember praying every night that she’d come home,” Ashley said.

Olivia bent—not easy to do with her huge belly—and rested her forehead on Ashley’s crown, tightened her grip on her shoulder. “We all wanted her to come home, at least at first,” she recalled softly. “But the reality is, she didn’t—not even when Dad got killed in that lightning storm. After a while, we stopped needing her.”

“Maybe *you* did,” Ashley sniffled. “Now she’s gone forever. I’m never going to know what she was really like.”

Olivia straightened, very slowly. “She was—”

“Don’t say it,” Ashley warned.

“She drank,” Olivia insisted, stepping back. The invisible barrier dropped between them again, a nearly audible shift in the atmosphere. “She took drugs. Her brain was pickled. If you want to remember her differently, that’s your prerogative. But don’t

expect me to rewrite history.”

Ashley's cheeks were wet, and she swiped at them with the back of one hand, probably leaving streaks in the coating of attic dust prickling on her skin. “Fair enough,” she said stiffly.

Olivia crossed the room again, jangled things around at the counter for a few moments, and returned with a pot of steeping tea and two cups and saucers.

“This is getting to me,” she told Ashley. “It’s as if the earth has cracked open and we’re standing on opposite sides of a deep chasm. It’s bothering Brad and Melissa, too. *We’re family*, Ashley. Can’t we just agree to disagree as far as Mom is concerned and go on from there?”

“I’ll try,” Ashley said, though she had to win an inner skirmish first. A long one.

Olivia reached across the table, closed her hand around Ashley’s. “Why didn’t you tell me you were having trouble getting the computer up and running?” she asked. Ashley was profoundly grateful for the change of subject, even if it did nettle her a little at the same time. She hated the stupid contraption, hated anything electronic. She’d followed the instructions to the letter, and the thing *still* wouldn’t work.

When she didn’t say anything, Olivia went on. “Sophie and Carly are cyberwhizzes—they’d be glad to build you a Web site for the B&B and show you how to zip around the Internet like a pro.”

Brad and his wife, the former Meg McKettrick, had adopted

Carly, Meg's half sister, soon after their marriage. The teenager doted on their son, three-year-old Mac, and had befriended Sophie from the beginning.

"That would be...nice," Ashley said doubtfully. The truth was, she was an old-fashioned type, as Victorian, in some ways, as her house. She didn't carry a cell phone, and her landline had a rotary dial. "But you know me and technology."

"I also know you're not stupid," Olivia responded, pouring tea for Ashley, then for herself. Their spoons made a cheerful tinkling sound, like fairy bells, as they stirred in organic sugar from the chunky ceramic bowl in the center of the table.

The kitten jumped back into Ashley's lap then, startling her, making her laugh. How long had it been since she'd laughed?

Too long, judging by the expression on Olivia's face.

"You're really all right?" Ashley asked, watching her sister closely.

"I'm better than 'all right,'" Olivia assured her. "I'm married to the man of my dreams. I have Sophie, a barn full of horses out at Starcross Ranch, and a thriving veterinary practice." A slight frown creased her forehead. "Speaking of men...?"

"Let's not," Ashley said.

"You still haven't heard from Jack?"

"No. And that's fine with me."

"I don't think it *is* fine with you, Ashley. He's Tanner's friend. I could ask him to call Jack and—"

"No!"

Olivia sighed. “Yeah,” she said. “You’re right. That would be interfering, and Tanner probably wouldn’t go along with it anyhow.”

Ashley stroked the kitten even as she tried not to bond with it. She was zero-for-zero on that score. “Jack and I had a fling,” she said. “It’s obviously over. End of story.”

Olivia arched one perfect eyebrow. “Maybe you need a vacation,” she mused aloud. “A new man in your life. You could go on one of those singles’ cruises—”

Ashley gave a scoffing chuckle—it felt good to engage in girl talk with her sister again. “Sure,” she retorted. “I’d meet guys twice my age, with gold chains around their necks and bad toupees. Or worse.”

“What could be worse?” Olivia joked, grinning over the gold rim of her teacup.

“Spray-on hair,” Ashley said decisively.

Olivia laughed.

“Besides,” Ashley went on, “I don’t want to be out of town when you have the baby.”

Olivia nodded, turned thoughtful again. “You should get out more, though.”

“And do what?” Ashley challenged. “Play bingo in the church basement on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays? Join the Powder Puff bowling league? In case it’s escaped your notice, O pregnant one, Stone Creek isn’t exactly a social whirlwind.”

Olivia sighed again, in temporary defeat, and glanced at her

watch. “I’m supposed to meet Tanner at the clinic in twenty minutes—just a routine checkup, so don’t panic. Meet us for lunch afterward?”

The kitten climbed Ashley’s shirt, its claws catching in the fabric, nestled under her neck again. “I have some errands to run,” she said, with a shake of her head. “You’re going to stick me with this cat, aren’t you, Olivia?”

Olivia smiled, stood, and carried her cup and saucer to the sink. “Give Mrs. Wiggins a chance,” she said. “If she doesn’t win your heart by this time next week, I’ll try to find her another home.” She took Big John’s ratty coat from the row of pegs next to the back door and shoved her arms into the sleeves, reclaimed her purse from the end of the counter, where she’d set it on the way in. “Shall I ask Sophie and Carly to come by after school and have a look at your computer?”

Ashley enjoyed the girls, and it would be nice to bake a batch of cookies for someone. Besides, she was tired of being confronted by the dark monitor, tower and printer every time she went into the study. “I guess,” she answered.

“Done deal,” Olivia confirmed brightly, and then she was out the door, gone.

Ashley held the kitten in front of her face. “You’re not staying,” she said.

“Meow,” Mrs. Wiggins replied.

“Oh, all right,” Ashley relented. “But I’d better not find any snags in my new chintz slipcovers!”

The helicopter swung abruptly sideways in a dizzying arch, setting Jack McCall's fever-ravaged brain spinning. He hoped the pilot hadn't seen him grip the edges of his seat, bracing for a crash.

His friend's voice sounded tinny, coming through the earphones. "You belong in a hospital," he said. "Not some backwater bed-and-breakfast."

All Jack really knew about the toxin raging through his system was that it wasn't contagious—the CDC had ordered him into quarantine until that much had been determined—but there was still no diagnosis and no remedy except a lot of rest and quiet. "I don't like hospitals," he responded, hoping he sounded like his normal self. "They're full of sick people."

Vince Griffin chuckled at that, but it was a dry sound, rough at the edges. "What's in Stone Creek, Arizona?" he asked. "Besides a whole lot of nothin'?"

Ashley O'Ballivan was in Stone Creek, and she was a whole lot of somethin', but Jack had neither the strength nor the inclination to explain. Given the way he'd ducked out on her six months before, after taking an emergency call on his cell phone, he didn't expect a welcome, knew he didn't deserve one. But Ashley, being Ashley, would take him in, whatever her misgivings, same as she would a wounded dog or a bird with a broken wing.

He had to get to Ashley—he'd be all right then.

He closed his eyes, letting the fever swallow him.

There was no telling how much time had passed when he

surfaced again, became aware of the chopper blades slowing overhead. The magic flying machine bobbed on its own updraft, sending the broth he'd sipped from a thermos scalding its way up into the back of his throat.

Dimly, he saw the ancient ambulance waiting on the airfield outside Stone Creek; it seemed that twilight had descended, but he couldn't be sure. Since the toxin had taken him down, he hadn't been able to trust his perceptions.

Day turned into night.

Up turned into down.

The doctors had ruled out a brain tumor, but he still felt as though something was eating his brain.

"Here we are," Vince said.

"Is it dark or am I going blind?"

Vince tossed him a worried look. "It's dark," he said.

Jack sighed with relief. His clothes—the usual black jeans and black turtleneck sweater—felt clammy against his flesh. His teeth began to chatter as two figures unloaded a gurney from the back of the ambulance and waited for the blades to stop so they could approach.

"Great," Vince remarked, unsnapping his seat belt. "Those two look like volunteers, not real EMTs. The CDC parked you at Walter Reed, and that wasn't good enough for you because—?"

Jack didn't answer. He had nothing against the famous military hospital, but he wasn't associated with the U.S. government, not officially at least. He couldn't see taking up a

bed some wounded soldier might need, and, anyhow, he'd be a sitting duck in a regular facility.

The chopper bounced sickeningly on its runners, and Vince, with a shake of his head, pushed open his door and jumped to the ground, head down.

Jack waited, wondering if he'd be able to stand on his own. After fumbling unsuccessfully with the buckle on his seat belt, he decided not.

When it was safe, the EMTs came forward, following Vince, who opened Jack's door.

Jack hauled off his headphones and tossed them aside.

His old friend Tanner Quinn stepped around Vince, his trademark grin not quite reaching his eyes.

"You look like hell warmed over," he told Jack cheerfully.

"Since when are you an EMT?" Jack retorted.

Tanner reached in, wedged a shoulder under Jack's right arm, and hauled him out of the chopper. His knees immediately buckled, and Vince stepped up, supporting him on the other side.

"In a place like Stone Creek," Tanner replied, "everybody helps out."

"Right," Jack said, stumbling between the two men keeping him on his feet. They reached the wheeled gurney—Jack had thought they never would, since it seemed to recede into the void with every awkward step—and he found himself on his back.

Tanner and the second man strapped him down, a process that brought back a few bad memories.

"Is there even a hospital in this hellhole of a place?" Vince asked irritably, from somewhere in the cold night.

"There's a pretty good clinic over in Indian Rock," Tanner answered easily, "and it isn't far to Flagstaff." He paused to help his buddy hoist Jack and the gurney into the back of the ambulance. "You're in good hands, Jack. My wife is the best veterinarian in the state."

Jack laughed raggedly at that.

Vince muttered a curse.

Tanner climbed into the back beside Jack, perched on some kind of fold-down seat. The other man shut the doors.

"I'm not contagious," Jack said to Tanner.

"So I hear," Tanner said, as his partner climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine. "You in any pain?"

"No," Jack struggled to quip, "but I might puke on those Roy Rogers boots of yours."

"You don't miss much, even strapped to a gurney." Tanner chuckled, hoisted one foot high enough for Jack to squint at it and hauled up the leg of his jeans to show off the fancy stitching on the boot shaft. "My brother-in-law gave them to me," he said. "Brad used to wear them onstage, back when he was breaking hearts out there on the concert circuit. Swigged iced tea out of a whiskey bottle all through every performance, so everybody would think he was a badass."

Jack looked up at his closest and most trusted friend and wished he'd listened to Vince. Ever since he'd come down with

the illness, a week after snatching a five-year-old girl back from her noncustodial parent—a small-time drug runner with dangerous aspirations and a lousy attitude—he hadn't been able to think about anyone or anything but Ashley. When he *could* think.

Now, in one of the first clearheaded moments he'd experienced since checking himself out of the hospital the day before, he realized he might be making a major mistake—not by facing Ashley; he owed her that much and a lot more. No, he could be putting her in danger, and putting Tanner and his daughter and his pregnant veterinarian wife in danger, as well.

"I shouldn't have come here," he said, keeping his voice low.

Tanner shook his head, his jaw clamped down hard, as though irritated by Jack's statement. Since he'd gotten married, settled down and sold off his multinational construction company to play at being an Arizona rancher, Tanner had softened around the edges a little, but Jack knew his friend was still one tough SOB.

"This is where you belong," Tanner insisted. Another grin quirked one corner of his mouth. "If you'd had sense enough to know that six months ago, old buddy, when you bailed on Ashley without so much as a fare-thee-well, you wouldn't be in this mess."

Ashley. The name had run through his mind a million times in those six months, but hearing somebody say it out loud was like having a fist close around his insides and squeeze hard.

Jack couldn't speak.

Tanner didn't press for further conversation.

The ambulance bumped over country roads, finally hit smooth blacktop.

"Here we are," Tanner said. "Ashley's place."

"I knew something was going to happen," Ashley told Mrs. Wiggins, peeling the kitten off the living room curtains as she peered out at the ambulance stopped in the street. "*I knew it.*"

Not bothering to find her coat, Ashley opened the door and stepped out onto the porch. Tanner got out on the passenger side and gave her a casual wave as he went around back.

Ashley's heart pounded. She stood frozen for a long moment, not by the cold, but by a strange, eager sense of dread. Then she bolted down the steps, careful not to slip, and hurried along the walk, through the gate.

"What...?" she began, but the rest of the question died in her throat.

Tanner had opened the back of the ambulance, but then he just stood there, looking at her with an odd expression on his face.

"Brace yourself," he said.

Jeff Baxter, part of a rotating group of volunteers, like Tanner, left the driver's seat and came to stand a short but eloquent distance away. He looked like a man trying to brace himself for an imminent explosion.

Impatient, Ashley wedged herself between the two men, peered inside.

Jack McCall sat upright on the gurney, grinning stupidly. His black hair, military-short the last time she'd seen him, was longer now, and sleekly shaggy. His eyes blazed with fever.

"Whose shirt is that?" he asked, frowning.

Still taken aback, Ashley didn't register the question right away. Several awkward moments had passed by the time she glanced down to see what she was wearing.

"Yours," she answered, finally.

Jack looked relieved. "Good," he said.

Ashley, beside herself with surprise until that very instant, landed back in her own skin with a jolt. "What are you doing here?" she demanded.

Jack scooted toward her, almost pitched out of the ambulance onto his face before Tanner and Jeff moved in to grab him by the arms.

"Checking in," he said, once he'd tried—and failed—to shrug off them off. "You're still in the bed-and-breakfast business, aren't you?"

You're still in the bed-and-breakfast business, aren't you?

Damn, the man had nerve.

"You belong in a hospital," she said evenly. "Not a bed-and-breakfast."

"I'm willing to pay double," Jack offered. His face, always strong, took on a vulnerable expression. "I need a place to lay low for a while, Ash. Are you game?"

She thought quickly. The last thing in the world she wanted

was Jack McCall under her roof again, but she couldn't afford to turn down a paying guest. She'd have to dip into her savings soon if she did, and not just to pay Brad.

The bills were piling up.

"Triple the usual rate," she said.

Jack squinted, probably not understanding at first, then gave a raspy chuckle. "Okay," he agreed. "Triple it is. Even though it is the off-season."

Jeff and Tanner half dragged, half carried him toward the house.

Ashley hesitated on the snowy sidewalk.

First the cat.

Now Jack.

Evidently, it was her day to be dumped on.

Chapter Two

“What *happened* to him?” Ashley whispered to Tanner, in the hallway outside the second-best room in the house, a small suite at the opposite end of the corridor from her own quarters. Jeff and Tanner had already put the patient to bed, fully dressed except for his boots, and Jeff had gone downstairs to make a call on his cell phone.

Jack, meanwhile, had sunk into an instant and all-consuming sleep—or into a coma. It was a crapshoot, guessing which.

Tanner looked grim; didn’t seem to notice that Mrs. Wiggins was busily climbing his right pant leg, her infinitesimal claws snagging the denim as she scaled his knee and started up his thigh with a deliberation that would have been funny under any other circumstances.

“All I know is,” Tanner replied, “I got a call from Jack this afternoon, just as Livie and I were leaving the clinic after her checkup. He said he was a little under the weather and wanted to know if I’d meet him at the airstrip and bring him here.” He paused, cupped the kitten in one hand, raised the little creature to nose level, and peered quizzically into its mismatched eyes before lowering it gently to the floor. Straightening from a crouch, he added, “I offered to put him up at our place, but he insisted on coming to yours.”

“You might have called me,” Ashley fretted, still keeping her

voice down. "Given me some warning, at least."

"Check your voice mail," Tanner countered, sounding mildly exasperated. "I left at least four messages."

"I was out," Ashley said, defensive, "buying kitty litter and kibble. Because *your wife* decided I needed a cat."

Tanner grinned at the mention of Olivia, and something eased in him, gentling the expression in his eyes. "If you'd carry a cell phone, like any normal human being, you'd have been up to speed, situationwise." He paused, with a mischievous twinkle. "You might even have had time to bake a welcome-back-Jack cake."

"As if," Ashley breathed, but as rattled as she was over having Jack McCall land in the middle of her life like the flaming chunks of a latter-day Hindenburg, there was something else she needed to know. "What did the doctor say? About Olivia, I mean?"

Tanner sighed. "She's a couple of weeks overdue—Dr. Pentland wants to induce labor tomorrow morning."

Worry made Ashley peevish. "And you're just telling me this now?"

"As I said," Tanner replied, "get a cell phone."

Before Ashley could come up with a reply, the front door banged open downstairs, and a youthful female voice called her name, sounding alarmed.

Ashley went to the upstairs railing, leaned a little, and saw Tanner's daughter, Sophie, standing in the living room, her face

upturned and so pale that her freckles stood out, even from that distance. Sixteen-year-old Carly, blond and blue-eyed like her sister, Meg, appeared beside her.

“There’s an ambulance outside,” Sophie said. “What’s happening?”

Tanner started down the stairs. “Everything’s all right,” he told the frightened girl.

Carly glanced from Tanner to Ashley, descending behind him. “We meant to get here sooner, to set up your computer,” Carly said, “but Mr. Gilvine kept the whole Drama Club after school to rehearse the second act of the new play.”

“How come there’s an ambulance outside,” Sophie persisted, gazing up at her father’s face, “if nobody’s sick?”

“I didn’t say nobody was sick,” Tanner told her quietly, setting his hands on her shoulders. “Jack’s upstairs, resting.”

Sophie’s panic rose a notch. “Uncle Jack is sick? What’s wrong with him?”

That’s what I’d like to know, Ashley thought.

“From the symptoms, I’d guess it’s some kind of toxin.”

Sophie tried to go around Tanner, clearly intending to race up the stairs. “I want to see him!”

Tanner stopped her. “Not now, sweetie,” he said, his tone at once gruff and gentle. “He’s asleep.”

“Do you still want us to set up your computer?” Carly asked Ashley.

Ashley summoned up a smile and shook her head. “Another

time,” she said. “You must be tired, after a whole day of school and then play practice on top of that. How about some supper?”

“Mr. Gilvine ordered pizza for the whole cast,” Carly answered, touching her flat stomach and puffing out her cheeks to indicate that she was stuffed. “I already called home, and Brad said he’d come in from the ranch and get us as soon as we had your system up and running.”

“It can wait,” Ashley reiterated, glancing at Tanner.

“I’ll drop you off on the way home,” he told Carly, one hand still resting on Sophie’s shoulder. “My truck’s parked at the fire station. Jeff can give us a lift over there.”

Having lost her mother when she was very young, Sophie had insecurities Ashley could well identify with. The girl adored Olivia, and looked forward to the birth of a brother or sister. Tanner probably wanted to break the news about Livie’s induction later, with just the three of them present.

“Call me,” Ashley ordered, her throat thick with concern for her sister and the child, as Tanner steered the girls toward the front door.

Tanner merely arched an eyebrow at that.

Jeff stepped out of the study, just tucking away his cell phone. “I’m in big trouble with Lucy,” he said. “Forgot to let her know I’d be late. She made a soufflé and it fell.”

“Uh-oh,” Tanner commiserated.

“We get to ride in an ambulance?” Sophie asked, cheered.

“Awesome,” Carly said.

And then they were gone.

Ashley raised her eyes to the ceiling. Recalled that Jack McCall was up there, sprawled on one of her guest beds, buried under half a dozen quilts. Just how sick was he? Would he want to eat, and if so, what?

After some internal debate, she decided on homemade chicken soup.

That was the cure for everything, wasn't it? Everything, that is, except a broken heart.

Jack McCall awakened to find something furry standing on his face.

Fortunately, he was too weak to flail, or he'd have sent what his brain finally registered as a kitten flying before he realized he wasn't back in a South American jail, fighting off rats willing to settle for part of his hide when the rations ran low.

The animal stared directly into his face with one blue eye and one green one, purring as though it had a motor inside its hairy little chest.

He blinked, decided the thing was probably some kind of mutant.

"Another victim of renegade genetics," he said.

"Meooooow," the cat replied, perhaps indignant.

The door across the room opened, and Ashley elbowed her way in, carrying a loaded tray. Whatever was on it smelled like heaven distilled to its essence, or was that the scent of her skin and that amazing hair of hers?

“Mrs. Wiggins,” she said, “get down.”

“Mrs.?” Jack replied, trying to raise himself on his pillows and failing. This was a fortunate thing for the cat, who was trying to nest in his hair by then. “Isn’t she a little young to be married?”

“Yuk-yuk,” Ashley said, with an edge.

Jack sighed inwardly. All was not forgiven, then, he concluded.

Mrs. Wiggins climbed down over his right cheek and curled up on his chest. He could have sworn he felt some kind of warm energy flowing through the kitten, as though it were a conduit between the world around him and another, better one.

Crap. He was really losing it.

“Are you hungry?” Ashley asked, as though he were any ordinary guest.

A gnawing in the pit of Jack’s stomach told him he was—for the first time since he’d come down with the mysterious plague. “Yeah,” he ground out, further weakened by the sight of Ashley. Even in jeans and the flannel shirt he’d left behind, with her light hair springing from its normally tidy braid, she looked like a goddess. “I think I am.”

She approached the bed—cautiously, it seemed to Jack, and little wonder, after some of the acrobatics they’d managed in the one down the hall before he left—and set the tray down on the nightstand.

“Can you feed yourself?” she asked, keeping her distance. Her tone was formal, almost prim.

Jack gave an inelegant snort at that, then realized, to his mortification, that he probably couldn't. Earlier, he'd made it to the adjoining bathroom and back, but the effort had exhausted him. "Yes," he fibbed.

She tilted her head to one side, skeptical. A smile flittered around her mouth, but didn't come in for a landing. "Your eyes widen a little when you lie," she commented.

He sure hoped certain members of various drug and gunrunning cartels didn't know that. "Oh," he said.

Ashley dragged a fussy-looking chair over and sat down. With a little sigh, she took a spoon off the tray and plunged it into a bright-blue crockery bowl. "Open up," she told him.

Jack resisted briefly, pressing his lips together—he still had *some* pride, after all—but his stomach betrayed him with a long and perfectly audible rumble. He opened his mouth.

The fragrant substance turned out to be chicken soup, with wild rice and chopped celery and a few other things he couldn't identify. It was so good that, if he'd been able to, he'd have grabbed the bowl with both hands and downed the stuff in a few gulps.

"Slow down," Ashley said. Her eyes had softened a little, but her body remained rigid. "There's plenty more soup simmering on the stove."

Like the kitten, the soup seemed to possess some sort of quantum-level healing power. Jack felt faint tendrils of strength stirring inside him, like the tender roots of a plant splitting

through a seed husk, groping tentatively toward the sun.

Once he'd finished the soup, sleep began to pull him downward again, toward oblivion. There was something different about the feeling this time; rather than an urge to struggle against it, as before, it was more an impulse to give himself up to the darkness, settle into it like a waiting embrace.

Something soft brushed his cheek. Ashley's fingertips? Or the mutant kitten?

"Jack," Ashley said.

With an effort, he opened his eyes.

Tears glimmered along Ashley's lashes. "Are you going to die?" she asked.

Jack considered his answer for a few moments; not easy, with his brain short-circuiting. According to the doctors at Walter Reed, his prognosis wasn't the best. They'd admitted that they'd never seen the toxin before, and their plan was to ship him off to some secret government research facility for further study.

Which was one of the reasons he'd bolted, conned a series of friends into springing him and then relaying him cross-country in various planes and helicopters.

He found Ashley's hand, squeezed it with his own. "Not if I can help it," he murmured, just before sleep sucked him under again.

Their brief conversation echoed in Ashley's head, over and over, as she sat there watching Jack sleep until the room was so dark she couldn't see anything but the faintest outline of him,

etched against the sheets.

Are you going to die?

Not if I can help it.

Ashley overcame the need to switch on the bedside lamp, send golden light spilling over the features she knew so well—the hazel eyes, the well-defined cheekbones, the strong, obstinate jaw—but just barely. Leaving the tray behind, she rose out of the chair and made her way slowly toward the door, afraid of stepping on Mrs. Wiggins, frolicking at her feet like a little ghost.

Reaching the hallway, Ashley closed the door softly behind her, bent to scoop the kitten up in one hand, and let the tears come. Silent sobs rocked her, making her shoulders shake, and Mrs. Wiggins snuggled in close under her chin, as if to offer comfort.

Was Jack truly in danger of dying?

She sniffled, straightened her spine. Surely Tanner wouldn't have agreed to bring him to the bed-and-breakfast—to her—if he was at death's door.

On the other hand, she reasoned, dashing at her cheek with the back of one hand, trying to rally her scattered emotions, Jack was bone-stubborn. He always got his way.

So maybe Tanner was simply honoring Jack's last wish.

Holding tightly to the banister, Ashley started down the stairs.

Jack hadn't wanted to *live* in Stone Creek. Why would he choose to *die* there?

The phone began to ring, a persistent trilling, and Ashley,

thinking of Olivia, dashed to the small desk where guests registered—not that *that* had been an issue lately—and snatched up the receiver.

“Hello?” When had she gotten out of the habit of answering with a businesslike, “Mountain View Bed and Breakfast”?

“I hear you’ve got an unexpected boarder,” Brad said, his tone measured.

Ashley was unaccountably glad to hear her big brother’s voice, considering that they hadn’t had much to say to each other since their mother’s funeral. “Yes,” she assented.

“According to Carly, he was sick enough to arrive in an ambulance.”

Ashley nodded, remembered that Brad couldn’t see her, and repeated, “Yes. I’m not sure he should be here—Brad, he’s in a really bad way. I’m not a nurse and I’m—” She paused, swallowed. “I’m scared.”

“I can be there in fifteen minutes, Ash.”

Fresh tears scalded Ashley’s eyes, made them feel raw. “That would be good,” she said.

“Put on a pot of coffee, little sister,” Brad told her. “I’m on my way.”

True to his word, Brad was standing in her kitchen before the coffee finished perking. He looked more like a rancher than a famous country singer and sometime movie star, in his faded jeans, battered boots, chambray shirt and denim jacket.

Ashley couldn’t remember the last time she’d hugged her

brother, but now she went to him, and he wrapped her in his arms, kissed the top of her head.

“Olivia...” she began, but her voice fell away.

“I know,” Brad said hoarsely. “They’re inducing labor in the morning. Livie will be fine, honey, and so will the baby.”

Ashley tilted her head back, looked up into Brad’s face. His dark-blond hair was ruffled, and his beard was growing in, bristly. “How’s the family?”

He rested his hands on her shoulders, held her at a little distance. “You wouldn’t have to ask if you ever stopped by Stone Creek Ranch,” he answered. “Mac misses you, and Meg and I do, too.”

The minute Brad had known she needed him, he’d been in his truck, headed for town. And now that he was there, her anger over their mother’s funeral didn’t seem so important.

She tried to speak, but her throat had tightened again, and she couldn’t get a single word past it.

One corner of Brad’s famous mouth crooked up. “Where’s Lover Boy?” he asked. “Lucky thing for him that he’s laid up—otherwise I’d punch his lights out for what he did to you.”

The phrase *Lover Boy* made Ashley flinch. “That’s over,” she said.

Brad let his hands fall to his sides, his eyes serious now. “Right,” he replied. “Which room?”

Ashley told him, and he left the kitchen, the inside door swinging behind him long after he’d passed through it.

She kept herself busy by taking mugs down from the cupboard, filling Mrs. Wiggins's dish with kibble the size of barley grains, switching on the radio and then switching it off again.

The kitten crunched away at the kibble, then climbed onto its newly purchased bed in the corner near the fireplace, turned in circles for a few moments, kneaded the fabric, and dropped like the proverbial rock.

After several minutes had passed, Ashley heard Brad's boot heels on the staircase, and poured coffee for her brother; she was drinking herbal tea.

As if there were a hope in hell she'd sleep a wink that night by avoiding caffeine.

Brad reached for his mug, took a thoughtful sip.

"Well?" Ashley prompted.

"I'm not a doctor, Ash," he said. "All I can tell you for sure is, he's breathing."

"That's helpful," Ashley said.

He chuckled, and the sound, though rueful, consoled her a little. He turned one of the chairs around backward, and straddled it, setting his mug on the table.

"Why do men like to sit like that?" Ashley wondered aloud.

He grinned. "You've been alone too long," he answered.

Ashley blushed, brought her tea to the table and sat down.

"What am I going to do?" she asked.

Brad inclined his head toward the ceiling. "About McCall?"

That's up to you, sis. If you want him out of here, I can have him airlifted to Flagstaff within a couple hours."

This was no idle boast. Even though he'd retired from the country-music scene several years before, at least as far as concert tours went, Brad still wrote and recorded songs, and he could have stacked his royalty checks like so much cordwood. On top of that, Meg was a McKettrick, a multimillionaire in her own right. One phone call from either one of them, and a sleek jet would be landing outside of town in no time at all, fully equipped and staffed with doctors and nurses.

Ashley bit her lower lip. God knew why, but Jack wanted to stay at her place, and he'd gone through a lot to get there. As impractical as it was, given his condition, she didn't think she could turn him out.

Brad must have read her face. He reached out, took her hand. "You still love the bastard," he said. "Don't you?"

"I don't know," she answered miserably. She'd definitely loved the man she'd known before, but this was a new Jack, a different Jack. The *real* one, she supposed. It shook her to realize she'd given her heart to an illusion.

"It's okay, Ashley."

She shook her head, started to cry again. "Nothing is okay," she argued.

"We can make it that way," Brad offered quietly. "All we have to do is talk."

She dried her eyes on the sleeve of Jack's old shirt. It seemed

ironic, given all the things hanging in her closet, that she'd chosen to wear that particular garment when she'd gotten dressed that morning. Had some part of her known, somehow, that Jack was coming home?

Brad was waiting for an answer, and he wouldn't break eye contact until he got one.

Ashley swallowed hard. "Our mother died," she said, cornered. "Our *mother*. And you and Olivia and Melissa all seemed—relieved."

A muscle in Brad's jaw tightened, relaxed again. He sighed and shoved a hand through his hair. "I guess I *was* relieved," he admitted. "They said she didn't suffer, but I always wondered—" He paused, cleared his throat. "I wondered if she was in there somewhere, hurting, with no way to ask for help."

Ashley's heart gave one hard beat, then settled into its normal pace again. "You didn't hate her?" she asked, stunned.

"She was my mother," Brad said. "Of course I didn't hate her."

"Things might have been so different—"

"Ashley," Brad broke in, "things *weren't* different. That's the point. Delia's gone, for good this time. You've got to let go."

"What if I can't?" Ashley whispered.

"You don't have a choice, Button."

Button. Their grandfather had called both her and Melissa by that nickname; like most twins, they were used to sharing things. "Do you miss Big John as much as I do?" she asked.

"Yes," Brad answered, without hesitation, his voice still gruff.

He looked down at his coffee mug for a second or so, then raised his gaze to meet Ashley's again. "Same thing," he said. "He's gone. And letting go is something I have to do about three times a day."

Ashley got up, suddenly unable to sit still. She brought the coffee carafe to the table and refilled Brad's cup. She spoke very quietly. "But it was a one-time thing, letting go of Mom?"

"Yeah," Brad said. "And it happened a long, long time ago. I remember it distinctly—it was the night my high school basketball team took the state championship. I was sure she'd be in the bleachers, clapping and cheering like everybody else. She wasn't, of course, and that was when I got it through my head that she wasn't coming back—ever."

Ashley's heart ached. Brad was her big brother; he'd always been strong. Why hadn't she realized that he'd been hurt, too?

"Big John *stayed*, Ashley," he went on, while she sat there gulping. "He stuck around, through good times and bad. Even after he'd buried his only son, he kept on keeping on. Mom caught the afternoon bus out of town and couldn't be bothered to call or even send a postcard. I did my mourning long before she died."

Ashley could only nod.

Brad was quiet for a while, pondering, taking the occasional sip from his coffee mug. Then he spoke again. "Here's the thing," he said. "When the chips were down, I basically did the same thing as Mom—got on a bus and left Big John to take care of

the ranch and raise the three of you all by himself—so I'm in no position to judge anybody else. Bottom line, Ash? People are what they are, and they do what they do, and you have to decide either to accept that or walk away without looking back."

Ashley managed a wobbly smile. Sniffled once. "I'm sorry I'm late on the mortgage payments," she said.

Brad rolled his eyes. "Like I'm worried," he replied, his body making the subtle shifts that meant he'd be leaving soon. With one arm, he gestured to indicate the B&B. "Why won't you just let me sign the place over to you?"

"Would you do that," Ashley challenged reasonably, "if our situations were reversed?"

He flushed slightly, got to his feet. "No," he admitted, "but—" "But what?"

Brad grinned sheepishly, and his powerful shoulders shifted slightly under his shirt.

"But you're a man?" Ashley finished for him, when he didn't speak. "Is that what you were going to say?"

"Well, yeah," Brad said.

"You'll have the mortgage payments as soon as I get a chance to run Jack's credit card," she told her brother, rising to walk him to the back door. Color suffused her cheeks. "Thanks for coming into town," she added. "I feel like a fool for panicking."

In the midst of pulling on his jacket, Brad paused. "I'm a big brother," he said, somewhat gruffly. "It's what we do."

"Are you and Meg going to the hospital tomorrow, when

Livie...?”

Brad tugged lightly at her braid, the way he'd always done. “We'll be hanging out by the telephone,” he said. “Livie swears it's a normal procedure, and she doesn't want everyone fussing ‘as if it were a heart transplant,’ as she put it.”

Ashley bit down on her lower lip and nodded. She already had a nephew—Mac—and two nieces, Carly and Sophie, although technically Carly, Meg's half sister, whom her dying father had asked her to raise, wasn't really a niece. Tomorrow, another little one would join the family. Instead of being a nervous wreck, she ought to be celebrating.

She wasn't, she decided, so different from Sophie. Having effectively lost Delia when she was so young, she'd turned to Olivia as a substitute mother, as had Melissa. Had their devotion been a burden to their sister, only a few years older than they were, and grappling with her own sense of loss?

She stood on tiptoe and kissed Brad's cheek. “Thanks,” she said again. “Call if you hear anything.”

Brad gave her braid another tug, turned and left the house.

Ashley felt profoundly alone.

Jack had nearly flung himself at the singing cowboy standing at the foot of his bed, before recognizing him as Ashley's famous brother, Brad. Even though the room had been dark, the other man must have seen him tense.

“I know you're awake, McCall,” he'd said.

Jack had yawned. “O'Ballivan?”

“Live and in person,” came the not-so-friendly reply.

“And you’re sneaking around my room because...?”

O’Ballivan had chuckled at that. Hooked his thumbs through his belt loops. “Because Ashley’s worried about you. And what worries my baby sister worries *me*, James Bond.”

Ashley was worried about him? Something like elation flooded Jack. “Not for the same reasons, I suspect,” he said.

Mr. Country Music had gripped the high, spooled rail at the foot of the bed and leaned forward a little to make his point. “Damned if I can figure out why you’d come back here, especially in the shape you’re in, after what happened last summer, except to take up where you left off.” He paused, gripped the rail hard enough that his knuckles showed white even in the gloom. “You hurt her again, McCall, and you have my solemn word—I’m gonna turn right around and hurt *you*. Are we clear on that?”

Jack had smiled, not because he was amused, but because he liked knowing Ashley had folks to look after her when he wasn’t around—and when he was. “Oh, yeah,” Jack had replied. “We’re clear.”

Obviously a man of few words, O’Ballivan had simply nodded, turned and walked out of the room.

Remembering, Jack raised himself as high on the pillows as he could, strained to reach the lamp switch. The efforts, simple as they were, made him break out in a cold sweat, but at the same time, he felt his strength returning.

He looked around the room, noting the flowered wallpaper, the pale rose carpeting, the intricate woodwork on the mantelpiece. Two girly chairs flanked the cold fireplace, and fat flakes of January snow drifted past the two sets of bay windows, both sporting seats beneath, covered by cheery cushions.

It was a far cry from Walter Reed, he thought.

An even further cry from the jungle hut where he'd hidden out for nearly three months, awaiting his chance to grab little Rachel Stockard, hustle her out of the country by boat and then a seaplane, and return her to her frantic mother.

He'd been well paid for the job, but it was the memory of the mother-daughter reunion, after he'd surrendered the child to a pair of FBI agents and a Customs official in Atlanta, that made his throat catch more than two weeks after the fact.

Through an observation window, he'd watched as Rachel scrambled out of the man's arms and raced toward her waiting mother. Tears pouring down her face, Ardith Stockard had dropped to her knees, arms outspread, and gathered the little girl close. The two of them had clung to each other, both trembling.

And then Ardith had raised her eyes, seen Jack through the glass, and mouthed the words, "Thank you."

He'd nodded, exhausted and already sick.

Closing his eyes, Jack went back over the journey to South America, the long game of waiting and watching, finally finding the small, isolated country estate where Rachel had been taken after she was kidnapped from her maternal grandparents' home

in Phoenix, almost a year before.

Even after locating the child, he hadn't been able to make a move for more than a week—not until her father and his retinue of thugs had loaded a convoy of jeeps with drugs and firepower one day, and roared off down the jungle road, probably headed for a rendezvous with a boat moored off some hidden beach.

Jack had soon ascertained that only the middle-aged cook—and he had reason not to expect opposition from her—and one guard stood between him and Rachel. He'd waited until dark, risking the return of the jeep convoy, then climbed to the terrace outside the child's room.

“Did you come to take me home to my mommy?” Rachel had shrilled, her eyes wide with hope, when he stepped in off the terrace, a finger to his lips.

Her voice carried, and the guard burst in from the hallway, shouting in Spanish.

There had been a brief struggle—Jack had felt something prick him in the side as the goon went down—but, hearing the sound of approaching vehicles in the distance, he hadn't taken the time to wonder.

He'd grabbed Rachel up under one arm and climbed over the terrace and back down the crumbling rock wall of the house, with its many foot- and handholds, to the ground, running for the trees.

It was only after the reunion in Atlanta that Jack had suddenly collapsed, dizzy with fever.

The next thing he remembered was waking up in a hospital room, hooked up to half a dozen machines and surrounded by grim-faced Feds waiting to ask questions.

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