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A Christmas Conundrum Women, Dr. Jacob Hartman knew, were a mystery. Take the first time he met social worker Hannah Smith at the Stone Refuge home for foster children. The woman stared him down as if he'd come at her with castor oil. Why? His past was full of heavy-duty heartache, but he was positive they'd never met. And as a former foster child himself, Jacob was deeply touched by how much she cared about the kids at the home, how loving she was—to everyone but him. Which was where, he figured, the mistletoe came in!

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Heart of the Family

Margaret Daley



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MILLS & BOON

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To my family: my husband, mother-in-law, son,
daughter-in-law and granddaughters

To all the foster parents who have done such a
great job helping out in a difficult situation

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Chapter One

The child's name on the chart held Jacob Hartman's gaze riveted. Andy Morgan. The eight-year-old from Stone's Refuge had possibly another broken bone. Flashes of the last time the boy had been in his office, only a few weeks before, paraded across his mind.

With a sigh, Jacob entered the room to find the boy perched on the edge of the exam table, his face contorted in pain as he held his left arm, in a makeshift sling, close to his body. A woman Jacob wasn't familiar with stood to the side murmuring soothing words to Andy. She turned toward Jacob, worry etched into her face—and something else he couldn't decipher. Her mouth pinched into a frown that quickly evolved into an unreadable expression.

Jacob shook off the coolness emanating from the young woman. "Hi, Andy. Remember me? I'm Dr. Jacob," he said, using the name the children at the refuge knew him by. "How did you hurt your arm?" He gently removed the sling made from an old T-shirt and took the injured, swollen limb into his hands.

When he probed the forearm, Andy winced and tried to draw it back. "I fell." The child's lower lip trembled, and he dug his teeth into it.

"He was climbing the elm tree next to the barn and fell out of it." When Jacob glanced toward her, taking in the concern in the woman's dark blue gaze, she continued in a tense voice that had a soft Southern lilt. "I'm the new manager at Stone's Refuge. Hannah Smith. I was told when there was a medical problem to bring the children to you. This is only my second day, and no one else was around. The other kids are at school. Andy was supposed to be there, too. I—" she offered him a brief smile that didn't reach her eyes "—I talk too much when I'm upset."

No doubt the tension he felt coming from the refuge's new manager was due to Andy's accident. "I take care of the children's medical needs." Jacob buzzed for his nurse. "Andy, can you do this for me?" He demonstrated flexing and extending his wrist and fingers.

With his forehead scrunched, the boy did, but pain flitted across his features. He tried to mask it, but Jacob knew what the child was going through. He'd experienced a few broken bones in his own childhood and remembered trying to put up a brave front. He learned to do that well. Jacob unlocked a cabinet and removed a bottle of ibuprofen.

He handed the boy the pain pills and a glass of water. "Why weren't you at school?" Children like Andy were the reason he had become a pediatrician, but he hadn't quite conquered the feelings generated when he was confronted with child abuse.

The boy dropped his head, cradling his arm against his chest. "I told the other kids I was going back to the cottage because I didn't feel good. I hid instead. I don't like school. I want to go home."

"Just as soon as I get a picture of your arm and we get it fixed up, you can go home."

Andy's head snapped up, his eyes bright. "I can? Really?"

Hannah Smith stepped closer and placed a hand on the child's shoulder. Apprehension marked her stiff actions. "Back home to the refuge."

"No! I want to go home." Tears welled up in Andy's brown eyes, and one slid down his thin face.

"Andy, you can't. I'm sorry." Calmness underscored her words as tiny creases lined her forehead. Her concern and caring attitude accentuated her beauty.

Having realized his mistake, Jacob started to respond when the door opened and the nurse appeared. "Teresa, Andy's visiting us again. We need an X-ray of his left arm."

"Hello, Andy. What did you do to your arm?" Teresa, a petite older woman with a huge, reassuring smile, helped the child down from the table. "I bet you remember where our prize box is. Once we get the X-ray done, I'll let you check it out."

"I can?"

"Sure. If I remember correctly, you were also eyeing that red car the last time. It's still there."

“It is?” Andy hurried out of the room, still holding his arm across his chest.

The refuge’s manager started to follow the pair. Jacob blocked her path and closed the door. Frowning, she immediately backed up against the exam table.

“I’d like a word with you, Ms. Smith. Teresa will take care of Andy. He knows her. She spent quite a bit of time with him several weeks ago.”

Her dark blue gaze fixed on him, narrowing slightly. “I haven’t had a chance to read all the children’s files yet. What happened the last time he was here?”

Obviously she was upset that something like this occurred on her watch. But beneath her professional demeanor, tension vibrated that Jacob suddenly sensed went beyond what had occurred to Andy. “His mother brought him in with a nasty head wound, and I called social services. Her story didn’t check out. Thankfully he was placed quickly at Stone’s Refuge.”

“I was in the middle of reading the children’s files when the school called to find out why he wasn’t there. I found Andy lying on the ground hugging his arm and trying his best not to cry, but his face had dry tear marks on it.” She pushed her long blond hair behind her ears and blew a breath of air out that lifted her bangs. “When I approached him, he tried to act like nothing was wrong.”

“Sadly, Andy is used to holding his pain in. I took several X-rays last time because he was limping and discovered he’d broken his ankle and it was never set properly. He probably will always limp because of the way his bone healed without medical attention.”

“His mother didn’t seek care for him?”

He shook his head. “I think the only reason she came in last time was because there was so much blood involved. She thought he was dying. He’d passed out briefly. She flew into a rage when he was taken from her.” Jacob didn’t know if he would ever forget the scene Andy’s mother created at the clinic that afternoon. If looks could kill, he would be dead, but then he should be accustomed to that from an angry mother.

“Is there a father?”

“No. I don’t think there ever was one in the picture. His mother clammed up and hasn’t said anything about the new or old injuries.” Jacob picked up the child’s chart. “I want you to know what you’re dealing with since you haven’t been on the job long. The only time Andy cried was when he found out he wasn’t going with his mother when he left the hospital. He kept screaming he needed to go home. When he settled down, he whimpered that his mother needed him, but I could never get him to tell me why he thought that.” He jotted his preliminary findings down on the chart. “Have you been a social worker for long?”

A gleam glittered in her eyes. “No, I got my degree recently.”

A newbie. No wonder she’d wanted to know if Andy’s mother had sought help. He would hate to see that light in her eyes dim when the reality of the system sank in. But having dealt with the Department of Human Services and the lack of funding that so often tied its hands when it came to neglected or abused children, he knew the reality of the situation, first as a boy who had gone through the system and now as a pediatrician.

“I’ve been impressed by the setup at Stone’s Refuge, especially since it hasn’t been around for long. We could use more places like that.” Hannah hiked the straps of her brown leather purse up onto her shoulder. “I’m glad they’ve started building another house at the ranch. Mr. Stone has quite a vision.”

Jacob laughed. “That’s Peter. When he came up with using the students from the Cimarron Technology Center to help with the construction of the house, it was a blessing. They’re learning a trade, and we’re getting another place for kids to stay at a cheaper rate.”

“I heard some of his ideas, as well as his wife’s when I interviewed with them. It’s quite an ambitious project.” She started forward. “I’d better check and see—”

The door opened, and Andy came into the room with Teresa and a red car clutched in his hand. “It was there, Dr. Jacob. No one took it.”

The child's words, no one took it, stirred a memory from Jacob's past. He'd been in his fourth foster home, all of his possessions easily contained in a small backpack. Slowly his treasures had disappeared. The first item had been stolen at the shelter after he'd been removed from his mother's care. By the age of twelve he hadn't expected any of his belongings to stay long, so when he had received a radio for Christmas from a church toy drive, he hadn't thought he would keep it more than a day or so. But when he had moved to his fifth foster home seven months later, he still had the radio in his backpack. No one had taken it. His body had begun to fill out by then, and he'd learned to defend himself with the older children.

"Here's the X-ray, Dr. Hartman."

Teresa handed it to him, drawing him back to the present.

After studying the X-ray, Jacob pointed to an area on Andy's forearm. "That's where it's fractured. Teresa will set you up with Dr. Filmore, an orthopedic surgeon here in the clinic, to take care of your arm."

Andy's eyes grew round. "What will he do?"

"He'll probably put a cast on your arm."

"Can people sign it?" Andy stared at the place where Jacob had pointed on the X-ray.

"Yep, but you won't be able to get it wet. You'll have it on for a few months."

Andy grinned. "You mean, I don't have to take a bath for months?"

Jacob chuckled, ruffling the boy's hair. "I'm afraid a few people might have something to say about that."

"But—"

"We'll rig something up to keep your arm with the cast dry while you take a bath." Hannah moved next to Andy, her nurturing side leaking through her professional facade. "And I'm thinking when we get home, we'll have a cast signing and invite everyone. I've got some neat markers we can use. We can use different colors or just one."

"My favorite color is green."

"Then green it is." Hannah glanced toward Jacob. "Where do we go to see Dr. Filmore?"

Jacob nodded toward Teresa who slipped out of the room. "He's on the third floor. He owes me a favor. If he isn't in surgery, he should be able to see Andy quickly. Teresa will arrange it."

Hannah smiled, her glance straying to Andy. "Great."

It lit her whole face, transforming her plain features into a pretty countenance. It reached deep into her eyes, inviting others to join her in grinning. Jacob responded with his own smile, but when her attention came back to him, her grin died. An invisible but palpable barrier fell into place. Was she still worried about the accident on her second day on the job? Or something else?

As Teresa showed Hannah and Andy out of the room, Jacob watched them leave. He couldn't shake the feeling he'd done something wrong in Hannah's eyes, that her emotional reaction went beyond Andy's accident. Jacob was out at the refuge all the time, since he was the resident doctor for the foster homes and on the board of the foundation that ran Stone's Refuge. But the ice beneath her professional facade didn't bode well for their working relationship. As he headed into the hall, he decided he needed to pay Peter a visit and find out what he could about Hannah Smith.

The sun began its descent toward the line of trees along the side of the road leading to Stone's Refuge. Tension gripped Hannah's neck and shoulders from the hours sitting in the doctor's office, waiting for Andy's arm to be taken care of. No, that wasn't the whole reason. The second she'd seen Dr. Jacob Hartman she'd remembered the time her family had been torn apart because of him. After the death of her older brother, Kevin, everything had changed in her life, and Jacob Hartman had been at the center of the tragedy.

But looking at him, no one could tell what he had done. His bearing gave the impression of a proficient, caring doctor. Concern had lined his face while interacting with Andy. Even now she could

picture that look in his chocolate-brown eyes that had warmed when he'd smiled. The two dimples in his cheeks had mocked her when he had turned that grin on her. And for just a second his expression had taunted her to let go of her anger. But she couldn't.

The small boy next to her in the van had been a trouper the whole time, but now he squirmed, his bottled-up energy barely contained. "Mrs. Smith, ya ain't mad at me, are ya?" Andy stared down at his cast, thumping his finger against it over and over.

The rhythmic sound grated on Hannah's raw nerves, but she suppressed her irritation. Andy wasn't the source of her conflicting emotions. "Mad? No. Disappointed, yes. I want you to feel you can come talk to me if something is bothering you rather than playing hooky from school."

Andy dropped his head and mumbled, "Yes, ma'am."

"Please call me Hannah. You and I are the new kids on the block. Actually, you could probably show me the ropes. How long have you been at the house? Two, three weeks?"

He lifted his head and nodded.

"See? This is only my second day. You've got tons more experience at how things are done around here." Why had she accepted this job? How was she going to work with Dr. Hartman? The questions screamed for answers she couldn't give.

"Sure. But I don't know too much. The other kids..."

When he didn't continue his sentence, Hannah slanted a look toward him, his chin again resting on his chest, his shoulders curled forward as though trying to draw inward. "What about the other kids?"

"Nothin'."

She slowed the van as she turned onto the gravel road that led to the group of houses for the foster children at Stone's Refuge. "Is anyone bothering you?"

His head came up, and he twisted toward her. "No. It's not that."

In the short time she'd been around the boy, she felt as though she was talking to a child two or three years older, especially now after the half a day spent at the clinic and his staunch, brave face. But after reading part of his file and hearing what the doctor had said, she understood where the boy was coming from. He'd seen the ugly side of life and experienced more than most kids his age. "Then what's wrong?"

"I don't fit in."

Those words, whispered in a raw voice, poked a dagger into old wounds. She had always been the new kid in school. After her family had fallen apart with Kevin's death and her parents divorced, she and her mother had moved around a lot. "Why do you say that?" she managed to get out, although her throat tightened with buried pain she'd thought she had left behind her. But coming back to her hometown where she had lived for the first nine years of her life had been a mistake. How had she thought she wouldn't have to confront what had happened to Kevin? Of course, she hadn't discovered Dr. Jacob Hartman's involvement with the refuge until yesterday.

Andy averted his gaze, hanging his head again. "I just don't. I never have."

The pain produced from his declaration intensified, threatening her next breath. She slowly drew in a lungful of rich oxygen and some of the tension eased. "Then maybe we could work on it together. The staff at the refuge has been there since it opened last year. In fact, I just moved here last week." Cimarron City had been the only place that had resembled a home to her in her wayfaring life. She'd spent much more time here than any other place. Even while attending college, she'd moved several times. She wanted stability and had chosen the familiar town to be where she would put down roots. Maybe that was a mistake.

"You did?"

"Yep." She parked between the two houses she managed—still wanted to manage. This job had been a dream come true—until she realized that Jacob Hartman was involved. "Up until recently, I'd been in school."

“Aren’t you too old for that?”

Hannah grinned. “In your eyes, probably. I had to work my way through college as a waitress, which took longer than normal.”

Andy tilted his head. “How old are you?”

“Don’t you know you aren’t supposed to ask a woman how old she is?” she said with a laugh, then immediately added when she saw the distress on his thin face, “But I’ll tell you how old if you promise not to tell anyone. I’m twenty-nine.”

“Oh,” he murmured, as though that age really was ancient.

She almost expected him to say, “I’m sorry,” but thankfully he didn’t. Instead, he shoved open the door, slowly climbed from the van, and walked toward the house. Seeing him limp renewed her determination to do well in her first professional job, to help these children have a better life.

But she couldn’t help thinking: her second day at work and a child in her care had broken a bone. Not good. She would make sure that Andy went to school if she had to escort him every day. She needed to let Laura and Peter Stone, the couple who ran the Henderson Foundation that funded the refuge, know that they were back and what happened with Andy. Hannah looked toward the main house off in the distance, on the other side of the freshly painted red barn.

The refuge was perfect for children who needed someone to care about them. At the moment there were two cottages but the foundation for a third had been poured last week. The best part of the place was the fact it was on a ranch, not far from town. The barn housed abandoned animals that the children helped take care of. The wounded helping the wounded. She liked that idea.

Before she went in search of the couple, she needed to check on Andy and the other seven children in the house where she lived. Meg, her assistant at the cottage and the cook, should be inside since the kids had come home from school an hour ago.

Ten minutes later, after satisfying herself that everything was fine, Hannah trekked across the pasture toward the Stones’ place. When she passed in front of the large red double doors thrown open to reveal the stalls inside, she heard a woman’s light laugh followed by a deeper one. She changed her direction and entered the coolness of the barn. In the dimness, she saw both Laura and Peter kneeling inside a pen with several puppies roughhousing on the ground in front of them.

“We’re going to have a hard time not keeping these.” Peter gestured toward the animals that had to be a mix of at least three different breeds.

Laura angled her head toward him. “What’s another puppy or two or three when we have so many? They’re adorable.”

“Are you going blind, woman?”

“Okay, they’re so ugly they’re cute.” Laura caught sight of Hannah and waved her to them. “Don’t you think they’re cute?”

Hannah inspected the black, brown and white puppies with the elongated squat body of a dachshund, the thick, wiry coat of a poodle and the curly tail and wrinkled forehead of a pug. Ugly was an understatement. “I can see their attraction.”

Peter’s laughter reverberated through the cavernous barn. “I meant that we would have a hard time finding homes for them since they are so—unattractive.”

“But that’s their appeal. They’re different, and you and I love different.” Laura stood, dusting off her jean-clad knees.

He swept his arm in a wide arc, indicating the array of animals that had found a refuge at the ranch along with the children. “That’s for sure.”

Laura stepped over the low pen and approached Hannah. “I heard about Andy. Is he okay?”

“Yes. Broken left forearm. He told me he’d wanted to climb to the very top of that elm tree you have outside the barn.”

Laura chuckled. “I’ve found my twins up there more than once.” She glanced back at Peter. “Maybe we should cut it down.”

“And rob the kids of a great tree to scale? No way! We’ll just have to teach Andy the art of climbing.”

“There’s an art to climbing trees?” Hannah watched as Peter came up to Laura’s side, draped his arm over her shoulder and cradled her against him. Wistfulness blanketed Hannah—a desire to have her own husband and family. She’d almost had that once when she’d married Todd. Would she ever have that kind of love again? A home she would stay in for more than a year?

“Of course. The first rule is to make sure you have good footing before you reach up. I’ll talk with Andy.”

“He’s gonna be in a cast for a few months.”

“When he’s ready, I’ll show him how to do it properly.” Peter nuzzled closer to Laura.

“I’m sorry I didn’t realize he wasn’t on the school bus. If I had, he would—”

Laura shook her head. “Don’t, Hannah. Boys will be boys. I have three, and believe me, I know firsthand there’s little we can do when they set their minds to do something. I gather you took him to see Jacob.”

The name stiffened Hannah’s spine. “Yes. He got Andy in to see Dr. Filmore, who put the cast on him.”

“We don’t know what we would do without Jacob to take care of the children for free.” Laura looked up at her husband, love in her eyes. “We’ve taken up more and more of his time as the refuge has grown.”

“Wait until we open the third home. Before we know it, there’ll be eight more children for Jacob to take care of.” Peter shifted his attention to Hannah. “That should be after the first of the year. Are you going to be ready for the expansion?”

“I’m looking forward to it. The more the merrier.” By that time she would know how to deal with Jacob without her stomach tensing into a knot. And hopefully she would become good at masking her aversion because she could do nothing to harm the refuge.

“I knew there was a reason we hired you to run the place. I like that enthusiasm. I’ve got to check on a mare.” Peter kissed his wife’s cheek, then headed toward the back door.

“Don’t blame yourself for Andy’s accident.” Laura pinned her with a sharp, assessing regard.

“I’m that obvious?”

“Yep.” Laura began walking toward the front of the barn. “Kids do things. They get hurt. Believe me, I know with four children. The twins get into more trouble than five kids. I’m always bandaging a knee, cleaning out a cut.”

Outside Hannah saw an old black car coming down the road toward them, dust billowing behind the vehicle. As it neared her, Hannah glimpsed Jacob Hartman driving. Even with him wearing sunglasses, she knew that face. Would never forget that face. She readied herself mentally as the car came to a grinding stop and Jacob climbed from it.

In her last year in college she had discovered the Lord, but she didn’t think her budding faith had prepared her to confront the man responsible for her brother’s death.

Chapter Two

Jacob's long strides chewed up the distance between him and Hannah. Her heartbeat kicked up a notch. Even inhaling more deep breaths didn't alleviate the constriction in her chest.

A huge grin appeared on his face. He nodded toward Laura, then his warm brown gaze homed in on Hannah. "It's good to see you again. How's Andy doing?"

Lord, help! When she had decided to come back to the town and settle down, she'd discovered Jacob Hartman still lived in Cimarron City and was a doctor, one of nine pediatricians, but why did he have to be involved with her children?

"Hannah, are you all right?"

His rich, deep-toned voice penetrated her thoughts. She blinked and focused on his face, his features arranged in a pleasing countenance that made him extra attractive—if she were interested, which she wasn't. His casual air gave the impression of not having a care in the world. Did he even comprehend the pain his actions caused?

"I'm fine." Hannah stuffed her hands into her pants pockets. "Andy's doing okay. He's going around, having everyone sign his cast. If any good has come out of the accident, I would say it has been an icebreaker for him with the others." When she realized she was beginning to ramble, she clamped her lips together, determined not to show how nervous and agitated she was.

Jacob's smile faded as he continued to stare at her. "I'm glad something good came out of it."

Tension invaded his voice, mirroring hers. She curled her hands in her pockets into fists and forced a grin to her lips as she turned toward Laura. "I'd better get back to the house. I just wanted to let you know about Andy. Good day, Dr. Hartman." If she kept things strictly formal and professional, she would be all right.

Hannah started across the pasture toward the refuge, the crisp fall air cooling her heated cheeks. Keep walking. Don't look back. She thought of her Bible in her room at the house and knew she needed to do some reading this evening when the children were settled in their beds. Somehow she had to make enough peace with the situation to allow her to do her job. She wanted what was best for the children and if that meant tolerating Dr. Hartman occasionally, then she could do it. The needs of the children came first.

"Do you get the feeling that Hannah Smith doesn't like me?" Jacob followed the woman's progress across the field.

Laura peered in the same direction. "There was a certain amount of tension. I just thought it was because of Andy's accident. I think she blames herself."

"I think it's something else." Jacob kneaded the nape of his neck, his muscles coiled in a knot. "Tell me about our new Stone's Refuge's manager."

"She just completed her bachelor's degree in social work from a college in Mississippi."

"What brought her to Oklahoma? The job?"

Laura laughed. "In our short existence we are garnering a good reputation but not that good so we can attract job candidates from out of state. She used to live here once and wanted to come back. She heard about the job from a classmate, who lives in Tulsa, and applied. Personally I think the Lord brought her to us. She's perfect for the job and beat every other candidate hands down."

"High praise coming from you."

"When the third house is finished, we're going to need someone highly organized and capable. We'll have almost thirty children, ranging in ages from five to eighteen. I'm hoping to bring in another couple like Cathy and Roman for the third home and eventually have one in the second cottage, too."

“What happens to Hannah Smith then? I understand she’s living in the second cottage right now.” He had heard and sensed Hannah’s passion for her job earlier and agreed with Laura she would be good as the refuge’s manager.

“We’ll need someone to oversee all three homes. I can’t do it and run the foundation, too. Raising money is a full-time job. If she wants to continue living on-site, we’ll come up with something, but I’d like a man and woman in each cottage in the long run, sort of like a surrogate mother and father for the children.”

He had pledged himself and his resources to the Henderson Foundation because he knew how lacking good care was for children without a home and family. “I’ll do whatever you need.”

“I want you to find out what’s going on with Hannah. If there’s something concerning you, take care of it. She’s perfect for the job, and I don’t want to lose her. You can charm the spots off a leopard.”

“I think you’ve got me confused with Noah.” He peered toward the group homes. “Are you sure there isn’t something else I could do?” He wished he had the ease with women that Noah did. His foster brother rarely dated the same lady for more than a month while lately he had no time to date even one woman.

“Yeah, while you’re over there, check and see how Andy is faring. I worry about him.”

“You worry about all of them.”

“Hey, I thought I heard your car.” Peter emerged from the barn, a smile of greeting on his face. “What brings you out this way? Is someone sick?”

“Do I have to have a reason to pay good friends a visit?”

Peter slipped his arms around Laura’s waist, and she leaned back against him. “No, but I know how busy you’ve been, and it isn’t even flu season yet.”

Watching Peter and Laura together produced an ache deep in Jacob’s heart. He wanted that with a woman, but Peter was right. His work and church took up so much of his life that he hadn’t dated much since setting up his practice two years ago. And you have to date to become involved with a woman, he thought with a wry grin. Maybe Noah could give him lessons after all.

Laura’s gaze fastened on him. “Jacob’s just leaving. He’s going over to check on Andy.”

A scowl descended over Peter’s features. “Andy’s situation is a tough one. His mother is fighting the state. She wants him back.”

“To use as a punching bag.” Jacob clenched his jaw. He couldn’t rid himself of the feeling Andy and his situation were too similar to his own experiences growing up, as though he had to relive his past through the child. He’d been blessed finally to find someone like Paul and Alice Henderson to set him on the right path. “If at all possible, I won’t let that happen.” He needed to return the gift the Hendersons had given him.

“Stop by and have dinner with us when you’re through. I want to discuss the plans for a fourth house.”

“Peter, I love your ambition, but the third one isn’t even half-finished.” Jacob dug into his pocket for his keys.

“But maybe it will be by the holidays. What a wonderful way to celebrate Christ’s birthday with a grand opening!”

“I can’t argue with you on that one, but the weather would have to cooperate for that to happen and you know Oklahoma. When has the weather cooperated?” Jacob headed toward his car. He twice attempted to start it before he managed to succeed and pull away from the barn. He had a woman to charm, he thought with a chuckle.

Andy held up his cast. “See all the names I’ve gotten. All in green.”

Hannah inspected it as though it were a work of art. “You even went to the other cottage.”

“Yep, I didn’t want to leave anyone out.”

Because he knew what it was like to be left out, Hannah thought and took the green marker from Andy to pen her own name on the cast. “There’s hardly any room left.”

He flipped his arm over. “I had them leave a spot for you here.”

Hannah wrote her name over the area above his wrist where a person felt for a pulse.

“I’ve saved a place for Dr. Jacob, too.”

Andy’s declaration jolted Hannah. She nearly messed up her last letter but managed to save it by drawing a line under her name. “You aren’t going back to see Dr. Jacob. Dr. Filmore will be seeing you about your arm.” She realized Jacob Hartman was at the barn talking with Peter and Laura, but hopefully he would leave without coming over here. She needed more time to shore up her defenses. The walk across the pasture hadn’t been nearly long enough.

“He told me he would come see me. He’ll be here. The others said he never breaks a promise.”

That was just great! She was considering retreating to her office off her bedroom when the front door opened and the very man she wanted to avoid entered the cottage. His dark gaze immediately sought hers. A trapped sensation held her immobile next to Andy in the middle of the living area off the entrance.

“Dr. Jacob. You came! I knew you would.” With his hand cradled next to his chest, Andy hurried across the room and came to an abrupt halt inches from the doctor. The boy grinned from ear to ear. “See all the names I have!” He held up the green marker. “Will you sign it?”

“Where?”

“Right under Hannah’s.”

“I’d be honored to sign your cast.” Jacob again looked at her and said, “I’m in good company,” then scribbled his signature on the plaster, a few of his letters touching hers.

The adoring expression on Andy’s face galled her. If the boy only knew—Hannah shook that thought from her mind. She would never say anything. She couldn’t dwell on the past or she would never be able to deal with Jacob in a civil way. She had to rise above her own anger if she was going to continue to work at Stone’s Refuge and put the children’s needs before her own.

Was she being tested by God?

She didn’t have time to contemplate an answer. Kids flooded into the living room to see Dr. Jacob. In less than five minutes, every child in the house surrounded him, asking him questions, telling him about their day at school.

How had he fooled so many people? Maybe she was here to keep an eye on him. But in her heart she knew that wasn’t the reason, because she couldn’t see Peter and Laura having anyone but the best taking care of the foster children.

Jacob tousled Gabe’s hair. “I see you’ve got your baseball. How’s that throwing arm?”

“Great. You should see me.” Gabe grasped Jacob’s hand and tugged him toward the front door. “I’ll show you.”

Jacob allowed himself to be dragged outside, all the kids following. Hannah stepped out onto the porch and observed the impromptu practice in the yard. Laughter floated on the cooling air while the good doctor took turns throwing the ball to various children. They adored Dr. Jacob. She should be cheered by that thought, but Hannah couldn’t help the conflicting emotions warring inside her.

If God had put her here to forgive Jacob, she had a long way to go.

“I thought I saw Jacob’s car.” Cathy, the other cottage mom, came up next to her at the wooden railing. “It’s the ugliest—thing. I can’t even call it a car. I sometimes wonder how he even makes it out here in that rolling death trap.”

Hannah’s fingernails dug into the railing. She hadn’t even been able to see Kevin for one last time at his funeral because of how messed up he had been after the car wreck. Although seven of the children were running around and throwing the ball, all she could see was Jacob standing in the middle, smiling, so full of energy and life. Not a care in the world.

Before long several of the boys ganged up on him, and they began wrestling on the ground even though Jacob had on nice khaki pants and a long-sleeved blue cotton shirt. The gleeful sounds emphasized the fun the kids were having. But the scene was tainted by Hannah's perception of Jacob Hartman.

"He's so wonderful with them. If he ever decided to take time for himself, he might find a nice woman to marry and have a boatload of children. He'd make a great dad. Too bad I'm already spoken for."

Seizing the opportunity to turn her back on Jacob, Hannah swung her attention to Cathy. "To a very nice young man."

Her assistant smiled. "I know. Roman is the best husband."

"Where is he?"

"He went over to help Peter at the barn with one of the animals."

"It's nice he works at a veterinarian clinic."

"One day he hopes to go back to school to become a vet even if he's the oldest student in the class."

Hannah relaxed back against the railing, allowing some of the tension to flow from her body. The sounds of continual laughter peppered the air. "I was beginning to think that would be the case with me. It's hard working and going to college at the same time, but it's worth it when you do finally graduate."

"I almost forgot the reason I came out here. I passed through the kitchen and Meg said dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes." Cathy left, walking back to the other cottage next door.

Good. That should put an end to the doctor's visit. Hannah wheeled around and called out to the nearest two girls who were standing off to the side, watching the melee with the boys. "Let's get everyone inside to wash their hands for dinner."

Shortly the group on the ground untangled their limbs and leaped to their feet. They raced toward the door while Jacob moved slowly to rise, his shirttail pulled from his pants, his brown hair lying at odd angles. He tucked in his top and finger combed his short strands.

Andy, who had been standing off to the side watching the fun, shuffled toward Jacob, taking his hand. "Why don't you eat with us, Dr. Jacob?"

The too-handsome man glanced toward her. The child followed the direction of his gaze and asked, "Can he, Hannah?" When she didn't immediately answer, he quickly added, "He'd better check me out before bedtime to make sure I'm okay."

Having stayed behind, too, Gabe took Jacob's other hand. "Yeah. Don't forget you promised me the last time you were here that you'd read a story to me before I went to bed."

That trapped feeling gripped Hannah again. She really didn't have a reason to tell the man no, and yet to spend the whole evening with him wasn't her idea of fun.

Hannah shifted from one foot to the other, realizing everyone was staring at her, waiting for an answer she didn't want to give. She pasted a full-fledged smile on her face that she fought to maintain. "Sure, he can—if he doesn't mind hamburgers, coleslaw and baked beans."

He returned her grin. "Sounds wonderful to a man who doesn't cook. Meg can make anything taste great, even cabbage."

His warm expression, directed totally at her, tempted her cold heart to thaw. "Cabbage is good for you," was all she could think of to say.

"Yeah, I know, but that doesn't mean it tastes good."

"Yuck. I don't like it, either." Gabe puffed out his chest as though he was proud of the fact he and Dr. Jacob were alike in their food preferences.

"Me, neither." Andy followed suit, straightening his thin frame.

Jacob peered down at both boys. "But Meg makes it taste great, and Hannah is right. It's good for you. I'll play a board game with you guys if you finish all your coleslaw. Okay?"

“Yes,” the two shouted, then rushed toward the door.

Oh, great. The evening was going to be a long drawn-out affair with games and reading. Maybe she could gracefully escape to her room after dinner while he entertained the children. Hannah waited until he had mounted the porch steps before saying, “Nice recovery.”

He gave her another heart-melting grin. “I keep forgetting how impressionable these children can be. They’re so hungry for attention and love. I wish I had more time to spend with them.”

No! Please don’t! She pressed her lips together to keep from saying those words aloud. But she couldn’t keep from asking, “Just how involved are you with the refuge?”

He chuckled. “Worried you’ll have to be around me a lot?”

Heat scored her cheeks. Obviously she wasn’t a very good actress, a fact she already knew. She forced a semi-smile to her lips. “I was curious. I just thought you were the refuge’s doctor and that’s all.”

He planted himself in front of her. “I’m more than that. Peter, Noah and I were the ones who started this. Peter is the one in charge because he lives on the property, but I keep very involved. I’m on the foundation board. This project is important to me.”

His words and expression laid down a challenge to her. “It’s important to me, too.” She took one step back. He’s on the foundation board. It’s worse than I thought.

“Why?”

Although the space between them was a few feet, Hannah suddenly had a hard time thinking clearly. A good half a minute passed before she replied, “I went into social work because I want to make a difference, especially with children who need someone to be their champion. Stone’s Refuge gives me a wonderful opportunity to do my heart’s desire.” If I can manage my feelings concerning you.

“Then we have something in common, because that’s why I’m involved with the refuge.”

The idea they had anything in common stunned Hannah into silence.

The front door opened, and Gabe stuck his head out. “Dr. Jacob, are you coming?”

“Sure. I’ll be there in a sec.” When the door closed, he turned back to her, intensity in his brown gaze. “I sense we’ve gotten off on the wrong foot. Somehow we’ll have to manage to work together. I won’t have the children put in the middle.”

She tilted up her chin. “They won’t be.”

“Good. Then we understand each other.”

He left her alone on the porch to gather her frazzled composure. He was absolutely right about never letting the children know how she really felt about their “Dr. Jacob.” She had two choices. She could quit the perfect job or she could stay and deal with her feelings about him, come to some kind of resolution concerning Jacob Hartman. Maybe even manage to forgive him.

There really is only one choice.

Trembling with the magnitude of her decision, Hannah sank back against the railing and folded her arms across her chest. She’d never run from a problem in the past, and she wasn’t going to now. She didn’t quit, either. But most of all, these children needed her. She had so much love to give them. A lifetime of emotions that she’d kept bottled up inside of her while she had been observing life go by her—always an outsider yearning to be included.

So there’s no choice. Lord, I need Your help more now than ever before. I want this to work and I can’t do it without You. How do I forgive the man who killed my brother because I can’t expose his past to the others? The children adore him, and I won’t hurt them.

Jacob finished the last bite of his hamburger and wiped his mouth with his napkin. “So next week is fall break. What kind of plans do you all have for the extra two days off from school?”

Several of the children launched into a description of their plans at the same time.

He held up his hand. “One at a time. I think you were first, Gabe.”

“Peter wants us to help him when he takes some of the animals to several nursing homes on Thursday.”

“And there’s a lot of work to be done on the barn expansion.” Susie, the oldest child in this cottage, which housed the younger kids, piped up the second Gabe stopped talking.

“He’s getting new animals all the time.” Terry, a boy with bright red-orange hair, stuffed the last of his burger into his mouth.

Jacob laughed. “True. Word has gotten around about this place.”

Nancy nodded. “Yep. I found a kitten the other day in the trash can outside.”

Jacob caught Hannah’s attention at the other end of the long table. “Do you have any activities planned that you need a chaperone for next week? Maybe I—”

“I think I’ve got it covered.” She looked down at her plate, using her fork to stir the baked beans around in a circle as if it were the most important thing to do.

“I’m sorry, Hannah, I didn’t get a chance to tell you I won’t be able to go to the zoo with you on Friday.” Meg, the cook and helper, stood and removed some of the dishes from the center of the table. “That was the only time I could get in to see the doctor about the arthritis in my knees.”

Nancy’s blond pigtails bounced as she clapped her hands. “Then Dr. Jacob can go with us!”

Hannah lifted her head and glanced from Meg to Nancy before her regard lit upon him. For a few seconds anxiety clouded her gaze. He started to tell her he didn’t have to go when a smile slowly curved her lips, although it never quite touched her eyes.

“You’re welcome to come with us to the zoo. It’ll be an all-day trip. We leave at ten and probably won’t get home until four.” Her stare stayed fixed upon him.

The intensity in her look almost made Jacob squirm like Andy, who had a hard time keeping still. She might not have meant it, but deep in her eyes he saw a challenge. Determined to break down the barrier she’d erected between them, he nodded. “I’ll be here bright and early next Friday, and I even know how to drive the minibus.”

“That’s great, since I don’t think Hannah’s had a chance to learn yet. If you aren’t used to it, it can be a bit awkward.” Meg stacked several more plates, then headed for the kitchen.

“You can take that kind of time off just like that?” Hannah snapped her fingers.

“I always leave some time during a break or the holidays for the kids.”

“Yep.” Terry, the child who had been at the cottage the longest, stood to help Meg take the dishes into the kitchen.

“Well, then it’s settled. I appreciate the help, especially with the minibus.” Hannah rose. “Who has homework still to do tonight?” She scanned the faces of the eight children at the dining-room table.

Several of them confessed to having to do more homework and left to get their books.

Gabe, short for his nine years, held up his empty plate. “I ate all my coleslaw.”

“Me, too.” Andy gestured toward his as Susie took it.

“You two aren’t part of the cleanup crew?” Jacob gave the girl his dishes.

Both boys shook their heads.

“Then get a game out, and I’ll be in there in a minute.”

“Can I play, too?” Nancy leaped to her feet. “I don’t have to clean up.”

Gabe frowned and started to say something, but Jacob cut him off with, “Sure you can.”

Nancy, being in kindergarten, was the youngest in the house. Jacob suspected that and the fact she was a girl didn’t set well with Gabe, and judging by Andy’s pout, him, either. But Jacob knew the importance of bonding as a family and that meant every child, regardless of sex or age, should have an opportunity to play.

Gabe and Andy stomped off with Nancy right behind them, her pigtails swinging as she hurried to keep up. Jacob turned toward Hannah and noticed the dining-room table had been cleared and

they were totally alone now. That fact registered on her face at the same time. Her eyes flared for a second, then an indecipherable expression descended as though a door had been shut on him.

"I'm glad we have a few minutes alone." The look of surprise that flashed into her eyes made him smile. "I forgot to tell you earlier that Andy's mother is fighting to get him back. Peter just found out today."

"She is?"

"And I'm not going to let that happen. I've seen his injuries." I've been there. I know the horror. "He's better off without her."

"If she cleans up her act and stops taking drugs, he might be all right going back home. In the short time I've been around him, I've seen how determined he is to get back there."

"He isn't better off if he returns to her. Believe me."

A puzzled look creased her forehead. "Then why does he want to go home?"

He shook his head slowly. "You're new at this. Take my word in this situation—he shouldn't go back to his mother. He's the caretaker in that family of two and he feels responsibility as a parent would. Certainly his mother doesn't."

Hannah's face reddened. She came around the side of the table within a few feet of him. "How do you know this for a fact? Has Andy said anything to you?"

"No, I just know. I was in foster care for many years. I've seen and heard many things you've never dreamed of. Give yourself a year. Your attitude that the birth parent is best will change."

"I believe if it's possible a family should be together. Tearing one apart can be devastating to a child."

The ardent tone in her voice prodded his anger. His past dangled before him in all its pain and anguish. His heartbeat thundered in his ears, momentarily drowning out the sounds of the children in the other room. "Keeping a family together sometimes can be just as devastating." He balled his hands at his sides. "Why did you really go into social work?" he asked as though her earlier reason wasn't enough.

Her own temper blazed, if the narrowing of her eyes was any indication. "As I told you earlier, to help repair damaged families. But if that isn't possible, to make sure the children involved are put in the best situation possible."

His anger, fed by his memories, sizzled. Before he said anything else to make their relationship even rockier, he spun around and left her standing in the dining room.

The children's laughter, coming from the common living area, drew him. He needed that. For years he'd dealt successfully with the wounds of his childhood by suppressing them. Why were they coming to the surface now?

Lord, what are You trying to tell me? Aren't I doing enough to make up for what I did? What do You want of me?

Jacob stepped into the room and immediately Gabe and Andy surrounded him and pulled him toward the table in front of the bay window where the game was set up. Nancy sat primly, toying with a yellow game piece. Her huge grin wiped the past few minutes from his mind as he took his chair between the boys.

He lost himself in the fun and laughter as the three kids came gunning for him. He kept being sent back to the start and loving every second of it. Until he felt someone watching him. Jacob glanced up and found Hannah in the doorway, a question in her eyes—as though she couldn't believe a grown man was having so much fun playing a kid's game. He certainly hadn't done much of this as a child.

Across the expanse of the living room that challenge he had sensed earlier reared up. If she was staying at the refuge as its manager, then he would have to find a way for this situation to work. He didn't want the kids to feel any animosity between him and Hannah. They'd had enough of that in their short lives. Before he left tonight, he would find out exactly why she was wary of him.

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