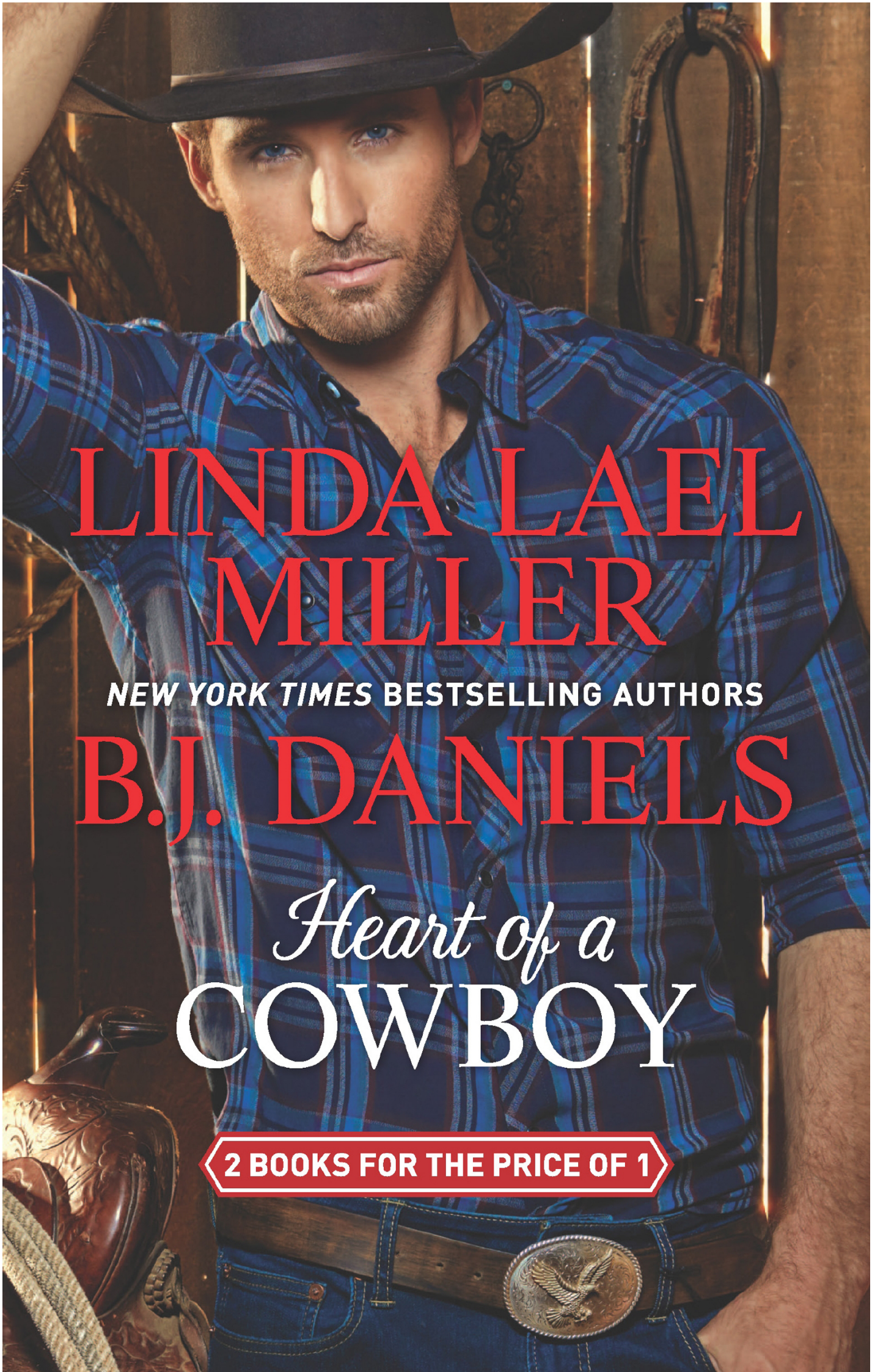
LINDA LAEL MILLER
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHORS
B.J. DANIELS
Heart of a COWBOY
2 BOOKS FOR THE PRICE OF 1

Linda Lael

Heart Of A Cowboy

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From «First Lady of the West» Linda Lael Miller and New York Times bestselling author B.J. Daniels come two tales of love and trust in big sky country.Creed's HonorLinda Lael MillerConner Creed knows exactly who he is: a hardworking rancher carrying on his uncle's legacy in Lonesome Bend, Colorado. Maybe a small-town cowboy's life isn't his dream, but he owes the man who took him in as a kid. When he meets Tricia McCall, a newcomer to the small-town, he discovers a kindred spirit who knows a thing or two of her own about living someone else's dreams. As they each struggle with their own desires, together they might just find their own dreams in Lonesome Bend.UnforgivenB.J. DanielsIn Beartooth, Montana, land and family is everything. So when Destry Grant's brother is accused of killing Rylan West's sister, the high school sweethearts leave their relationship behind in order to help their families recover from tragedy. Years later, Destry is dedicated to her ranch and making plans for the future. Plans that just might include reuniting with the love of her life. Rylan, too, is done denying his feelings for Destry. But when her brother returns to clear his name and the secrets of the past threaten to resurface, their last chance at love may turn them against each other for good.

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Praise for the authors of Heart of a Cowboy

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—Publishers Weekly

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—RT Book Reviews

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Creed's Honor

To some of my favorite Laels:
Mike and Sara and Courtney and Chandler

CHAPTER ONE

Lonesome Bend, Colorado

TRICIA MCCALL WAS not the type to see apparitions, but there were times—especially when lonely, tired or both—that she caught just the merest flicker of a glimpse of her dog, Rusty, out of the corner of one eye. Each time that happened, she hoped for the impossible; her heartbeat quickened with joy and excitement, and her breath rushed up into the back of her throat. But when she turned, no matter how quickly, the shepherd-Lab-setter mix was never there.

Of course, he wasn't. Rusty had died in his sleep only six months before, contented and gray-muzzled and full of years, and his absence was still an ache that throbbed in the back of Tricia's heart whenever she thought of him. Which was often.

After all, Rusty had been her best friend for nearly half her life. She was almost thirty now, and she'd been fifteen when she and her dad had found the reddish-brown pup hiding under a picnic table at the campground, nearly starved, flea-bitten and shivering.

She and Joe McCall had debugged him as best they could, fed him and taken him straight to Dr. Benchley's office for shots and a checkup. From then on, Rusty was a member of the family.

"Meow," interrupted a feline voice coming from the general vicinity of Tricia's right ankle.

Still wearing her ratty blue chenille robe and the pink fluffy slippers her best friend, Diana, had given her for Christmas many moons ago as a joke, Tricia looked down to see Winston, a black tom with a splash of white between his ears. He was a frequent visitor to her apartment, since he lived just downstairs, with his mistress, Tricia's great-grandmother, Natty. The separate residences were connected by an inside stairway, but Winston still managed to startle her on a regular basis.

"Meow," the former stray repeated, this time with more emphasis, looking earnestly up at Tricia. Translation: It's cat abuse. Natty McCall may look like a harmless old woman, but I'm being starved, I tell you. You've got to do something.

"A likely story, sardine-breath," Tricia replied, out loud. "I was there when the groceries were delivered last Friday, remember? You wouldn't go hungry if we were snowed in till spring."

Winston twitched his sleek tail in a jaunty, oh-well-I-tried sort of way and crossed the small kitchen to leap up onto Tricia's desk and curl up on a tidy stack of printer paper next to the keyboard. He watched Tricia with half-closed amber eyes as she poured herself a cup of coffee and meandered over to boot up the PC. Maybe there would be an email from Hunter; that would definitely lift her spirits.

Not that she was down, exactly. No, she felt more like someone living in suspended animation, a sort of limbo between major life events. She was marking time, marching in place. And that bothered her.

At the push of a button, the monitor flared to life and there it was: the screensaver photo of her and Hunter, beaming in front of a ski lodge in Idaho and looking like—well—a couple. Two happy and reasonably attractive people who belonged together, outfitted for a day on the slopes.

With the tip of one finger, Tricia touched Hunter's square-jawed, classically handsome face. Pixels scattered, like a miniature universe expanding after a tiny, silent big bang. She set her cup on the little bit of desk space Winston wasn't already occupying and plunked into the chair she'd dragged away from the dinette set.

She sat very still for a moment or so, the cup of coffee she'd craved from the instant she'd opened her eyes that morning cooling nearby, her gaze fixed on the cheerfully snowy scene. Big smiles. Bright eyes.

Maybe she ought to change the picture, she thought. Put the slide show of Rusty back up. Trouble was, the loss was still too fresh for that.

So she left the ski-lodge shot where it was. She and Hunter had had a good thing going, back in Seattle, in what seemed like a previous lifetime now even though it had only been a year and a half since the passion they'd been so sure they could sustain had begun to fizzle.

As soon as she sold the failing businesses she'd inherited when her dad died—the River's Bend Campground and RV Park and the decrepit Bluebird Drive-in theater at the edge of town—she could go back to her real life in the art world of Seattle. Open a little gallery in the Pike Place Market, maybe, or somewhere in Pioneer Square.

Beside her, Winston unfurled his tail so the end of it brushed the back of Tricia's hand, rolled it back up again and then repeated the whole process. Gently jolted out of her reverie, she watched as wisps of black fur drifted across her line of vision and then settled, with exquisite accuracy, onto the surface of her coffee.

Tricia shoved back her chair, the legs of it making a loud, screeching sound on the scuffed linoleum floor, and she winced before remembering that Natty was out of town this week, visiting her eighty-nine-year-old sister in Denver, and therefore could not have been disturbed by the noise.

Muttering good-naturedly, she crossed to the old-fashioned sink under the narrow window that looked out over the outside landing, dumped the coffee, rinsed the cup out thoroughly and poured herself a refill.

Winston jumped down from the desktop, making a solid thump when he landed, as he was a somewhat rotund fellow.

Leaning back against the counter, Tricia fortified herself with a couple of sips of the hot, strong coffee she knew—even without Natty's subtle reminders—she drank too often, and in excessive quantities.

Winston had been right to put in his order for breakfast, she reflected; it was her job to feed him and empty his litter box while her great-grandmother was away.

"Come on," she said, coffee in hand, heading toward the doorway that led down the dark, narrow stairs to Natty's part of the house. "I wouldn't want you keeling over from hunger."

You're not even thirty, commented a voice in her head, and you're talking to cats. You seriously need a life.

With a sigh, Tricia flipped on the single light in the sloping ceiling above the stairs and started down, careful because of Winston's tendency to wind himself around her ankles and the bulky slippers, which were a tripping hazard even on a flat surface.

Natty's rooms smelled pleasantly of recent wood fires blazing on the stone hearth, some lushly scented mix of potpourri and the lavender talcum powder so many old ladies seemed to favor.

Crossing the living room, which was stuffed with well-crafted antique furniture, every surface sporting at least one intricately crocheted doily and most of them adorned with a small army of ornately framed photographs as well, Tricia smiled. At ninety-one, Natty was still busy, with friends of all ages, and she was pretty active in the community, too. Until the year before, she'd been in

charge of the annual rummage sale and chili feed, a popular event held the last weekend of October. Members of the Ladies' Auxiliary—the organization they'd been auxiliary to was long defunct—donated the money they raised to the local school system, to be used for extras like art supplies, musical instruments and uniforms for the marching band. And while Natty had stepped down as the group's chairperson, she attended every meeting.

Natty's kitchen was as delightfully old-fashioned as the rest of the house—although there was an electric stove, the original wood-burning contraption still dominated one corner of the long, narrow room. And Natty still used it, when the spirit moved her to bake.

Without the usual fire crackling away, the kitchen seemed a little on the chilly side, and Tricia shivered once as she headed toward the pantry, setting her coffee mug aside on the counter. She took a can of Winston's regular food—he was only allowed sardines on Sundays, as a special treat—from one of the shelves in the pantry, popped the top and dumped the contents into one of several chipped but still beautiful soup bowls reserved for his use.

Frosty-cold air seemed to emanate from the floor as she bent to put the bowl in front of him. Tricia felt it even through the soles of those ridiculous slippers.

While Winston chowed down, she ran some fresh drinking water and placed the bowl within easy reach. Then, hugging herself against the cold, she glanced at the bay windows surrounding Natty's heirloom oak table, half expecting to see snowflakes drifting past the glass.

A storm certainly wouldn't be unusual in that part of Colorado, even though it was only mid-October, but Tricia was holding out for good weather just the same. The summer and early fall had been unusually slow over at the campground and RV park, but folks came from all over that part of the state to attend the rummage sale/chili feed, and a lot of them brought tents and travel trailers, and set up for one last stay along the banks of the river. The modest fees Tricia charged for camping spots and the use of electrical hookups, as well as her cut of the profits from the vending machines, would carry her through a couple of months.

Some benevolent soul could still happen along and buy the properties Joe had left her, but so far all the For Sale signs hadn't produced so much as a nibble.

Tricia sighed, watched Winston eat for a few moments, then started for the stairs. Yes, it was early, but she had a full workday ahead over at River's Bend. She'd already let the seasonal crew go, which meant she manned the registration desk by herself, answering the phone on the rare occasions when it rang and slipping away for short intervals to clean the public showers and the restrooms. After the big weekend at the end of the month, she would shut everything down for the winter.

A lump of sadness formed in Tricia's throat as she climbed the stairs, leaving the door at the bottom open for Winston as she would the one at the top. As a child, she'd loved coming to River's Bend for the summers, "helping" her dad run the outdoor theater and the campground, the two of them boarding with Natty and a series of pampered cats named for historical and/or political figures the older woman admired.

One had been Abraham; another, General Washington. Next came a redoubtable tabby, Laurel Roosevelt, and now there was Winston, for the cigar-smoking prime minister who had shepherded England through the darkest hours of World War II.

Tricia was smiling again by the time she reached her own kitchen, which was warmer. She was about to sit down at the computer again to check her email, as she'd intended to do earlier, when she heard the pounding at the back door downstairs.

Startled, Winston yowled and shot through the inside doorway like a black, furry bullet, his trajectory indicating that he intended to hide out in Tricia's bedroom, under the four-poster, maybe, or on the high shelf in her closet.

Once, when something scared him, he'd climbed straight up her living room draperies, and it had taken both her and Natty to coax him down again.

The pounding came again, louder this time.

"Oh, for pity's sake," Tricia grumbled, employing a phrase she'd picked up from Natty, tightening the belt of her bathrobe and moving, once more, in the direction of the stairs. She followed the first cliché up with a second, also one of Natty's favorites. "Hold your horses!"

Again, the impatient visitor knocked. Hard enough, in fact, to rattle every window on the first floor of the house.

A too-brief silence fell.

Tricia was halfway down the stairs, steam-powered by early-morning annoyance, when the sound shifted. Now whoever it was had moved to her door, the one that opened onto the outside landing.

Murmuring a word she definitely hadn't picked up from her great-grandmother, Tricia turned and huffed her way back up to her own quarters.

Winston yowled again, the sound muffled.

"I'm coming!" she yelled, spotting a vaguely familiar and distinctly masculine form through the frosted glass oval in her door. Lonesome Bend was a town of less than five thousand people, most of whom had lived there all their lives, as had their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents, so Tricia had long since gotten out of the habit of looking to see who was there before opening the door.

Conner Creed stood in front of her, one fist raised to knock again, a sheepish smile curving his lips. His blond hair, though a little long, was neatly trimmed, and he wore a blue denim jacket over a white shirt, along with jeans and boots that had seen a lot of hard use.

"Sorry," he said, with a shrug of his broad shoulders, when he came face-to-face with Tricia.

"Do you know what time it is?" Tricia demanded.

His blue eyes moved over her hair, which was probably sticking out in all directions since she hadn't yet brushed and then tamed it into a customary long, dark braid, her coiffure of choice, then the rag-bag bathrobe and comical slippers. That he could take a liberty like that without coming off as rude struck Tricia as—well—it just struck her, that's all.

"Seven-thirty," he answered, after checking his watch. "I brought Miss Natty a load of firewood, as she wanted, but she didn't answer her door. And that worried me. Is she all right?"

"She's in Denver," Tricia said stiffly.

His smile practically knocked her back on her heels. "Well, then, that explains why she didn't come to the door. I was afraid she might have fallen or something." A pause. "Is the coffee on?"

Though Tricia was acquainted with Conner, as she was with virtually everybody else in town, she didn't know him well—they didn't move in the same social circles. She was an outsider raised in Seattle, except for those golden summers with her dad, while the Creeds had been ranching in the area since the town was settled, way back in the late 1800s. Being ninety-nine percent certain that the man wasn't a homicidal maniac or a serial rapist—Natty was very fond of him, after all, which said something about his character—she stepped back, blushing, and said, "Yes. There's coffee—help yourself."

"Thanks," he said, in a cowboy drawl, ambling past her in the loose-limbed way of a man who was at ease wherever he happened to find himself, whether on the back of a bucking bronco or with both feet planted firmly on the ground. The scent of fresh country air clung to him, along with a woodsy aftershave, hay and something minty—probably toothpaste or mouthwash.

Tricia pushed the door shut and then stood with her back to it, watching as Conner opened one cupboard, then another, found a cup and helped himself at the coffeemaker.

Torn between mortification at being caught in her robe with her hair going wild, and stunned by his easy audacity, Tricia didn't smile. On some level, she was tallying the few things she knew about Conner Creed—that he lived on the family ranch, that he had an identical twin brother called Cody or Brody or some other cowboy-type name, that he'd never been married and, according to Natty, didn't seem in any hurry to change that.

"I'm sure my great-grandmother will be glad you brought that wood," she said finally, striving for a neutral conversational tone but sounding downright insipid instead. "Natty loves a good fire, especially when the temperature starts dropping."

Conner regarded Tricia from a distance that fell a shade short of far enough away to suit her, and raised one eyebrow. Indulged himself in a second leisurely sip from his mug before bothering to reply. "When's she coming back?" he asked. "Miss Natty, I mean."

"Probably next week," Tricia answered, surprised to find herself having this conversation. It wasn't every day, after all, that a good-looking if decidedly cocky cattle rancher tried to beat down a person's door at practically the crack of dawn and then stood in her kitchen swilling coffee as if he owned the place. "Or the week after, if she's having an especially good time."

"Miss Natty didn't mention that she was planning on taking a trip," Conner observed thoughtfully, after another swallow of coffee.

The statement irritated Tricia—since when was Conner Creed her great-grandmother's keeper? All of a sudden, she wanted him gone, from her kitchen, from her house. He didn't seem to be in any more of a hurry to leave than he was to get married, though.

And he was using up all the oxygen in the room.

Did he think she'd bound and gagged Natty with duct tape, maybe stuck her in a closet?

She gestured toward the inside stairway. "Feel free to see for yourself if it will ease your mind as far as Natty is concerned. And, by the way, you scared the cat."

He flashed that wickedly innocent grin again; it lighted his eyes, and Tricia noticed that there was a rim of gray around the blue irises. He had good teeth, too—white and straight.

Stop, Tricia told her racing brain. Her thoughts flew, clicking like the beads on an abacus.

"I believe you," he said. "If you say Miss Natty is in Denver, kicking up her heels with her sister, then I reckon it's true."

"Gee, that's a relief," Tricia said dryly, folding her arms. Then, after a pause, "If that's everything...?"

"Sorry about scaring the cat," Conner told her affably, putting his mug in the sink and pushing off from the counter, starting for the door. "Truth is, the critter's never liked me much. Must have figured out that I'm more of a dog-and-horse person."

Tricia opened her mouth, shut it again. What did a person say to that?

Conner curved a hand around the doorknob, looked back at her over one of those fine, denim-covered shoulders of his. Mischief danced in his eyes, quirked up one corner of his mouth. "If you wouldn't mind letting me in downstairs," he said, "I could fill up the wood boxes. There's room in the shed for the rest of the load, I guess."

Tricia nodded. She had an odd sense of disorientation, as if she'd suddenly been thrust underwater and held there, and on top of that had to translate everything this man said from some language other than her own before his meaning penetrated the gray matter between her ears.

"I'll meet you at Natty's back door," she said, still feeling muddled, as he went out.

She stood rooted to the spot, listening as the heels of Conner's boots made a rapid thunking sound on the outside steps.

Winston crept out of the short hallway leading to the apartment's one bedroom and slinked over to Tricia, purring companionably while he turned figure eights around her ankles.

Wishing she had time to pull on some clothes, fix her hair and maybe even slap on a little makeup, Tricia went back down to Natty's place, bustled through to the kitchen, turned the key in the lock and undid the chain, and wrenched open the door.

Conner was already there, standing on the porch, grinning at her. After looking her over once more in that offhand way that so disconcerted her, he shook his head slightly and rubbed the back of his neck with one hand.

"Thanks," he said, his tone husky with amusement. "I'll take it from here."

Tricia felt heat surge into her cheeks, spark in her eyes. He knew she was uncomfortable and not a little embarrassed, damn him, and he was enjoying it.

"I'll come back in a few minutes to lock up behind you," she replied, ratcheting her chin up a notch in hopes of letting Conner know he wasn't getting to her.

Well, maybe he was, a little, she admitted to herself, terminally honest. But it wasn't because of the invisible charge buzzing around them. She wasn't used to standing around in her bathrobe talking to strange men, that was all.

"Fine with me," Conner answered, lifting the collar of his jacket against a gust of wind as he turned to descend the steps of Natty's back porch. His truck, large and red, with mud-splattered tires and doors, was parked alongside the woodshed.

Possessed of a peculiar and completely unreasonable urge to slam the door behind him, hard, Tricia instead shut it politely, turned on one heel and fled back upstairs to her apartment.

There, in her small bedroom, she hastily exchanged her robe and pajamas for jeans and a navy blue hooded sweatshirt, replaced the slippers with sneakers. Advancing to the bathroom—she'd had larger closets, she thought, flustered—Tricia washed her face, brushed her teeth and whipped her renegade hair into a tidy plait.

Intermittently, she heard the homey sound of wood clunking into the boxes beside Natty's fireplace and the old stove in the kitchen.

She nearly tripped over Winston, who was lounging in the hallway, just over the bedroom threshold.

"That," Tricia sputtered, righting herself, "is a great place to stretch out."

"Meow," Winston observed casually, flicking his tail and giving no indication that he planned on moving anytime soon. He was quite comfortable where he was, thank you very much.

Tricia took a moment to collect her wits—why was she rushing around as though the place were on fire, anyway?—smoothing her hands down the thighs of her jeans and drawing in a deep, slow breath.

Consuming a carton of low-fat yogurt for breakfast, she stood on tiptoe to look out the window over her kitchen sink, which afforded her a clear view of the backyard.

And she forgot all about reading her email.

* * *

AFTER HE'D FILLED Miss Natty's wood boxes, making sure she had plenty of kindling, Conner unloaded the pitch-scented pine—a full cord—stacking it neatly in the shed. With that done, he could check the delivery off his mental to-do list and move on to the next project—stopping by the feed store for a dozen fifty-pound bags of the special mix of oats and alfalfa he gave the horses. When he finished that errand, he'd head for Doc Benchley's office to pick up the special serum for the crop of calves born that spring. Doc had served as the town's one and only veterinarian since way back.

Unlike a lot of people in his profession, Hugh Benchley didn't specialize. He treated every animal from prize Hereford bulls to Yorkshire terriers small enough to fit in a teacup, and had no evident intention of retiring in the foreseeable future, even though he was well past the age when his fellow senior citizens preferred to spend their days fishing or patronizing the flashy new casino out on the reservation.

"I won't last six months from the day I close my practice," Doc had told Conner more than once.

Conner understood, since he thrived on work himself—the more physically demanding, the better. That way, he didn't have time to think about things he wished were different—like his relationship, if you could call it that, with his twin brother, Brody.

Dusting his leather-gloved hands together, the last of the wood safely stowed for Miss Natty's use, he started for the driver's-side door of his truck. Something made him look up at the second-story window, a feeling of prickly sweetness, utterly strange to him, and he thought he saw Tricia McCall peering through the glass.

Wishful thinking, he told himself, climbing into the rig.

He'd seen Tricia lots of times, usually at a distance, but close-up once or twice, too.

How was it that he'd never noticed how appealing Natty's great-granddaughter was, with her fresh skin and her dark, serious eyes? She had a trim little body—he'd figured that out right away, her sorry bathrobe notwithstanding—and just standing in the same room with her had put him in mind of an experience when he and Brody were kids. Nine or ten and virtually fearless, they'd dared each other to touch the band of electric fence separating the main pasture from the county road that ran past the ranch.

It had been raining until a few minutes earlier, and they were both standing in wet grass. The jolt had knocked them both on their backsides, and once they'd caught their breath, they'd lain there laughing, like the pair of fools they were.

Because any memory involving Brody tended to be painful, the good ones included, Conner avoided them when he could. Now, as he shifted the truck into gear and eased out of Miss Natty's gravel driveway, his thoughts strayed right back to Tricia like deer to a salt lick.

He signaled a right turn at the corner, heading for Main Street, and the feed store.

As a kid, he recalled, Tricia had spent summers in Lonesome Bend with her dad. Shy, she'd kept to herself, sticking to Joe's heels as he went happily about his business. Even then, the run-down drive-in theater, with its bent screen, had been a losing proposition, and the campground hadn't been much better.

Like all his friends, Conner had gone swimming at River's Bend every chance he got, but he didn't remember ever seeing Tricia so much as dip a big toe into the water. She'd sit cross-legged and solemn on the dock, always wearing a hand-me-down swimsuit, with a towel rolled up under one arm, and watch the rest of them, though, as they splashed and showed off for each other.

At the time, it was generally agreed that Tricia McCall was a little weird—probably because her parents were divorced and lived in different states, an unusual situation in those days, in Lonesome Bend if not in the rest of the country.

Since his older cousin, Steven, split his time between the ranch and a mansion back in Boston, neither Tricia nor her situation had struck Conner as strange—she was just quiet, liked to keep to herself. He'd been mildly curious about her, but nothing more. After all, she always left town at the end of August, the way Steven did, turning up again sometime in June.

Drawing up to the feed store, Conner pulled into the parking lot and backed the truck up to one of two loading docks. He shut off the engine, got out of the rig and vaulted up onto the platform to help with the bags, stacked and waiting to be collected.

And still Tricia lingered in his mind.

As a teenager, Tricia continued to visit her dad every summer, and she went right on marching to her own private drumbeat, too. The popular girls had declared her a snob, a snooty city girl who thought she was too good for a bunch of country kids. But she was wearing some guy's class ring on a chain around her neck, Conner recollected, and he'd steered clear because he figured she was going steady.

And because he'd been bone-headed crazy about Joleen Williams, the platinum blonde wild child with the body that wouldn't quit.

Somebody elbowed Conner, and that brought him back to the here and now, pronto. Malcolm, Joleen's half brother and a classmate of Conner's since kindergarten, grinned as he pushed past with a bag of horse feed under each arm. "Clear the way, Creed," Malcolm teased, his round face red and sweaty with effort and a penchant for triple cheeseburgers and more beer than even Brody could put away. "People are trying to work here."

Conner grinned and slapped his friend on the back in greeting. The day was cool and crisp, but the sun was climbing higher into a sky blue enough to make a man's heart catch, and the aspen trees, lining the streets of Lonesome Bend and crowding the foothills all around it, were changing

color. Splashes of bright crimson and gold, pale yellow and rust, and a million shades in between, blazed like fire everywhere he looked.

"How've you been, Malcolm?" he asked, because in small towns people always asked each other how they were, even if they'd seen each other an hour before at the post office or the courthouse or the grocery store. Moreover, they cared about the answer.

"I was fine until you showed up," Malcolm answered, tossing the feed bags into the bed of the pickup and turning to go back for more. "What kind of fancy horses are you keeping out on that ranch these days, anyhow? Thoroughbreds, maybe? This stuff costs double what the generic brand runs, and I swear it's heavier, too."

Conner laughed and hoisted a bag. "Maybe you ought to sit down and rest," he joked. "It would suck if you had a heart attack right here on the loading dock."

"It would suck if I had a heart attack anyplace," Malcolm countered, continuing to load the truck. "Hell, I'm only thirty-three."

Conner, sobered by the picture the conversation had brought to mind, didn't answer.

"You heard about Joleen?" Malcolm asked, when they'd finished piling the bags in the back of the truck.

Conner jumped down to level ground and put up the tailgate on his rig with more of a bang than the task probably called for. He'd been over Malcolm's sister for years, but any mention of her always stuck in his craw. "What about her?" he asked, looking up at Malcolm, who stood rimmed in dazzling sunlight on the loading dock like some overweight archangel.

"She's coming back to Lonesome Bend," Malcolm answered. His tone was strange. Almost cautious.

"No offense, Malcolm," Conner replied, "but I couldn't care less."

Malcolm was quiet for a moment. Then, in a rush of words, he added, "You want this feed put on your bill, as usual?"

"That'll be fine," Conner said, opening the door of his truck and setting one booted foot on the running board, about to climb behind the wheel. "Thanks, Malcolm."

"Conner?"

Halfway into the rig, Conner ducked out again. Malcolm had shifted his position, and his features were clearly visible now. He wasn't smiling.

"What?" Conner asked.

Malcolm sighed heavily, swept off his billed cap and dried the back of his neck on one shirtsleeve. "She's with Brody," he said, as though it pained him. "I guess they've been—seeing each other."

Everything inside Conner went still. It was as if the whole universe had ground to a halt all around him.

Finally, he found his voice. "I guess that's their business," he said, flatly dismissive, "not mine."

CHAPTER TWO

THE WIND RUFFLED the surface of the river, placid enough where it nestled in the tree-sheltered bend, the stony beach curving easy around it, like a cowboy's arm around his girl's shoulders, but wilder out in the middle. There, the currents were swift and, a mile downriver, there were rapids, leading straight to the falls.

Every so often, some hapless soul would be swept away in a canoe or even an inner tube, and find himself rushing at top speed toward a seventy-five-foot drop over the waterfall and onto the jagged boulders below.

It was a miracle nobody had been killed, Tricia thought, pulling her jacket more tightly around her and surveying the rocky shore in front of her. The area was littered with crushed beer cans, cigarette butts and fast food wrappers—kids had been partying there again.

Sighing, Tricia pulled a pair of plastic gloves from her pocket and snapped them on, then unfolded the large trash bag she'd tucked into the waistband of her jeans. There were No Trespassing signs posted, of course, but they seemed to have no more effect that the ones that read For Sale.

She picked up all the aluminum cans first—those were destined for the recycling bin—then collected the rest of the trash, using a smaller bag.

Tricia liked being outside, chilly as it was, under that blue, blue sky, breathing in the singular scents of autumn, though cleaning up after thoughtless people wasn't her favorite chore. It would be a nice day for a bonfire, she reflected, bending to retrieve a potato chip bag that looked as though it had been chewed up right along with its contents.

It was then that she made eye contact with the dog.

Nestled beneath the very same picnic table where she and Joe had found Rusty all those years ago was a painfully thin mutt with burrs and twigs caught in its coat and sorrow in its liquid brown eyes.

"Hey," Tricia said, dropping to her knees.

The dog whimpered, tried to scoot out of her reach when she moved to touch him.

"It's okay," she murmured. She tried to harden her heart a little, but it remained tender. "I won't hurt you, buddy."

Resting on her haunches, her hands on her thighs, Tricia studied the animal carefully. He was probably yellow under all that dirt, she concluded, though there would be no way to know for sure until he'd been cleaned up a little. Since he wasn't wearing a collar, let alone ID tags, Tricia never seriously entertained the idea that some anxious pet owner was out there somewhere, searching frantically for the family dog.

She extended one hand cautiously, still wearing the plastic gloves, though they wouldn't protect her from a bite. The poor creature snarled feebly in warning.

Tricia drew back. "No worries," she said gently. "Wait here, and I'll bring you something to eat."

She got to her feet and headed for the log building that housed the office and a couple of vending machines, tossing the trash bags into a Dumpster as she passed it, the gloves following quickly behind.

Inside the tiny space, measuring no more than twelve by twelve in its entirety, a fire burned in the Franklin stove, exuding pleasant warmth, and the varnish on the front of the big rustic reception counter bisecting the room reflected the dancing flames.

For just a moment, Tricia paused, feeling a pang of regret at the prospect of moving away. This place had seen a lot of happy times in days gone by—families eager to camp out in a tent, cook their meals under the sky, swim in the calm inlet of the river. As eager as she was to sell everything and return to Seattle for good, letting go would be hard.

Shaking off the spell, she rounded the counter, took her purse from one of the shelves underneath it and scrabbled around in the bottom of the bag for the change she continually tossed in. Maybe she'd get one of those little plastic coin holders, the kind that gaped open like a grin when you squeezed either end. For now, though, the slapdash method had to do.

When she had a palm full of quarters, dimes and nickels, Tricia approached the vending machine. Chester, the man who ran the route, dropping sandwiches and candy bars and snack-size bags of chips into the slots, hadn't been around recently. It was the end of the season, and the pickings were slim.

She finally decided on a ham sandwich, sealed inside a carton with a see-through top—the edges of the bread were curling up—dropped the appropriate number of quarters into the slot and pushed the button. The sandwich clunked into the tray.

Tricia studied it with distaste, then sighed and marched herself toward the door. Outside, she peeled back the top of the container, and walked back to the picnic table.

A part of her had been hoping the dog would be gone when she got back, she realized as she knelt again, but of course he was right there where she'd left him. He raised his head off his outstretched forelegs and sniffed tentatively at the air.

Tricia smiled, broke half the sandwich in two and held out a portion to the dog.

He hesitated, as though expecting some cruel trick—the world clearly hadn't been kind to him—then decided to chance it. He literally wolfed down the food, and Tricia gave him more, and then more, in small, carefully presented chunks, until there was nothing left.

"Come out of there," Tricia coaxed, fallen leaves wetting the knees of her jeans through and through, "and I'll buy you another sandwich."

The dog appeared to consider his—or her—options.

Tricia stood up again, backed off a few feet and called for a second time.

A frigid wind blew in off the river and seeped into her bones like a death chill. She longed for hot coffee and the radiant coziness of the fire in the Franklin stove, but she wasn't going to leave the dog out here alone.

It took a lot of patience and a lot of persuasion, but the poor little critter finally low-crawled out from under the picnic table and stood up.

Definitely a male, Tricia thought. Probably not neutered.

"This way," she said, very softly, turning and leading the way toward the structure her dad had euphemistically referred to as "the lodge." The dog limped along behind her, head down, hip bones and ribs poking out as he moved.

Tricia's heart turned over. Was he a lost pet or had someone turned him out? Dropped him off along the highway, thinking he'd be able to fend for himself? That happened way too often.

The dog crossed the threshold cautiously, but the heat of the stove attracted him right away. He teetered over on his spindly legs and collapsed in front of it with a deep sigh, as though he'd come to the end of a long and very difficult journey.

Tears stung Tricia's eyes. There was no animal shelter in Lonesome Bend, though Hugh Benchley, the veterinarian, kept stray dogs and cats whenever he had room in the kennels behind his clinic. His three daughters, who all worked for him, made every effort to find homes for the creatures, and often succeeded.

But not always.

Those who didn't find homes ended up living on the Benchleys' small farm or, when they ran out of room, in one of the shelters in nearby Denver.

This little guy might be one of the lucky ones, Tricia consoled herself, and wind up as part of a loving household. In the meantime, she'd give him another vending machine sandwich and some water. Most likely, he'd been drinking out of the river for a while.

While the dog ate the second course, Tricia called Dr. Benchley's office to say she was bringing in a stray later, for shots and a checkup. It went without saying that a permanent home would be nice, too.

Becky, Doc's eldest daughter, who kept the books for her father's practice and did the billing at the end of the month, picked up. Fortyish, plump and happily married to the dairy farmer on the land adjoining the Benchleys', Becky had a heart the size of Colorado itself, but she sighed after Tricia finished telling her what little she knew about the dog's condition.

"It never stops," Becky said sadly. "We're bulging at the seams around here as it is, and at Dad's place, too, and Frank says if I bring home one more stray, he's going to leave me."

Frank Garson adored his wife, and was unlikely to leave her for any reason, and everybody knew it, but Becky had made her point. Bottom line: there was no room at the inn.

"Maybe I could keep him for a little while," Tricia said hesitantly. Then she blushed. "The dog, I mean. Not Frank."

Becky laughed, sounding more like her old self, but still tired. Maybe even a little depressed. "That would be good."

"But not forever," Tricia added quickly.

"Still not over losing Rusty?" Becky asked, very gently. As a veterinarian's daughter, she was used to the particular grief that comes with losing a cherished pet. "How long's it been, Tricia?"

Tricia swallowed, watching as the stray got to his feet and stuck his muzzle into the coffee can full of water, lapping noisily. "Six months," she said, in a small voice.

"Maybe it's time—"

Tricia squeezed her eyes shut, but a tear spilled down her right cheek anyway. "Don't, Becky. Please. I'm not ready to choose another dog."

"We don't choose animals," Becky said kindly. "They choose us."

She couldn't possibly be expected to understand, of course. As soon as a real-estate miracle happened—and Tricia had to believe one would or she'd go crazy—she'd be moving away from Lonesome Bend, probably living in some condo in downtown Seattle, where only very small dogs were allowed.

She swallowed again. Dashed at her cheek with the back of her free hand. The canine visitor knocked over the coffee can, spilling what remained of his water all over the bare wooden floor. "Be that as it may—"

"How's eleven-thirty?" Becky broke in, brightening. "For the appointment, I mean?"

Tricia guessed that would be fine, and said so.

She hung up and hurried into the storage room for a mop, and the dog cowered as she approached.

Tricia's heart, already pulverized by Rusty's passing, did a pinchy, skittery thing. "Nobody's mad at you, buddy," she said softly. "It's all okay."

She swabbed up the spilled water and made a mental note to stop off at the discount store for kibble and bowls and maybe a pet bed, preferably on sale, since the trip to the vet was bound to cost a lot of money. The dog—he needed a name, but since giving him one implied a commitment she wasn't willing to make, the dog would have to do—could live right here at the office until other arrangements could be made.

Taking him home, like naming him, would only make things harder later on. Besides, Winston would probably take a dim view of such a move, and then there was the matter of seeing another dog in all the places where Rusty used to be.

She did wish she hadn't been in such a hurry to give Rusty's gear away, though. She could have used that stuff right about now.

The dog looked up at her with an expression so hopeful that the sight of him wrenched at something deep inside Tricia. Then he meandered, moving more steadily now that he'd eaten, over to the vending machine. Pressed his wet nose to the glass.

Tricia chuckled in spite of herself. "Sorry," she said. "No more stale sandwiches for you."

He really seemed to understand what she was saying, which was crazy. The similarities between finding Rusty and finding—well, the dog—were getting to her, that was all, and it was her own fault; she was letting it happen.

She brought him more water, and this time, he didn't tip the coffee can over.

Gradually, they became friends, a three steps forward, two steps back kind of thing, and while Tricia doubted he'd tolerate being scrubbed down under one of the public showers, he did let her remove the twigs and thistles from his coat.

At 11:15, she hoisted him into the backseat of her secondhand blue Pathfinder without being bitten in the process. A good omen, she decided. Things were looking up.

Maybe.

Doc Benchley's clinic was housed in a converted Quonset hut left over from the last big war, with an add-on built of cinder blocks. As buildings went, it was plug-ugly, maybe even a blight on the landscape, but nobody seemed to mind. Folks around Lonesome Bend appreciated Doc because he'd

come right away if a cow fell sick, or a horse, whether it was high noon or the middle of the night. He'd saved dozens, if not hundreds, of dogs and cats, too, along with a few parrots and exotic lizards.

He drove his ancient green pickup truck through snowstorms that would daunt a lesser man and a much better vehicle, and once or twice, in a pinch, he'd treated a human being.

Distracted, Tricia didn't notice the other rigs in the clinic's unpaved parking lot; she wanted to borrow a leash and a collar before she brought the dog inside, in case something spooked him and he took off. And she was totally focused on that.

She fairly collided with Conner Creed in the big double doorway; his arms were full of small boxes and he was wearing a battered brown hat that cast shadows over his facial features.

"Sorry," she said, after gulping her heart back down into its normal place. Nearly, anyway.

He said something in reply—maybe "Excuse me"—but Tricia had already started to go around him, unaccountably anxious to get away.

Becky stood behind the counter, wearing colorful scrubs with pink cartoon kittens frolicking all over the fabric, holding out the leash and collar without being asked. Her eyes sparkled as she looked at Tricia, then past her, to Conner.

"Thanks," Tricia said.

She turned around, and Conner had disappeared. Her relief was exceeded only by her disappointment.

All for the best, she told herself firmly. It's not as if you're in the market for a man. You've got Hunter, remember? Never mind that she hadn't seen or even spoken to Hunter lately.

Outside, Conner was just turning away from his truck, where he'd stowed the boxes he'd been carrying before. He adjusted his hat, giving her another of those frank assessments he seemed to be so good at.

"Need help?" he asked, at his leisure.

Tricia realized that she'd stopped in her tracks and made herself move again, but color thumped in her cheeks. "I can manage," she said.

Conner approached, nonetheless, and when she opened one of the Pathfinder's rear doors, he eased her aside. "Let me," he said, taking the leash and collar from her hand. He lifted the panting dog out of the vehicle and set him down, offering the leash to Tricia. "What's his name?"

"I call him the dog," Tricia said.

"Imaginative," Conner replied, with another of those tilted grins.

Tricia bristled. "He's a stray. I found him hiding under one of the picnic tables at River's Bend, just this morning."

What all this had to do with naming or not naming the animal Tricia could not have said. The words just tumbled out of her mouth, as though they'd formed themselves with no input at all from her brain.

"So you're leaving him here?" Conner asked. His grin lingered, but it wasn't as dazzling as before, and his voice had a slight edge.

"No," Tricia said. She'd just gotten her feathers smoothed down, and now they were ruffled again. "He'll be staying at the office until I can find him somewhere to live."

She'd hoped that would satisfy Conner and he'd go away, but he didn't. He dropped to his haunches in front of the dog and stroked its floppy ears.

"A name doesn't seem like too much to ask," the rancher said mildly.

Tricia tugged at the leash, to no real avail. "We'll be late," she fretted. As if she had anything to do for the rest of the day except clean restrooms at the campground. "Come on—dog."

Conner stood up again. He towered over Tricia, so her neck popped when she tilted her head back to look into his face.

She liked shorter men, she reflected, apropos of nothing. Hunter, at five-eight, was tall enough. Perfect, in fact. He was the perfect man.

If you didn't mind being ignored most of the time.

Or if you set aside the fact that he didn't want children. Or that he didn't like animals much.

"He'll be here at the clinic awhile," Conner said, ostensibly referring to the dog. "Have lunch with me."

Tricia blinked. She didn't know what she'd expected, if indeed she'd expected anything at all, but it hadn't been an invitation to lunch. Was this a date? The thought sent a small, shameful thrill through her.

"Natty's a good friend of mine," Conner went on, adjusting his hat again. "And since you and I seem to have started off on the wrong foot, I thought—"

"We haven't," Tricia argued, without knowing why. The strange tension between them must have made her snappish. "Started off on the wrong foot, I mean."

Again, that slow grin that settled over her insides like warm honey. Agitated, she tugged at the leash again and this time, the dog was willing to follow her lead. Relieved, she made her way to the doors.

But Conner came right along with her. He was a persistent cuss—she'd say that for him.

"My, my," Becky said, rounding the desk to take the leash from Tricia but looking all the while at the dog. "I see a bath in your future," she told him. Then, meeting Tricia's gaze, she added, "We're looking at an hour and a half at the least. More likely, two. Dad's schedule is packed."

The dog whined imploringly, his limpid gaze moving between Tricia and Conner, as though making some silent appeal. Please don't leave me.

She'd better toughen up, Tricia thought. And now was the time to start.

"Mr. Creed and I are going to lunch," she heard herself say, in a perfectly ordinary tone of voice, and was amazed. "I'll check back with you later on."

"Good idea," Becky agreed, with a little twinkle.

Just as Conner had done earlier, the woman crouched to look into the dog's eyes. "Don't you be scared, now," she said. "We're going to take good care of you, I promise."

He licked her face, and she laughed.

"Hey, Valentino," Becky said. "You're quite the lover."

Valentino, Tricia thought.

Oh, God, he had a name now.

But as Becky rose and started to lead the dog away, into the back, he made a sound so forlorn that Tricia's eyes filled.

"We have your cell number on file, don't we?" Becky turned to ask Tricia, who was still standing in the same place, feeling stricken. "You haven't changed it or anything?"

"You have it," Tricia managed to croak. She felt Conner take a light hold on her elbow. He sort of steered her toward the doors, through them and out into the parking lot.

"Lunch," he reminded her quietly.

Her cell phone chirped in her purse, and she took it out, looked at the screen, and smiled, though barely. There was a text from Diana's ten-year-old daughter, Sasha. "Hi," it read. "Mom let me use her phone so I could tell you that we're on a field trip at the Seattle Aquarium and it's awesome!"

Tricia replied with a single word. "Great!"

"No sense in taking two rigs," Conner commented.

The next thing Tricia knew, she was in the passenger seat of his big truck, the cell phone in her pocket.

It's just lunch, she told herself, as they headed toward the diner in the middle of town. Except for the upscale steakhouse on the highway to Denver, Elmer's Café was the only sit-down eating establishment in Lonesome Bend.

All the ranchers gathered there for lunch or for coffee and pie, and the people who lived in town liked the place, too. It was continually crowded, but the food was good and the prices were

reasonable. Tricia occasionally stopped in for a soup-and-sandwich special, sitting at one of the stools at the counter, since she was always alone and the tables were generally full.

Today, there was a booth open, a rare phenomenon at lunchtime.

Tricia wondered dryly if the universe always accommodated Conner Creed and, after that, she wondered where in the heck that thought had come from.

Conner took off his hat and hung it on the rack next to the door, as at home as he might have been in his own kitchen. He nodded to Elmer's wife, Mabel, who was the only waitress in sight.

Mabel, a benign gossip, sized up the situation with a good, hard look at Tricia and Conner. A radiant smile broke over her face, orangish in color because of her foundation, and she sang out, "Be right with you, folks."

Conner waited until Tricia slid into the booth before sitting down across from her and reaching for a menu. She set her cell phone on the table, in case there was another communiqué from Sasha, or a call from Doc Benchley's office about Valentino. Then she extracted a bottle of hand sanitizer from her bag and squirted some into her palm.

Conner raised an eyebrow, grinning that grin again.

"You can't be too careful," Tricia said, sounding defensive even to herself.

"Sure you can," Conner replied easily, reaching for a menu.

Tricia pushed the bottle an inch or so in his direction.

He ignored it.

"There are germs on everything," she said, lowering her voice lest Mabel or Elmer overhear and think she was criticizing their hygiene practices.

"Yes," Conner agreed lightly, without looking up from the menu. "Too much of that stuff can compromise a person's immune system."

Tricia felt foolish. Conner was a grown man. If he wanted to risk contracting some terrible disease, that was certainly his prerogative. As long as he wasn't cooking the food, what did she care?

She dropped the bottle back into her purse.

Mabel bustled over, with a stub of a pencil and a little pad, grinning broadly as she waited to take their orders.

Tricia asked what kind of soup they were serving that day, and Mabel replied that it was cream of broccoli with roasted garlic. Her own special recipe.

Women in and around Lonesome Bend were recipe-proud, Tricia knew. Natty guarded the secret formula for her chili, a concoction that drew people in droves every year when the rummage sale rolled around, claiming it had been in the family for a hundred years.

Tricia ordered the soup. Conner ordered a burger and fries, with coffee.

Then, as soon as Mabel hurried away to put in the order, he excused himself, his eyes merry with amusement, and went to wash his hands.

Tricia actually considered making a quick exit while he was gone, but in the end, she couldn't get around the silliness of the idea. Besides, her SUV was still over at the veterinary clinic, a good mile from Elmer's Café.

So she sat. And she waited, twiddling her thumbs.

* * *

DAMN, CONNER SAID SILENTLY, addressing his own reflection in the men's-room mirror. It was no big deal having a friendly lunch with a woman—it was broad daylight, in his hometown, for God's sake—so why did he feel as though he were riding a Clydesdale across a frozen river?

Sure, he'd been a little rattled when Malcolm told him Brody and Joleen were on their way back to Lonesome Bend, but once the adrenaline rush subsided, he'd been fine.

Now, he drew a deep breath, rolled up the sleeves of his shirt and hit the soap dispenser a couple of times. He lathered up, rinsed, lathered up again. Smiled as he recalled the little bottle of disinfectant gel Tricia was carrying around.

Of course there was nothing wrong with cleanliness, but it seemed to Conner that more and more people were phobic about a few germs. He dried his hands and left the restroom, headed for the table.

Tricia sat looking down at the screen on her cell phone, and the light from the window next to the booth rimmed her, caught in the tiny hairs escaping that long, prim braid of hers, turning a reddish gold.

Conner, not generally a fanciful man, stopped in midstride, feeling as though something had slammed into him, hard. Like a gut punch, maybe, but not unpleasant.

Get a grip, he told himself. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mabel and everybody at the counter looking at him.

Pride broke the strange paralysis. He slid into the booth on his side, and was immediately struck again, this time by the translucent smile on her face. He'd never seen anybody light up that way—Tricia's eyes shone, and her skin glowed, too.

"Good news?" he asked.

She didn't look at him, but he had a sinking feeling the text was from a guy.

"Very good news," she said. Her gaze lingered on the phone for a few more moments—long ones, for Conner—and then, with a soft sigh, she put the device down again.

Conner waited for her to tell him what the good news was, but she didn't say anything about it.

"Do you have a dog?" she asked Conner.

Momentarily tripped up by the question, he had to think before he could answer. "Not at the moment," he said.

"Maybe you'd like one?"

Mabel arrived with their food, and Conner flirted with the older woman for a few seconds. "Maybe," he said, very carefully, when they were alone again. "Sometime."

"Sometime?"

"We're pretty busy out on the ranch these days," he told her, picking up a French fry and dunking it into a cup of catsup on the side of his plate. "A dog's like a child in some ways. They need a lot of attention, right along."

Belatedly, Tricia took up her spoon, dipped it into her soup and sipped. He could almost see the gears turning in her head.

"Dogs are probably happier in the country than anywhere else," she ventured, and her eyes were big and soulful when she looked at him. He felt an odd sensation, as if he were shooting down a steep slope on a runaway toboggan.

"Plenty of townspeople have dogs," he said, once he'd caught his breath. He knew damn well what she was up to—she wanted him to take Valentino off her hands—but he played it cool. "Even in big cities, you see every size and breed walking their owners in the parks and on the sidewalks."

Some of the color in her cheeks drained away, and he could pinpoint the change in her to the millisecond—it had happened when he said "big cities."

"I wouldn't want to keep a dog shut up in an apartment or a condo all day, while I was working," she said. Even though she spoke casually, there was a slight tremor in her voice. "Not a big one, anyway."

He thought of that morning, when he'd poured himself a cup of coffee in her kitchen above Miss Natty's place. Her apartment had looked small, but he didn't think she'd been referring to her present living quarters.

Suddenly Conner remembered all those For Sale signs. Of course—Tricia was planning to leave town when she finally sold the campground and the RV park and that albatross of a drive-in theater. These days, when folks wanted to see a movie, they downloaded one off the net, or rented a DVD out of a vending machine. Or drove to Denver to one of the multiscreen "cina-plexes."

Conner cut his burger in half and picked up one side. He'd been hungry—breakfast time rolled around early on a ranch, and he hadn't eaten for hours—but now his appetite was a little on the iffy side.

"You planning on leaving Lonesome Bend one of these days?" he asked, when he thought he could manage a normal tone of voice. As far as he knew, the properties she'd inherited from her dad weren't exactly attracting interest from investors—in town or out of it.

She glanced at her phone again, lying there next to the salt and pepper shakers and the napkin holder, and a fond expression softened her all over. A little smile crooked one side of her mouth. "Yes," she answered, and this time she looked straight into his eyes.

"When?" he asked, putting down his burger.

"As soon as something sells," she said, her gaze still steady. "The campground, the RV park, the drive-in—whichever. Of course, I'd like to get rid of all three at once, but even one would make it possible."

"I see," Conner said. Why should it matter to him that this woman he barely knew was ready to get out of Dodge? He couldn't answer that, yet it did matter.

Then she smiled in a way that turned his brain soft. "Now, about the dog..."

CHAPTER THREE

TRICIA WAS GETTING nowhere with Conner Creed and she knew it. The dog wasn't going to have a home on the range—not the Creed range, anyway.

"I'd better get back to the clinic and pick up my car," she said, watching as Mabel removed their plates and silverware from the table and hurried away at top speed as though she thought she was interrupting something. "I have things to do while Doc Benchley is treating Valentino."

It was dangerous, saying the name, actually giving voice to it. She might start caring for the dog now, and where would that lead? To another fracture of the heart, that's where.

Conner paid for their lunches, shaking his head in the negative when Tricia offered to chip in, and they left the diner, headed for the parking lot where his truck was parked. He held the door for her while she climbed in, like the gentleman he probably wasn't.

He was quiet during the drive back to the clinic, even a little cool.

"Thanks for lunch," she told him when they drew up alongside her Pathfinder, getting her keys out of her purse and unsnapping her seat belt.

Conner was wearing his hat again; he simply tugged at the brim and said, "You're welcome," the way he might have said it to the meter reader from the electric company or a panhandler expressing gratitude for a cash donation.

Tricia got out of the truck, shut the door.

Conner nodded at her and waited until she was behind the wheel of her own rig, with the engine running. Then he backed up, turned around and drove away.

Why did she feel sad all of a sudden? To cheer herself up, Tricia pulled her phone from its special pocket in her purse and pressed one of the buttons. Hunter's smiling face appeared on the screen, along with the message he'd texted earlier.

I miss you. Let's get together—soon.

Tricia waited to be overtaken by delight and excitement—hadn't she been missing Hunter for a year and a half, yearning to "get together" with him?—but all she felt was a strange letdown that seemed to have more to do with Conner Creed than the man she believed she loved. Weird.

There was no figuring it out, she decided with a sigh. She put the phone away and went over her mental shopping list as she headed for the big discount store where a person could buy pretty much anything.

The dog beds weren't on sale, but she found a nice, fluffy one for a decent price and wadded it into her cart. On top she piled a small bag of kibble, two large plastic bowls, a collar and a leash

and, because she didn't want Valentino to feel lonely when she left him at the office for the night, she sprang for a toy—a blue chicken with a squeaker but no stuffing—to keep him company.

There were a few other things Tricia needed to pick up, but none of them were urgent and her cart was full, so she wheeled her way up to the long row of checkout counters and got in line.

Twenty minutes later—a woman ahead of her paid for a can of soup with a credit card—she drove back to the campground office with her purchases, arranging the bed in front of the woodstove and hauling the kibble to the storeroom, where she opened it and filled the bowls—one with food and one with water.

She set them carefully within reach of the dog bed, adjusted everything and was finally satisfied that the arrangement looked welcoming. As the finishing touch, Tricia removed the price tag from the blue chicken and laid the toy tenderly on the bed, the way she might have set out a teddy bear for a child.

"There," she said aloud, though there was nobody around to hear. Talking to herself—she had definitely been alone too much lately, she decided ruefully, especially since Natty had left to visit her sister.

Conner popped into her mind, but Tricia blocked him out—with limited success—and told herself to think about Hunter instead. In the end, she had to bring up the phone picture again just to remember what Hunter looked like.

And even then the image didn't stick in her mind when she looked away.

* * *

NOT GOOD, CONNER thought when he pulled in at the ranch and saw Davis, his uncle, waiting in the grassy stretch between the ranch house and the barn. Davis's expression would have said it all, even if he hadn't been pacing back and forth like he was waiting for a prize calf to be born.

"What?" Conner asked, once he'd stopped the truck, shut it down and stepped out onto the running board.

Davis was an older version of his son, Steven, with the same dark blond hair and blue eyes. He was a little heavier than Steven, and his clothes, like Conner's, weren't fancy. He was dressed for work.

Steven had a ranch of his own now, down in Stone Creek, Arizona, not to mention a beautiful wife, Melissa, a six-year-old son named Matt and another of those intermittent sets of twins, both boys, that ran in the Creed family.

In fact, if Conner hadn't loved Steven like a brother—had the same strong bond with his cousin that he'd once shared with Brody—it would have been easy to hate him for having more than his share of luck.

"Did you get the serum?" Davis asked, as though Conner were on an urgent mission from the CDC, carrying the only known antidote to some virus fixing to go global.

Conner gave his uncle—essentially the only father he'd ever known, since his own, Davis's older brother, Blue, had died in an accident when Conner and Brody were just babies—a level look. "Yeah," he answered, "I got the serum. Didn't know it was a rush job, though."

Davis sighed, rummaged up a sheepish smile. "We've still got plenty of daylight left," he said. "Kim and I had words a little while ago, that's all. She put my favorite boots in the box of stuff she's been gathering up to donate to the rummage sale. I took issue with that—they're good boots. Just got 'em broken in right a few years ago—"

Conner laughed. Kim, Davis's wife, was a force of nature in her own right. And she'd been a mother figure to her husband's orphaned twin nephews, never once acting put upon. It was a shame, Conner had always thought, that Kim and Davis had never had any children together. They were born parents.

"I reckon it would be easier to buy those boots back at the rummage sale than argue with Kim," Conner remarked, amused. The woman could be bone-stubborn; she'd had to be to hold her own in that family.

"We won't be here then," Davis complained. "I've got half a dozen saddles ready, and we'll be on the road for two weeks or better."

"I remember," Conner said, opening a rear door and reaching into the extended-cab pickup for the boxes of serum he'd picked up at Doc Benchley's clinic. There were still a few hours of daylight left; if they saddled up and headed out right away, they could get at least some of the calves inoculated.

So Conner thrust an armload of boxes at Davis, who had to juggle a little to hold on to them.

"You'll be here, though," Davis went on innocently. "You could buy those boots back for me, Conner, and hide them in the barn or someplace—"

Conner chuckled and shook his head. "And bring the wrath of the mom-unit down on my hapless head? No way, Unc. You're on your own with this one."

"But they're lucky boots," Davis persisted. "One time, in Reno, I won $20,000 playing poker. And I was wearing those boots at the time."

"We're doomed," Conner joked.

"That isn't funny," his uncle said.

Davis and Kim lived up on the ridge, in a split-level rancher they'd built and moved into the year Brody and Conner came of age. Because Blue had been the elder of the two, the firstborn son and therefore destined to inherit the spread, the ranch belonged to them.

Conner occupied the main ranch house now, and since Brody was never around, he lived by himself.

He hated living alone, eating alone and all the rest. He frowned. There he went, thinking again.

"Everything all right?" Davis asked, looking at him closely.

"Fine," Conner lied.

Davis was obviously skeptical, but he didn't push for more information, as Kim would have done. "Let's get out there on the range and tend to those calves," he said. "As many as we can before sunset, anyhow."

"You ever think about getting a dog?" Conner asked his uncle, as they walked toward the barn. "Old Blacky's been gone a long time."

Davis sighed. "Kim wants to get a pair of those little ankle biters—Yorkies, I guess they are. She's got dibs on two pups from a litter born back in June—we're supposed to pick the critters up on this trip, when we swing through Cheyenne."

It made Conner grin—and feel a whole lot better—to imagine his ultramasculine cowboy uncle followed around by a couple of yappers with bows in their hair. Davis would be ribbed from one end of the rodeo circuit to the other, and he'd grouse a little, probably, but deep down, he'd be a fool for those dogs.

Reaching the barn, they took the prefilled syringes Conner had gotten from Doc Benchley out of their boxes and stashed them in saddlebags. They chose their horses, tacked them up, fetched their ropes and mounted.

Once they were through the last of the gates and on the open range, Davis let out a yee-haw, nudged his gelding's sides with the heels of his boots, and the race was on.

* * *

VALENTINO LOOKED LIKE a different dog when Becky brought him out into the waiting area, all spiffy. His coat was a lovely, dark honey shade, and when he spotted Tricia, he immediately started wagging his tail. She'd have sworn he was smiling at her, too.

"See?" Becky bent to tell him. "I told you she'd come back."

Tricia felt a stab at those words—she was only looking after this dog temporarily, not adopting him—but when she handed over her ATM card to pay the bill, she got over the guilt in short order.

Good heavens, what had Doc done? Performed a kidney transplant?

Taking Valentino's new collar and leash from her bag, Tricia got him ready to leave. While she was bending over him, he gave her a big, wet kiss.

"Eeeew," she fussed, but she was smiling.

"Looks like we're due for a change in the weather," Becky commented, nodding her head toward the big picture window looking out over the parking lot and the street beyond. She sighed. "I guess it's typical for this time of year. Winter will be on us before we know it."

Tricia had noticed the dark clouds rolling in to cover the blue, but she hadn't really registered that there was a storm approaching. She'd been thinking about Valentino, and Hunter's text message —and Conner Creed.

"Let's hope the snow holds off until after the big rummage sale and the chili feed," Tricia said, her tone deceptively breezy. If the weather was bad, the campers and RVers wouldn't show up for that all-important final weekend of the season, and if that happened, she was going to have to dip into her savings to pay the bills.

"Amen to that," Becky said, but her old smile was back. She leaned down to pat Valentino's shiny head. "Aren't you the handsome fella, now that you've had a bath?" she murmured.

A light sprinkle of rain dappled the dry gravel in the parking lot, raising an acrid scent of dust, as Tricia and Valentino hurried toward the Pathfinder. She opened the rear hatch and was about to hoist the dog inside when he leaped up there on his own, nimble as could be.

"You are pretty handsome," Tricia told him, once she'd gotten behind the wheel and turned the key in the ignition. She'd just buckled her seat belt when the drizzle suddenly turned into a downpour so intense that the windshield wipers couldn't keep up, even on their fastest setting.

Thunder boomed, directly over their heads, it seemed, and Valentino gave a frightened yelp.

"We're safe, buddy," Tricia said gently, looking back over one shoulder.

The dog stood with his muzzle resting on the top of the backseat, looking bravely pathetic.

"Now, now," she murmured, in her most soothing voice, "you're going to be fine, I promise. We're just going to sit right here in the parking lot until the storm lets up a little, and then we'll go back to the office and you can eat and drink out of your new bowls and sleep on your new bed and play with your new blue chicken—"

Tricia McCall, said the voice of reason, you are definitely losing it.

Another crash of thunder seemed to roll down out of the foothills like a giant ball, and that was it for Valentino. He sprang over the backseat, squirmed over the console and landed squarely in Tricia's lap, whining and trembling and trying to lick her face again.

That was the bad news. The good news was that even though there was more thunder, and a few flashes of lightning to add a touch of Old Testament drama, the rain stopped coming down so hard.

After gently shifting Valentino off her thighs and onto the passenger seat, Tricia put the SUV in gear and went slowly, carefully on her way.

Valentino, panicked before, sat stalwartly now, probably glad to be up front with Tricia instead of all alone in the back.

"You're not going to make this easy, are you?" she asked the dog, as they crept along the rainy streets with the other traffic.

Valentino made that whining sound again, low in his throat.

"I'll take that as a no," Tricia said.

They got back to River's Bend in about twice the time it would normally have taken to make the drive, and by then, the rain was pounding down again. Tricia parked as close to the office door as she could, but she and Valentino both got wet before they made it inside.

Shivering and shedding her jacket as she went, Tricia headed straight for the stove and added wood to the dwindling fire inside.

Valentino sniffed his kibble bowl and drank some water, then went back to the kibble again. There was more thunder, loud enough to raise the roof this time, and flashes of lightning illuminated the angry river out past the safety ropes that were supposed to keep swimmers within bounds.

Tricia wondered how Winston was faring, back at the house; he didn't like loud noises any more than Valentino did, and the poor cat was all alone at home, probably terrified and hiding under a bed. He'd want his supper pretty soon, too, she thought, biting her lip as she stood looking out at the storm. Winston liked his routine.

She turned from the window and smiled as Valentino gulped the last of his kibble ration, washing it down with the rest of the water. Then he inspected the bed, sniffed the blue chicken, and turned three circles before giving a big yawn and curling up for a snooze.

Tricia refilled his water dish at the restroom sink and put it back in place, then checked the office voice mail, hoping for a few reservations for the last weekend of the month, but there had been no calls.

Resigned, she fired up the outdated computer she used at work, and waited impatiently while it booted up. The black Bakelite office phone with a rotary dial rang while she was waiting.

Over by the fire, Valentino began to snore.

Smiling a little, Tricia checked the screen on her phone, saw Diana's number and answered with a happy "Hello!"

"You'll never guess," said Diana. A smashing redhead, Diana had been the most popular girl in high school and probably college, too. She was smart and outgoing, then as now, and she was the best friend Tricia had ever had.

"What?" Tricia asked, leaning on the back of the counter and grinning. "You won the lottery? Paul's been elected president by secret ballot? Sasha is bored with fifth grade and signing up for law school?" Paul was Diana's husband; the two had been happily married since they were nineteen.

"Better," Diana replied, laughing. "Paul got that promotion, Tricia. We'll be moving to Paris for at least two years—Sasha will love it, and we've already found the perfect private school for her." Diana, a teacher, homeschooled Sasha, not to keep her out of the mainstream but because the child had a positively ravenous capacity for absorbing information. "The French school is famously progressive. Of course, we have to go over there as soon as possible, to look for an apartment..."

It was a dream come true, and Tricia was happy for her friend, and happy for Paul and Sasha —she truly was. But Paris was so far away. She could hardly get to Seattle these days. How was she supposed to visit France?

"That's...great...." she managed.

"You'll come over often," Diana said quickly. She was perceptive; that was one of the countless reasons she and Tricia were so close.

"Right," Tricia said doubtfully.

Valentino's snores reached an epic crescendo and then started to ebb.

Diana went on. "Paul and I were hoping—well—that Sasha could stay with you while we're away, checking out real estate. Paul's folks would look after her, but they're traveling in Australia, and mine—well, you know about my parents."

Diana's mother had a drinking problem, and her dad went through life on autopilot. Letting them babysit Sasha was out of the question.

Tricia closed her eyes. She loved Sasha but, frankly, the responsibility scared her to death. What if the adventurous ten-year-old got hurt or sick or, God forbid, disappeared? It happened; you couldn't turn on the TV or the radio without hearing an Amber alert. "Okay," she said. "Sure."

"Don't be too quick to agree," Diana said, with a smile in her voice. "We'll be gone for two weeks."

Tricia swallowed. "Two weeks?" The words came out sounding squeaky. "What about her schoolwork? Won't she get behind?"

"Sasha is way ahead on her lessons," Diana assured her. "Two weeks will be a nice break for her, actually."

"You don't want to take her to Paris?"

Diana chuckled. “It’s a long flight, especially from the West Coast. We’d rather she didn’t have to make that round-trip twice. Besides, we don’t get that many opportunities for a romantic, just-the-two-of-us getaway.”

“Two weeks,” Tricia mused aloud, then blushed because she’d only meant to think the words, not say them.

This time Diana laughed. “Feel free to say no,” she said sincerely. “I know you’re busy with whatever it is you do down there in Colorado. Paul can go to Paris alone—he’s perfectly capable of choosing an apartment that will suit us—and I’ll stay here in Seattle with Sasha.”

Affection for her friend, and for Sasha, warmed Tricia from the inside. Made her forget about the driving rainstorm she had to drive through to get home, for the moment at least. “Nonsense,” she said. “Paul is real-estate challenged and you know it. Remember the time he almost bought that mansion with the rotting floors and only half a roof? I’ll be glad to have my goddaughter visit for two weeks.” She paused. “Unless you’d rather I came over there.”

“Sasha’s never been to Colorado,” Diana said gently. “She’ll love it. You do have room for her, don’t you?”

The apartment had one bedroom, but the living room couch folded out. “Of course I do,” Tricia responded.

“It’s settled, then,” Diana said.

“It’s settled,” Tricia agreed, already starting to look forward to Sasha’s visit. The child was delightful and Tricia adored her.

“So what do you hear from the biggest loser these days?” Diana asked.

Tricia sighed. That was Diana’s nickname for Hunter, whom she had never liked, though, to her credit, she’d always been polite to him. “I had a text from him today, as a matter of fact,” she replied lightly. “He misses me.”

“I’ll just bet he does,” Diana said dryly.

“Diana,” Tricia replied, good-naturedly but with the slightest edge of warning.

“When were you planning to rendezvous?” Diana asked, with genuine concern. “Are Paul and I messing up your love life by dumping our brilliant, well-behaved and incomparably beautiful child on you, Trish?”

What love life? Tricia wanted to ask, but she didn’t.

“Hunter and I have waited this long,” she said practically. “A few more weeks won’t matter. And I can’t wait to see Sasha.”

“You’re a good friend,” Diana said.

“So are you,” Tricia replied. Okay, so Diana wasn’t Hunter’s greatest fan. She didn’t really know him, that was all. She was protective of all her friends, especially the ones who had been painfully shy in high school, like Tricia.

“Trish—”

Tricia tensed, sensing that Diana was about to say something she didn’t want to hear. “Yes?”

Diana sighed. “Nothing,” she said. When she went on, the usual sparkle was back in her voice. “Listen, I’ll make Sasha’s flight arrangements and email her itinerary to you. I suppose she’ll fly into Denver. Is that going to be a problem for you? Getting to the airport, I mean?”

Tricia smiled. “No, Mother Hen,” she said. “It will not be a problem.”

Diana really was a mother hen, but not in an unhealthy way. She liked taking care of people, but she knew when to back off, too. She’d learned that the hard way, she’d once confided in Tricia, courtesy of her profoundly dysfunctional parents. “All right, then,” Diana said. There was another pause. “By the way, do you have plans for Thanksgiving? Paul doesn’t have to start his new job until after New Year’s, so you could join us in Seattle—”

Valentino stretched, got to his feet and went to press his nose against the door, indicating that he wanted to go out.

Point in his favor, Tricia thought. He's house-trained.

"Thanksgiving is Natty's favorite holiday," she reminded Diana, crossing to open the door for Valentino. "We always spend it together."

Standing on the threshold, Tricia noted that the rain had slowed again, but the sky looked ready to pitch a fit.

Valentino went out, showing no signs of his previous phobia.

Tricia remained in the doorway, keeping an eye on him, the phone still pressed to her ear.

"I knew you'd say that," Diana said.

Tricia laughed. It was still midafternoon, but thanks to the overcast sky and the drizzle, she had to squint to see Valentino. "It's always good to be invited," she said.

The dog lifted his leg against one end of a picnic table and let fly.

The conversation wound down then, to be continued online, with email and instant messaging.

Tricia said goodbye to her friend and put down the phone before going back to the open door and squinting into the grayish gloom.

There was no sign of the dog.

"Valentino!" she called, surprised by the note of panic in her voice.

Just then, he rounded the row of trash receptacles, trotting merrily toward her and wearing a big-dog grin.

By the time Tricia left for home an hour later, Valentino was sound asleep on his new bed. She carefully banked the fire, made sure he had plenty of water and an extra scoop of kibble in case he needed a midnight snack. She'd been dreading the moment she had to leave him, but he didn't seem concerned.

She promised she'd be back first thing in the morning and, apparently convinced, Valentino stretched on his cozy bed and closed his eyes.

* * *

DAVIS AND CONNER rode back toward home with a hard rain beating at their backs and soaking their clothes. They'd managed to rope and tie at least a dozen calves, injecting each of them with serum before letting them up again.

In the barn, they unsaddled their horses and brushed the animals down in companionable silence.

"You sure you won't buy those boots back for me?" Davis asked, with a tilted grin that reminded Conner of Steven and made him feel unaccountably lonesome. "At the rummage sale, I mean? You're not really all that scared of a little bitty thing like Kim—"

Conner rustled up a grin. "Nope," he admitted. "I'm not scared of Kim. But I do have some pride. You think I want the whole town of Lonesome Bend knowing I bought your broken-down old boots?"

Davis chuckled, sweeping off his hat and running a wet shirtsleeve over his wet face. "Since when do you give a damn what the 'whole town' thinks about anything?"

Conner rested a hand briefly on his uncle's shoulder. "You go on home," he said. "Change your clothes before you come down with pneumonia or something. I'll finish up here."

"Kim thought you might want to come over for supper tonight," Davis ventured. He and Kim worried about him almost as much as they did Brody. "She's making fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy—"

Conner's mouth watered, but the idea of cadging a meal from the people who'd raised him, though it was an offer he would have gladly accepted most times—especially when his favorite foods were being served—didn't sit so well on that rainy night. "No, thanks," he said.

He wanted a hot shower, a fire in the wood-burning stove that dated back to homestead days, and something to eat, the quicker and easier to cook, the better.

Those things, he could manage. It was the rest of what he wanted that always seemed just out of reach: a woman there to welcome him home at night, the way Kim welcomed Davis. Not that he'd mind if she had a career—that would probably make her more interesting—as long as she wanted a family eventually, as he did...

"Conner?" Davis said.

He realized he'd been woolgathering and blinked. "Yeah?"

"You sure you don't want to have supper with us?"

"I'm sure," Conner said, turning away from Davis, silently reminding himself that he had horses to feed. "Go on and get out of here."

Davis sighed, hesitated for a long moment and then left.

Moments later, Conner heard his uncle's truck start up out front. He went back to thinking about his nonexistent wife while he worked—and damn if she didn't look a little like Tricia McCall.

* * *

WINSTON SAT ON a windowsill in the kitchen, looking out at the rain. The wind howled around the corners of Natty's old house, but the cat didn't react; it took thunder and lightning to scare him.

And there hadn't been any since Tricia had arrived home, taken a quick shower to ease the chill in her bones and donned sweatpants and an old T-shirt of Hunter's. Every light in the room was blazing, and she'd even turned on the small countertop TV—something she rarely did. That night, she felt a need for human voices, even if they did belong to newscasters.

Tricia couldn't help thinking about Valentino, alone at the office, and when she managed to turn off the flow of that guilt-inducing scenario, Conner Creed sneaked into her mind and wouldn't leave.

"I know what you're thinking," she told Winston, opening the oven door to peer in and check on her dinner, a frozen chicken potpie with enough fat grams for three days. "That I should be eating sensibly. But tonight, I want comfort food."

Winston made a small, snarly sound, and his tail bushed out. He pressed his face against the steamy glass of the window and repeated insistently, "Reowww—"

Tricia frowned as she shut the oven door. And that was when she heard the scratching.

Winston began to pace the wide windowsill like a jungle cat in a cage. His tail was huge now, and his hackles were up.

Again, the scratching sound.

Tricia went to the door, squinting as she approached, but there was no one on the other side of the glass oval.

"What on earth—?" She opened the door and looked down.

Valentino sat on the welcome mat, drenched, gazing hopefully up at her.

"How did you get here?" Tricia asked, stepping back and, to her private relief, not expecting an answer.

Valentino's coat was muddy, and so were his paws. He walked delicately into Tricia's kitchen, as though he were worried about intruding.

Winston, to her surprise, didn't leap on the poor dog with his claws bared, despite all that previous pacing and tail fluffing. He simply sat on his sleek haunches as Tricia closed the door and began grooming himself.

Valentino plunked down in the middle of the floor, dripping and apologetic.

Tricia's throat tightened, and her eyes burned. Somehow, he'd gotten out of the office, and then found his way through town and straight to her door.

She bent to pat his head. "I'll be right back with a towel," she told him. "In the meantime, don't move a muscle."

CHAPTER FOUR

WITHIN THREE SHORT DAYS, during which the rainstorms dwindled and finally passed, leaving the scrubbed-clean sky a polished, heartrending shade of blue, Valentino charmed his way into Tricia's affections and even won Winston over.

Of course she was still telling herself the Valentino arrangement was temporary that Saturday morning, and she wrote her festive mood off to her lifelong love of autumn and the fact that she would be meeting Sasha's plane in a couple of hours. She'd been in regular contact with Hunter, though mostly by email, because he was so busy getting ready for a big show at a new gallery on Bainbridge Island. Also, it didn't hurt that virtually every camping spot and RV space was booked for the following weekend—plus a big group had reserved the whole campground for a Sunday barbecue.

The deposits had fattened Tricia's bank account considerably, and thus it was with figurative change jingling in her jeans that Tricia loaded Valentino into the back of the Pathfinder a few minutes after 10:00 a.m. and set out for the Denver airport.

She put on a Kenny Chesney CD as soon as she cleared the city limits—this was the only context in which Lonesome Bend, population 5,000, was ever referred to as a "city"—so she and Valentino could rock out during the drive.

Kenny's voice made her think of Conner Creed, though, and she switched it off after the third track, annoyed. Shouldn't it be Hunter she had on her mind? Hunter she imagined herself dancing with slow and close to the jukebox in some cowboy bar? After all, she hadn't seen Conner since their lunch date.

Hunter, on the other hand, had invited her to join him on a cruise to Mexico the week between Christmas and New Year's, going so far as to buy the tickets and forward them to her as an attachment to one of his brief, manic emails.

Remembering that, she frowned. She was—thrilled. Who wouldn't be? It was just that he hadn't consulted her first, had just assumed she'd be willing to drop everything—or worse yet, that she didn't have any holiday plans in the first place—meet him at LAX on Christmas night, and board the ship the next morning.

She knew a sunny, weeklong respite from a Colorado winter would be welcome when the time came and, besides, all that merry-merry, jing-jing-jingling stuff always gave her a low-grade case of the blues. Sure, she had Natty to celebrate with, but the music and the decorations and the lights and the rest of it made her miss her dad so keenly that her throat closed up, achy-tight. Joe McCall had loved Christmas.

To her mother, Laurel, December 25 was a nonevent at best and an orgy of capitalistic conspicuous consumption at worst. A skilled trauma nurse, too-busy-for-her-own-daughter Mom was always in the thick of some international disaster these days—floods in Pakistan, earthquakes in China, tsunamis in the Pacific, mudslides in South American countries whose names and borders changed with every political coup.

Suffice it to say, Laurel and Tricia weren't all that close, especially now that Tricia was a grown-up. To be fair, though, except for her parents' quiet divorce when she was seven, and all the subsequent schlepping back and forth between Colorado and Washington state, her childhood had been a fairly secure one. Until Tricia started college, Laurel had stayed right there in Seattle, working at a major hospital, making the mortgage payments on their small condo without complaint, and showing up for most of her only child's parent-teacher conferences, dance recitals and reluctant performances in school plays.

If there had been a coolness, a certain distance in Laurel's interactions with Tricia, well, there were plenty of people who would have traded places with her, too, weren't there? So what if she'd been a little lonely when she wasn't staying with Joe and Natty in Lonesome Bend?

She'd had a home, food, decent clothes, a college education.

Not that Laurel considered a BA degree in art history even remotely useful. She'd recommended nursing school, at least until one of those Bring Your Kid to Work things rolled around when Tricia

was thirteen. Laurel had been in charge of Emergency Services then, and it was a full moon, and Tricia was so shaken by the E.R. experience, with all its blood and screaming and throwing up, that she'd nearly been admitted herself.

Even now, though, on the rare occasions when they Skyped or spoke on the phone, Laurel was prone to distracted little laments like, "It would be different if you were an artist—your degree would make some kind of sense then—" or "You do realize, don't you, that this Hunter person is just using you?"

Tightening her hands on the steering wheel, Tricia shook off these reflections, determined not to ruin a happy day by dwelling on things that couldn't be changed. Better to concentrate on the road to Denver, and Sasha's much-anticipated visit.

Valentino, meanwhile, sat quietly in the back, watching with apparent interest as mile after flat mile rolled past the Pathfinder's windows. He was good company, that dog. No trouble at all.

When they reached the airport, and she rolled a window down partway and promised she'd be back before he knew she'd even been gone, he settled himself in for a midmorning nap.

Tricia locked the rig and headed for the nearest bank of elevators, checking her watch as the doors slid open and she stepped inside. Sasha was scheduled to land in less than half an hour.

So far, so good.

* * *

THE BIG TOUR BUS rolled up the dusty road to the Creed ranch house just before noon, and the sight of it made Conner smile. The monstrosity belonged to Steven's wife Melissa's famous brother, the country-western singer Brad O'Ballivan, and there was an oversize silhouette of his head painted on one side, along with the singer's name splashed in letters that probably could have been read from a mile away, or farther.

Davis and Kim had postponed their own road trip as soon as they learned that the Stone Creek branch of the family had decided on a spur-of-the-moment visit, and they were standing right next to Conner, grinning from ear to ear at the prospect of seeing their three grandchildren.

Conner, just as pleased as his aunt and uncle were, had nevertheless been waiting for the proverbial other shoe to drop ever since he'd learned that Brody was headed home, with Joleen Williams in tow. Several days had gone by since Malcolm had broken the news on the loading dock at the feed store, and there'd been no sign of David and Bathsheba in the interim, but Conner remained on his guard just the same. Brody would show up in Lonesome Bend, if not on the ranch, that was a given; it was only a question of when.

The Bradmobile came to a squeaky-braked stop in between the main ranch house and the barn, and the main door opened with a hydraulic whoosh. Six-year-old Matt and his faithful companion, a dog named Zeke, if Conner recalled correctly, burst through the opening.

Sparing a grin for his "Uncle Conner" as he dashed straight past him, the little boy hurtled off the ground like a living rocket, and Davis, laughing, caught the child in his arms.

"Hey, boy," he said.

Steven got out of the bus next, turning to extend a hand to his spirited wife, Melissa, a pretty thing with a great figure, a dazzling smile and a law degree.

"Where are those babies?" Kim demanded good-naturedly.

Smiling, Melissa put a finger to her lips and mouthed the word Napping.

Steven approached, shaking his father's hand and then turning to look at Conner. "Any word from Brody?" Steven asked.

Conner stiffened, a move that would have been imperceptible to most people, but Steven knew him too well to miss any nuances, however subtle. "Now, why would you ask me that, cousin?" Conner retorted.

Steven's nonchalant shrug didn't fool Conner, because the nuance thing worked two ways. "He told Melissa and me he might be headed this way," he said. "That was a week ago, at least. I figured he'd be here by now."

"He might be in town someplace," Conner allowed, his tone casual. "Staying under the radar."

Steven gave a snortlike chuckle at that. "As if Brody Creed has ever stayed under the radar," he replied. His eyes were watchful, and gentle in a way that made Conner wary of what would come next. "You know he and Joleen hooked up somewhere along the line, right?"

Conner cleared his throat, watching as Kim and Melissa crept into the tour bus for a glimpse of the six-month-old twins, Samuel Davis, called Sam, and Blue, named for Conner and Brody's dad. Davis, Matt and the dog were headed for the barn, because Matt had a serious addiction to horses.

"Yeah," Conner said belatedly, and his voice came out sounding huskier than he'd meant it to. "I heard." He displaced his hat, shoved splayed fingers through his hair and sighed. "Why does everybody seem to think I'm going to have to be talked in off some ledge because Brody and Joleen are up to their old tricks?"

Steven rested a hand on Conner's shoulder and squeezed. "'Everybody' doesn't think any such thing," he said quietly. "It's a long way in the past, what happened. Maybe far enough that you and Brody could lay the whole thing to rest and get on with it."

Conner made a derisive sound. "I'm sure that's what he wants, all right," he said sarcastically. "Why else would he be bringing Joleen with him?"

Steven sighed. Dropped his hand from Conner's shoulder. "This is Brody we're talking about," he reminded his cousin. "My guess would be, he figures bygones are bygones after all this time."

Kim and Melissa emerged from the bus, each of them carrying a bundled-up baby and beaming. Conner wondered if Kim had "accidentally" awakened the twins from their naps.

"That is some bus," he said, shaking his head. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you wanted to attract as much attention as possible, cousin."

Steven laughed. "We've stirred up some interest at gas stations and rest stops between here and Stone Creek," he admitted. "But as soon as folks realize Brad O'Ballivan isn't going to pop out and strum a few tunes on his guitar, they leave us alone."

Kim and Melissa went on by, headed for the house with the babies, and Steven ducked into the bus, returning moments later with a fold-up gizmo that might have been either a portable crib or a playpen.

The sight gave Conner a pang, and he wasn't very proud of himself, knowing that what he was feeling was plain old envy.

Steven had a ranch and a wife and, now, kids. Pretty much everything Conner had ever hoped to have himself.

Steven read Conner's expression as he passed. "Let's get inside," he said easily. "It's colder than a well-digger's ass out here and, besides, we've got a lot to catch up on."

A FEMALE FLIGHT attendant escorted Sasha out into the arrivals area.

"That's her!" Sasha whooped, pointing at Tricia and practically jumping up and down. "That's my Aunt Tricia!"

Beaming, Tricia opened her arms. The flight attendant smiled, watching as the child, bespectacled and pigtailed, clad in a pink nylon jacket, a sweater and little jeans with the flannel lining showing at the cuffs, left her carry-on bag and ran into Tricia's hug at top speed.

"I got to sit in first class!" Sasha announced, when Tricia and the flight attendant had had a brief exchange, the purpose of which was to verify Tricia's identity. "I was next to a man who kept clearing his sinuses!"

Tricia chuckled. "Yuck," she commented.

Sasha grasped the handle of the carry-on and jabbed at her smudged glasses where the wire rims arched across her tiny, freckled nose. "We don't even have to stop at baggage claim," she informed

Tricia proudly. “All my stuff is right here in this suitcase. Mom said I didn’t need to bring my whole wardrobe since you probably have a washer and dryer.”

“There’s a set downstairs, in my great-grandmother’s section of the house,” Tricia said, taking Sasha’s free hand and leading her toward the first of several moving walkways. “Do you need to use the restroom or anything?”

Sasha shook her head, making her light brown pigtails fly again. “I did that on the plane,” she said. “There wasn’t even a line in first class.”

“Wow,” Tricia said. “What about food? Are you hungry?”

Sasha grinned up at her. Her permanent teeth were coming in, too big for her face. She’d be a beauty when she got older, Tricia knew, just like Diana, but right now, she was headed into an awkward stage. “Aunt Tricia,” she said patiently, “I was in first class.”

Tricia laughed again. “So you mentioned,” she teased.

On the way to the parking garage, Sasha chattered on about the upcoming move to Paris, and how she’d be attending a real school over there, with other kids and different teachers for different classes and everything, because her mom and dad had been able to find one that could provide “the necessary academic challenges.” Homeschooling was okay, she stressed to Tricia, but it would be fun to ride buses and have a school song and all that stuff.

Tricia listened in delight, though a part of her was already missing Sasha and Diana and Paul, which was silly, when they hadn’t actually moved yet.

When they reached the Pathfinder, Valentino was standing with his nose pressed to the window on the rear hatch, steaming up the glass.

“You have a dog!” Sasha crowed, obviously thrilled by the discovery. “You actually got another dog!”

“Not exactly,” Tricia said, but Sasha didn’t hear her. She was totally focused on Valentino.

Tricia unlocked the doors and lifted the hatch, fielding Valentino with one hand, so he wouldn’t jump out of the vehicle and hurt himself, and hefting up Sasha’s surprisingly heavy bag with the other.

Sasha tried to scramble into the back with Valentino, and Tricia stopped her. It was only then that she realized she didn’t have a booster seat for the child to ride in. Feeling incredibly guilty, she helped Sasha onto the backseat and waited while she buckled up.

“In Washington,” Sasha informed her cheerfully, “I have to use a booster seat. It’s against the law not to.”

It’s against the law here, too, Tricia thought ruefully, rummaging up a smile. “We’ll stop and buy one first thing,” she said.

“What’s the dog’s name?” Sasha asked, straining to pat his head, when Tricia was behind the wheel, belted in, and ready to head out.

“Valentino,” Tricia answered, wondering if she ought to explain that she was just keeping him until she could find him a good home and deciding against the idea in the next instant. Sasha wouldn’t understand.

When the time came, Tricia thought sadly, neither would Valentino.

“Doesn’t he need to get out of the car before we go?” Sasha inquired, ever practical. She got that from her dad; Diana was smart, but impulsive.

“We’ll hit the first rest stop,” Tricia promised.

“What if he can’t wait?” Sasha fretted.

“He’s a good boy,” Tricia said, driving slowly along the aisle leading to the nearest exit. “He’ll wait.”

“Not if he can’t,” Sasha said.

“Sash,” Tricia said gently. “He’ll be okay.”

“He doesn’t look anything like Rusty,” the little girl observed, after a short silence, while Tricia was stopped at the pay window, handing over her ticket and the price of parking.

The remark gave Tricia a bittersweet feeling, a combination of affection for the child and grief for Rusty. “No,” she said softly, as they pulled away. “He’s not Rusty.”

“That’s okay,” Sasha said earnestly, evidently addressing Valentino. “Rusty was a really nice dog, but you’re nice, too.”

Tricia smiled, though her eyes stung a little.

They stopped at the first shopping center they passed and took Valentino on a little tour of the grassy dividers in the parking lot before settling him in the Pathfinder again and dashing into a chain store, hand in hand, to buy a proper booster seat.

Though Tricia was at a loss, Sasha knew the layout of the store from visiting the branch nearest her home in Seattle, and she went straight to the section with car seats. Once the purchase was made and they were back at the car again, they wrestled the bulky seat out of its box, laughing the whole time, and it was Sasha who showed Tricia how the various straps and buckles worked.

She had a booster seat just like it, she said.

A store employee, rounding up red plastic shopping carts, took charge of the empty box, and they were good to go.

“Now we’re legal,” Sasha said. “Valentino and I would be stranded if you got arrested.”

Tricia drove out of the lot and onto the highway. “The most important thing is that you’re safer now,” she told her goddaughter. “But even if something did happen, you wouldn’t be left to manage on your own.”

“But who’s going to use this seat when I’m in Paris?” Sasha asked. “It cost a lot of money.”

There it was again—her practical side. How many kids troubled their heads about such things?

“Not to worry,” Tricia answered, wanting to reassure the child. “It’ll come in handy now, and when you visit again.”

Sasha sighed. “But it might be a long time before that happens,” she said. “I might be too big to even need a booster seat next time I come to Colorado. I might even be a teenager by then.” From her tone, she didn’t find the idea of being a teen completely unappealing.

“It’ll be a while,” Tricia said, though she knew Sasha would be grown-up long before anybody else—Diana and Paul included—was the least bit ready for that to happen.

Mercifully, Sasha moved between subjects like a firefly flitting from branch to bough, and her concern over the expense of the booster seat was apparently forgotten. “Are we going to do fun stuff while I’m staying with you?” she asked.

Tricia reached up and adjusted the rearview mirror just far enough, and just long enough, to catch a glimpse of Sasha’s face. Valentino, living up to his name, rested his muzzle against the little girl’s cheek.

“Yes,” she said. “We are going to do fun stuff.”

“Like what?”

“Well, we could go out for pizza. And rent some DVDs at the supermarket—”

Tricia couldn’t help thinking how ordinary those activities must sound to an urban child, and she stumbled a little. “And there’s a barbecue at River’s Bend tomorrow afternoon. We’re invited.”

The mysterious Sunday reservation had been made under the name “Stone Creek Cattle Company,” and Tricia had regarded the invitation as a formality, never intending to attend as a guest. Now that she had a child to entertain, it sounded like a good idea after all—the sort of Western shindig one might expect to see in Lonesome Bend, Colorado.

“Will it be like a party?” Sasha piped up, clearly intrigued. “With music and sack races and games of horseshoes and stuff?”

“I don’t know,” Tricia confessed, mildly deflated. Good heavens, she was really batting a thousand here.

“You’re invited, but you don’t know what kind of party it’s going to be?”

Sasha, Tricia thought wryly, would probably grow up to be a lawyer.

"The people are from out of town," she said. "I had the impression that it's a pretty big gathering."

"They're strangers?"

"I guess so, but—"

"A barbecue might be fun. They have them in people's backyards sometimes, in Seattle, but I'll bet cookouts are pretty unusual in France."

Tricia smiled. "Probably," she agreed. "But the French are very good cooks."

"My friend Jessie," Sasha remarked, "says the French don't like Americans."

"Jessie?" Tricia countered, stalling so she could think for a few moments.

"Jessie's mom homeschools her and her brother, the same way my mom does me," Sasha said. "She's ten, just like me—Jessie, I mean—but she doesn't have to sit in a booster seat anymore because she's taller than I am. A lot taller." She paused, drew a breath. "What if I don't grow any bigger? What if I'm as old as you and Mom and I still have to ride in a stupid booster seat, like a baby, because I'm short? Jessie says it could happen."

"Jessie sounds—precocious," Tricia said. "You aren't through growing, kiddo—take it from me. Your dad is six-two, and your mom is five-seven. What are the genetic chances that you'll be short?"

"Grandma is short," Sasha reasoned.

"I've met your grandmother," Tricia responded. "And you don't take after her at all."

"But she is short," Sasha insisted.

"I guess," Tricia allowed, picturing Paul's sweet mother, who was indeed vertically challenged. "Care to make a wager?"

"What kind of wager?" Sasha asked, sounding eager.

"I'll bet that when you come home from France, you'll be at least five-five."

"What if I win? I mean, suppose I'm still four-six-and-a-half?"

"I'll buy you a whole season, on DVD, of whatever shows your mom will let you watch."

"Mom hates TV," Sasha said. "But I get to watch an hour a day when we live in Paris, if I have all my homework done, because that will help me learn the language."

Tricia barely kept from rolling her eyes. Sometimes Diana, who had been adventurous in the extreme before Sasha came along, overdid the whole responsible-parenting thing. "Okay," she said. "What would work for you?"

"The Twilight series," Sasha answered, with a marked lack of hesitation. "All the books in it."

"Deal," Tricia said, hoping she wouldn't have to pay up before Sasha was old enough to read about teenage vampires in love.

"What do you get if I lose?" Sasha wanted to know.

Tricia considered carefully before she replied. "Well, you could draw me a picture."

"I'd be willing to do that anyway," Sasha said, sweet thing that she was. "Your prize has to be something better than that."

"Let's think about it," Tricia suggested.

"Pizza for supper tonight?" Sasha asked.

"Pizza for supper tonight," Tricia confirmed.

"Yes!" Sasha shouted, punching the air with one small fist. "Mom never lets me eat real pizza, but Dad and I sneak it sometimes."

Valentino, caught up in the excitement of the moment, barked in happy agreement.

* * *

THE STONE CREEK Cattle Company, Tricia discovered the next day, when she and Sasha arrived at the campground to attend the barbecue, was owned by none other than Steven Creed.

There were Creeds everywhere—Davis and Kim, whom Tricia liked very much, were in attendance, each of them carrying a duplicate baby, dressed up warm. Conner was there, too, looking better than good, hazy in the heat mirage rising from the big central bonfire.

"Hello, Tricia," Steven said, when she stopped in her tracks. Suddenly, all her youthful shyness was back; she might actually have fled the scene if Sasha hadn't been with her, all primed for a Wild West experience she could brag about when she started school in Paris.

"Steven," she said, with a polite nod. "How are you?"

"Fantastic," Steven replied. "Married, with children." His blue gaze shifted to Sasha, who was staring at him in apparent fascination, probably thinking, as a lot of people did, that he looked like Brad Pitt. "Is this lovely young lady your daughter?"

Sasha gave a peal of laughter at that, as if it was totally inconceivable that her honorary aunt could be somebody's mother.

"No," she answered. "Aunt Tricia is my mom's best friend. I'm visiting for two whole weeks because we're moving to Paris in a couple of months—"

"Nice to see you again, Steven," Tricia said, after laying a hand lightly on Sasha's small shoulder to stem the flow.

He looked around, probably for his wife, and when his eyes landed on the friendly woman bouncing one of the matching babies on one hip while she chatted with some other guests, they softened in a way that moved Tricia deeply and unexpectedly.

Had Hunter ever looked at her that way? If he had, she hadn't noticed.

"Looks like Melissa is caught up in conversation," Steven mused, smiling. "Don't take off before I get a chance to introduce you two."

"Sure," Tricia answered, blushing. "I'd like that."

Steven nodded, excused himself and walked away. Sasha had wandered off to play with some of the other kids, but Tricia wasn't alone for long. She followed him with her gaze, and when she looked back at the space he'd occupied before, Conner was there.

"Hi," he said.

She smiled up at him, even though she felt incredibly nervous. The dancing-to-a-jukebox fantasy from the day before, when she'd had to turn off Kenny Chesney, filled her mind.

"Hi," she replied. Oh, she was a sparkling conversationalist, all right.

"I'm glad you're here," Conner said. She wouldn't have known that by his expression; he wasn't smiling. In fact, he looked as though he were trying to work out some complex equation in his head. "How's the dog?"

"Valentino's fine," she answered. She'd thought she was over her childhood shyness, but here it was, back again. "He's at home, with Natty's cat."

Could she sound any more inane?

Conner finally grinned, a spare, slanted motion of his mouth. "He's going to be big when he's full grown, you know," he remarked.

Was it possible that Conner Creed was shy, too? Nah, she decided.

"That's why I'm hoping to find him a home in the country someplace," she said. "Where he can run."

Conner merely nodded at that.

Tricia blushed, wishing the tension would subside. It didn't, of course, and she couldn't stand the brief silence that had settled between them, at once a bond and a barrier, so she burst out with, "He was supposed to live here, in the office, but he wouldn't stay put. He managed to escape somehow, and showed up on my doorstep in the middle of that last big rainstorm—"

Stop babbling, she ordered herself silently.

Conner frowned. “How could he have gotten out?” he asked, and when he walked over to examine the office door, Tricia followed right along. The rest of the world seemed to fall away, forgotten. “You locked up, right?”

“I forget sometimes,” Tricia said, enjoying his apparent concern for her personal security more than she probably should have. “And the lock is old, like the rest of this place, and it doesn’t always catch. A gust of wind could have blown it open.”

“Or somebody could have broken in,” Conner said, taking the dark view evidently. “Did you call Jim Young and report what happened?”

“No,” Tricia said. “I drove over here and checked things out myself, after I got Valentino dried off and settled at the apartment. Nothing was missing, or anything like that.”

Just then, Steven’s attractive wife joined them, baby tugging happily at a lock of her bright hair.

“I’m Melissa Creed,” she said, smiling at Tricia, putting out her free hand.

Tricia took the other woman’s hand and smiled back. “Tricia McCall,” she said.

Melissa slanted a mischievous glance at Conner, who was just standing there, contributing nothing at all. “Of course I might have expected you to introduce me,” she told him.

He shoved a hand through his hair, sighed. He looked mildly uncomfortable now, as though he might bolt. “Clearly,” he said, “that wasn’t necessary.”

Melissa laughed at that, and her eyes shone as she turned her attention back to Tricia. “The food is almost ready,” she said. “Women and children get to be first in line.”

By tacit agreement, they started toward the picnic area, where the huge grill was emitting delicious aromas, savory-sweet.

Tricia called to Sasha, who came reluctantly. She’d already made friends with some of the other kids, though they’d only been there a few minutes.

Melissa stayed at Tricia’s side while they waited their turns.

“What’s the occasion?” Tricia asked, taking in the crowds of people. She recognized most of them, but there were some strangers, too. “For the party, I mean?”

Melissa smiled. “My husband likes to bring people together,” she said. “The more, the merrier, as far as Steven’s concerned.”

“Oh,” Tricia said, at a loss again.

Just then, Melissa spotted some new arrival and waved, smiling. “Excuse me,” she said. “I might have to referee.”

With that, she hurried away.

Tricia turned her head, and there was Brody Creed in the distance, looking so much like his brother that it made her breath catch.

CHAPTER FIVE

BRODY.

Conner couldn’t have claimed he was surprised to see his brother; he’d been warned well ahead of time, after all. But he still felt as though he’d stepped through an upstairs doorway and found himself with no floor to stand on, falling fast.

Careful as Conner was to keep a low profile, Brody’s gaze swept over the crowd and found him with the inevitability of a heat-seeking missile. It was, Conner supposed, the twin thing. He’d nearly forgotten that weird connection between him and Brody, they’d been apart for so long. As kids, they’d been a little spooked by the phenomenon sometimes, though mostly it was fun, like scaring the hell out of each other with stories about escaped convicts with hooks for hands, or swapping identities and maintaining the deception for days before anyone caught on.

Brody narrowed his eyes. His hair was longer than Conner’s, he hadn’t shaved in a day or two, and his clothes were scruffy, but for all that, seeing him was, for Conner, disturbingly like looking into a mirror.

Where was Joleen? Conner wondered, subtly scanning Brody's immediate orbit. There was no sign of her—which didn't mean she wasn't around somewhere, of course. Like Brody, Joleen had a talent for turning up unexpectedly, in his thoughts if not in the flesh; she probably enjoyed the drama of it all. Joleen had always been big on drama.

Now Brody made his way through the clusters of people, smiling and speaking a word of greeting here and there, but he was headed straight for Conner. Pride made Conner dig in his boot heels and stay put, though he didn't feel ready to deal with Brody just then. He folded his arms, tilted his head to one side, and waited. If he bolted, Brody and whoever else was looking might think Conner was afraid of his brother—and he wasn't. It was just that there was so damn much going on under the surface of things, and Conner had trouble maintaining his perspective, at least as far as Brody was concerned.

"Hello, little brother," Brody drawled, when the two of them were standing face-to-face. He'd been born four minutes ahead of Conner, as the story went, and he'd always enjoyed bringing it up.

Like it gave him some advantage or something.

Conner gave a curt little nod, realized his arms were still folded across his chest, and let them fall to his sides. "Brody," he said, in gruff acknowledgment that the other man existed, if nothing else.

Brody indulged in a cocky grin, his mouth tilting up at one corner, his blue eyes mischievous, but watchful, too. Despite all his folksy affability, Brody was on high alert, just as Conner was. Maybe it had slipped his mind that they'd always been able to read each other like bold print on a billboard, but Conner definitely remembered.

"I'm just passing through," Brody said, and while his voice was easy, his eyes gave the lie to the impression he was doing his best to give. Whatever his reasons for returning to Lonesome Bend might be, they were important to him. "So there's no need for you to get all bent out of shape or anything."

"Who says I'm bent out of shape?" Conner asked, sensing that he had the upper hand. Since they'd always been so evenly matched that all either of them ever gained from a fistfight, for instance, was a lot of cuts and bruises but no clear victory, the insight came as something of a revelation.

"Just going by past history," Brody replied, raising both eyebrows. "Last time we ran into each other, at that rodeo in Stone Creek, you landed on me before I could get so much as a howdy out of my mouth."

Conner felt a twinge of shame, recalling that incident, though he wasn't about to concede that he'd started the row—it had been a mutual, and instantaneous, decision. And, as usual, it had ended in a standoff.

"What do you want, Brody?" he asked now. His arms were folded again. When had that happened?

"Just a place to hang my hat for a while," Brody replied, sounding sadly aggrieved.

"How about on Joleen's bedpost?" Conner asked, and then could have kicked himself, hard. Not because the remark had been unkind, but because of the way Brody might interpret it.

That slow, Brody-patented grin spread across his brother's beard-stubbled face. "So that's the way it is," he said, hooking his thumbs in the belt loops of his jeans, like some old-time cowpuncher surveying the herd. Next, he'd probably turn his head to one side and spit. "I don't mind telling you, little brother—I didn't figure you'd give a damn what Joleen and I might do together, after all this time."

The old rage seethed inside Conner, but glancing past Brody, he caught a momentary glimpse of Tricia McCall, sitting at one of the picnic tables, in the midst of a crowd of other diners, and something shifted inside him, just like that.

It hurt, like having a disjointed bone yanked back into its socket, but there was an element of relief, too. What the hell?

"You're right," Conner told his brother stiffly, finally paying attention to the conversation again. "The two of you can join the circus and swing from trapezes for all I care."

Brody put one hand to his chest, his fingers splayed wide, and feigned emotional injury. “Then you shouldn’t have a problem with me bunking out at the ranch for a couple of weeks,” he said. “Especially since the place is half mine anyhow.”

By that time, Davis had worked his way over to them, probably dispatched by Kim. She wouldn’t want any fights breaking out, with all those kids and women around, and if anything happened, the gossip wouldn’t die down for years.

“You two are bristling like a couple of porcupines,” Davis observed dryly, his Creed-blue eyes swinging from one brother to the other. “I don’t need to tell you, do I, that this is neither the time nor the place for trouble of the sort you’re probably cooking up right about now?”

Conner let out his breath, rolled his shoulders again.

Brody grinned at their uncle. “Just saying hello to my brother,” he said, sounding guileless, but unable to resist adding, “and meeting with the usual hostile response, of course.”

“Where’s Joleen?” Davis asked quietly, watching Brody.

Brody rolled his eyes and flung his hands out from his sides. “Why the hell does everybody keep asking me that?” he wanted to know. Fortunately, he didn’t raise his voice; that would have been like dropping a lighted match into a puddle of spilled kerosene. “I’m not the woman’s keeper, for God’s sake.”

Just her lover, Conner thought, automatically, and waited for the rush of testosterone-laced adrenaline. It didn’t come. And that threw him a little.

Brody thrust out a dramatic sigh, looking like a man who’d bravely fought the good fight, heroic in the face of great tragedy, won the battle but lost the war. “Look,” he said, still careful to speak quietly, since half the town was present and watching out of the corners of their eyes. “Joleen and I met up by accident, at a rodeo in Lubbock, that’s all. She’d just split the sheets with some yahoo, and she was too broke to even buy a bus ticket back home, so I brought her, since I happened to be headed in this general direction anyway. End of story.”

Conner leaned in until his nose and Brody’s were almost touching. “You’ve obviously mistaken me,” he growled, “for somebody who gives a rat’s ass why you and Jolene came back to Lonesome Bend.”

“That’s enough,” Davis said sternly, as in days of old, when Brody and Conner had been even more hotheaded than they were now. “That will be enough. This is a party, not some dive of a bar in Juarez. If you want to beat the hell out of each other, be my guests, but do it at home, behind the barn. Not here.”

A brief and highly incendiary silence fell.

“Sorry,” Conner finally ground out, insincerely.

“Me, too,” Brody added, lying through his teeth. “Fact is, I’ve lost my appetite anyhow, so I’ll just be heading home to the ranch—if nobody minds.”

Like he cared whether or not anybody minded anything, ever. Brody had always done whatever he damn well pleased, and people who got in his way were just expected to deal.

“Kim and I will be hitting the trail right after Steven and Melissa and the kids leave tomorrow,” Davis said, watching Brody. “I’d offer to let you stay at our place and look after things while we’re gone, but Kim’s already made other arrangements.”

Brody raised both hands, palms out, like the not-too-worried victim of a stick-up. “No problem,” he said, after a pointed look at Conner. “I’ve got a yen to sleep in my own bed, in my own room, anyway. ’Course I’ll have to sleep with one eye open, since I’ll be about as welcome as an unrepentant whore in church.”

Davis leveled a glance at Conner, put an arm around Brody’s shoulders and steered him away, toward the barbecue area, where the grill was smoking and food was being handed out. “Don’t say anything to Kim,” the older man began, his voice carrying back to Conner, “but there’s this pair of boots she donated to the rummage sale—”

In spite of everything, Conner chuckled. If Davis Creed was anything, he was persistent—some would say stubborn—just like the rest of their kin.

After giving himself a few moments to cool off, Conner made his way to Kim's side. She immediately turned to face him.

"Thanks for not making a scene," she said, not unkindly but with the quiet directness they'd all come to expect from her. "This get-together means a lot to Steven. It's his way of showing off his wife and kids to the hometown folks, and I'd hate to see that get ruined."

"I hear you, Kim," Conner replied. Brody and Davis were in line for grub by then, each of them holding a throwaway plate and jawing with folks around them. "But if anybody ruins this shindig, it won't be me."

Real pain flickered in Kim's eyes. Conner's biological mother had died soon after giving birth to him and Brody, leaving Blue alone and grief-stricken, with no clue as to how to look after two squalling, premature newborns, and this woman had stepped up, loved them like her own. She'd been firm, even strict sometimes, Kim had, but there had never been a single moment when Conner had doubted her devotion, and he was pretty sure Brody would have said the same.

They'd been lucky to have Kim in their lives, and even luckier to have Davis, because their uncle had run the ranch for them after Blue's death, and guarded their interests with absolute integrity. On top of that, he'd been a father to them.

"If only you and Brody could get along," Kim said sadly.

"That requires trust," Conner replied, his voice quiet. "And Brody and I don't have that anymore." Without conscious effort, he sought Tricia again, with his eyes, found her, and he was heartened by the mere sight of her.

Why was that?

Kim, typically, had followed Conner's gaze, registered that he was watching Tricia, even though he would have preferred to keep that particular tidbit of information to himself. "Tricia McCall?" Kim asked, her voice very soft, pitched to go no further than Conner's ears. "My faith in your judgment is restored, Conner Creed. Frankly, it's a mystery to me why a woman like that is still single."

"Maybe she likes being single," Conner suggested.

"The way you like being single, Conner?" Kim immediately retorted.

His hackles didn't exactly rise, but they twitched a little. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"You know perfectly well what it means," she answered, but she rested a hand on his forearm and squeezed. "Even without these two eyes in my head, I would still have known how much you want somebody to share your life. Whenever you so much as look at Steven, or Melissa, or any of those kids—even the dog, for heaven's sake—it's right there in that handsome mug of yours. A sort of lonely hunger."

"'Lonely hunger'?" Conner asked, with a lightness he didn't feel. "You read too many of those romance novels."

"It wouldn't hurt you or Brody or, for that matter, Davis, to read a few romances," Kim said, undaunted. "That way, you might know how a woman likes to be treated."

Conner let out a huff. "My point," he said, "is this—don't get carried away—Tricia's involved with some guy in Seattle. Keeps his picture on her computer monitor as a screen saver."

Kim smiled. "You've been to Tricia's place?"

Conner felt his neck go warm. "Yes," he answered. "I took Natty a load of firewood, as I do every fall and right on through the winter, and since the old gal was away, I needed somebody to let me in so I could fill the wood boxes. Tricia lives upstairs, above Natty's."

Kim was musing now. Thoughtful, but still amused. "Maybe the guy in that picture is her brother or just a good friend. He might even be gay."

"Right," Conner said dryly. "And Santa Claus might come down my chimney on Christmas Eve and stuff a Playboy bunny into my stocking."

Kim arched an eyebrow, but she was smiling again, full-out. “Bitter,” she said. “Conner Creed, you are a bitter man. And in the prime of your life, too.”

“I’m not bitter,” Conner retorted, knowing that what his stand-in mom said was true. He was bitter, over what he perceived as Brody’s betrayal of his trust, over the way he’d never met the right woman, as so many of the guys he knew had—Steven in particular.

“Don’t try to B.S. me, Conner,” Kim said. “I know you better than you know yourself. You’re taken with Tricia, and there’s not a darn thing wrong with that. Man up, why don’t you, and ask her out?”

“To do what?” Conner scuffed, strangely unsettled by the idea of making a move on Tricia. What if she said no? What if she said yes? “Go to a hoedown? Or maybe that rummage sale slash chili feed? Anyway, she has company, a little girl.”

“Sasha,” Kim clarified knowledgeably. “She’s Tricia’s best friend’s daughter, and she’s ten years old. Also, she’s horse crazy, like most girls her age.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, you thick-headed cowboy,” Kim replied, with exaggerated patience and wry affection, “that if you invite Sasha to go riding on the ranch, Tricia will automatically come with her. That’s how Davis and I fell in love, you know. We were on a trail ride together, with a bunch of friends, and the first night, we got to talking by the campfire, and it was happy trails from then on. We’ve been traveling side by side ever since.”

“In that case,” Conner answered, his tone dry, “I’ll take care to avoid trail rides.”

Kim quirked a smile. “Don’t give up your day job,” she whispered, before turning to walk away. “You’d never make it as a comedian.”

Conner watched her go. And he steered clear of the chow line, since his stomach felt all tensed up, as if it were closed for business. If Steven and Melissa’s visit hadn’t been such a short one, he would have gotten into his truck and gone home.

Maybe saddled a horse and headed up into the green-and-gold-and-crimson foothills, where the aspens whispered, where the streams tumbled over rocks and, except for the occasional call of a bird, those were pretty much the only sounds.

Up there, in the spectacular hills, a man could hear himself think. Get some kind of handle on the stuff that was—or wasn’t—happening in his life.

But he was stuck, for now anyway.

Might as well make the best of it, and join the party.

* * *

TRICIA HELPED WITH the cleanup, telling herself that she ought to leave the barbecue now that she’d put in a cordial appearance, but the bonfire was nice and people were having fun, especially the children, and somebody was tuning up a banjo. The thought of going home, even though Sasha would be with her, was an intensely lonely prospect.

Carolyn Simmons, perhaps the only person in Lonesome Bend who was even more rootless than Tricia, helped, too. A gypsy with no apparent home, Carolyn joined in with the other women and a few men, gathering paper plates and cups and plastic flatware from the ground and the tops of the picnic tables, stuffing the detritus into garbage bags.

“Are you volunteering at the rummage sale again this year?” Carolyn asked Tricia, her tone and manner at once casual and friendly.

“Natty’s been trying to pin me down for kitchen duty,” Tricia said, smiling in response. “I think she only wants me to guard the family chili recipe, though.” Like just about everyone in Lonesome Bend, Tricia was curious about Carolyn, who was always ready with a cheerful hello or a helping hand, but extremely private, too. She kept a roof over her head by housesitting, mainly for the reclusive movie stars, corporate execs and other famous types who bought or built enormous homes outside

town but rarely used them. Besides that, her only known income was from the original clothes she designed and sold online or through consignment boutiques.

Carolyn chuckled at Tricia's answer. She had shoulder-length hair, streaked blond but somehow very natural-looking, and her eyes were wide and green, surrounded by thick lashes. "I don't blame Natty one bit," she said warmly. "That chili is so good it ought to be patented."

"Amen," Tricia agreed. The chili recipe was closely guarded indeed; only Natty and her sister, the one she was visiting in Denver, knew how to make it. The single written copy in existence was brought out of some secret hiding place every October, on the Thursday preceding the rummage sale, and carefully protected from prying eyes.

Even Tricia, a true McCall, had merely managed glimpses of that tattered old recipe card over the years, with its bent corners and its spidery handwriting slanting hard to the right, though Natty had intimated that it might be time to think about "passing the torch." That remark never failed to alarm Tricia, who adored her great-grandmother, and couldn't imagine a world without her in it.

"How is Natty, anyway?" Carolyn asked, dropping a full garbage bag into one of the trash containers and dusting off her hands against the thighs of her black jeans. "I usually run into her at the grocery store or the library, but I haven't seen her around lately."

Tricia explained about the Denver trip, and quickly realized that Carolyn wasn't listening. Her gaze had snagged on Brody Creed, laughing with friends on the other side of the campground, and she seemed powerless to jerk it away again.

Intrigued herself, Tricia watched Brody for a few moments, too, thinking in a detached way that while he and Conner did resemble each other closely, there were obvious differences, too.

Conner moved with quiet purpose, for example, while Brody was loose-limbed, ready to change directions at any given moment, if it suited him to do so. There were other qualities, too—some of them so intuitive in nature that Tricia would have had a hard time putting names to them. She knew, somehow, that even if the Creed brothers tried to look as alike as possible, she would still know Conner from Brody in an instant. And that was puzzling indeed.

Carolyn snapped out of her own reverie a bit before Tricia did, and when their eyes met, a sort of understanding passed between them—empathy, perhaps. Or maybe just the silent admission that some questions didn't have answers. Not obvious ones, at least.

And then Carolyn surprised Tricia by saying calmly, "What a fool I was, way back when."

This time, it was Hunter who popped into Tricia's mind. She shook off the image and smiled reassuringly. "Weren't we all?"

Carolyn's gaze strayed back to Brody, but didn't linger. When she looked at Tricia again, it was clear that a door had closed inside Carolyn. It reminded Tricia of the way people board up a house when they know there's a category 4 hurricane on its way. "Some of us," she said sadly, with one more glance at Brody, "knew exactly what they were doing."

Carolyn had a history with Brody Creed?

Whoa, Tricia thought, hoping Carolyn hadn't noticed the way her eyes had widened for a second or two there. She'd lived part of every year in this small, close-knit community, starting with that first summer after second grade, when Joe and Laurel had called it quits and filed for a divorce, and for the better part of a year and a half since her dad's death.

None of which meant that she was any kind of insider when it came to the locals and their secrets, but, still, she usually had a glimmer of what was going on, if only because of things Natty and her friends said in passing, when they got together to sip tea around the old woman's kitchen table. In many ways, Lonesome Bend was like a soap opera come to life, and everybody kept up with the story line—except her, evidently.

Carolyn gave an awkward little laugh. "I'm sorry," she said, embarrassed. "That came out sounding pretty bitchy."

Tricia decided not to comment. Then she remembered that she was still holding her own bag of after-barbecue trash and tossed it into the bin.

"I'm going to be staying on the Creed ranch for a while," Carolyn said, as she and Tricia walked away from the line of garbage cans. "Looking after things for Davis and Kim, I mean. It's a great house, and they have horses, too. I have permission to ride the gentler ones, and I was wondering—"

Her voice fell away, perhaps because she'd seen something in Tricia's face.

Tricia had felt a hard jab to her middle when Carolyn announced her next housesitting assignment, given that, living on the ranch, the other woman would be in close proximity to Conner, and, recognizing the emotion for what it was, she was ashamed. Yes, Carolyn was an attractive woman, presumably available. But she, Tricia, certainly had no business being jealous and, anyway, if Carolyn was interested in one of the Creed men, it was Brody, not Conner.

Her relief was undeniable.

"What?" she asked belatedly. "What were you wondering?"

"Well, if you and your niece might like to go trail riding sometime," Carolyn said, almost shyly.

"I've never been on a horse in my life," Tricia replied. It wasn't that she didn't like horses, just that they were so big, and so unpredictable.

Diana was an accomplished equestrian, and because of that, Sasha was comfortable around the huge creatures.

"Well, then," Carolyn said, spreading her hands for emphasis and grinning a wide, Julia Roberts grin, "it's time you learned, isn't it?"

"I don't know—"

Just then, Sasha rushed over. Sometimes Tricia thought the child had superpowers—particularly as far as her hearing was concerned. Just moments before, she'd been on the other side of the campground, playing chasing games with other kids and several dogs. Let the word horse be spoken, though, and she was Johnny-on-the-spot.

"I want to go riding," Sasha crowed. "Please, please, please—"

"Do you read lips or something?" Tricia asked.

"Matt's uncle Conner is going to ask us to go riding, with a bunch of other people. Matt heard him talking about it, and he told me, and you've got to say yes, because I honestly don't know how I'll go on if you don't!"

Tricia chuckled and gave one of Sasha's pigtails a gentle tug. "When is this big ride supposed to take place?" she asked, hoping nobody would guess that she was stalling.

"Next Sunday, after the chili feed and the rummage sale are over," Sasha expounded, breathless with excitement. "It'll be the last of the good weather, before the snow comes."

"We'll see," Tricia said.

Carolyn was still standing there, smiling.

"Please!" Sasha implored, clasping her hands together as if in prayer and looking up at Tricia with luminous hope in her eyes.

"I have to ask your mom and dad first," Tricia told her, laying a calming hand on the little girl's shoulder. "I'll send them a text, and when they land in Paris, they'll read it and we'll probably have our answer right away."

"They'll say yes," Sasha said confidently, beaming now. "I ride with Mom all the time." The smile faded. "We mostly just ride in arenas and stuff, because Seattle's such a big city. In France, we probably won't get to do it at all. But this is real riding, on a real ranch, just like in that movie, City Slickers."

Tricia and Carolyn exchanged looks, both of them smiling now.

Somehow, they'd gone from being acquaintances to being friends.

"Not too much like it, I hope," Tricia said. "And that's what we are, isn't it? A pair of city slickers?"

"Speak for yourself," Sasha joked, folding her arms decisively in front of her little chest and jutting out her chin. "I might live in a city, but I know how to ride a horse."

"Yes, you do," Tricia conceded. "Now, what do you say we head for home? Valentino probably needs to go out for a walk, and Winston likes to have his supper early."

"Can we give Winston sardines?" Sasha asked. "It's Sunday, and he always gets sardines on Sunday. That's what you said."

"It is indeed what I said," Tricia answered, nodding to Carolyn as the other woman waved goodbye and walked off. "And I am a woman of my word."

"Good," Sasha said, in a tone of generous approval.

Tricia took the little girl's hand. "Let's go thank Matt's dad and mom for inviting us to the barbecue," she said. "Then we'll go home and walk Valentino and give Winston his sardines."

Sasha yawned widely and against her will, politely putting a hand over her mouth. It was still fairly early in the day, but she'd been running around in the fresh air for a couple of hours now, laughing and playing with a horde of energetic country kids, and she probably wasn't over the jet-lag of the trip from Seattle.

By the time Sasha had had a warm bath and watched part of a Disney movie on DVD, she'd be asleep on her feet.

"Can I send the text to Mom and Dad?" she asked, when goodbyes and thank-yous had been said, and the two of them were back in Tricia's Pathfinder, headed toward home. "I know how to do it."

Tricia smiled, remembering the message she'd received from Sasha before, from the aquarium in Seattle. "Sure," she said. She pulled over to one side of the road, just long enough to extract the cell from her purse and hand it to Sasha. "Remember, your mom and dad's plane didn't leave Sea-Tac until this morning, so they're still in transit."

Sasha sighed in contented resignation. "And that means they won't get the message until they land. I know that already."

"I did mention it before, didn't I?" Tricia admitted, in cheerful chagrin.

"That's okay, Aunt Tricia," Sasha said, already pushing buttons on the phone like a pro. "You're probably tired, like me."

Love for this child welled up in Tricia, threatening to overflow. "Probably," she agreed, her voice a little husky.

By the time they pulled into the driveway alongside Natty's venerable old Victorian, Sasha had finished transmitting a fairly long text message to her parents and put the phone aside.

They could hear Valentino barking a welcome-home from the bottom of the outside stairway, and he was all over Sasha with kisses the moment Tricia unlocked the door.

She was about to reprimand the dog when Sasha's delighted giggles registered.

They were having fun.

"I'll get the leash," Tricia said, stepping around the reunion on the threshold. She set her purse and phone on the counter and glanced at her computer monitor, across the room, wondering if Hunter had sent her any emails. There would be plenty of time to check later, she decided, collecting Valentino's sturdy nylon lead from the hook on the inside of the pantry door.

Sasha and Tricia took the dog for his much-needed walk, bringing along the necessary plastic bag for cleanup, and Winston was waiting when they got back, prowling back and forth on his favorite windowsill and meowing loudly for his dinner.

Sasha fed the cat an entire tin of sardines from Natty's supply downstairs, while Tricia gave Valentino his kibble and freshened his bowl of water.

Since both Sasha and Tricia were still stuffed from all they'd eaten at the barbecue, supper would be contingent on whether or not they got hungry and, if they did, it would consist of either leftover pizza from the night before or cold cereal, sugary-sweet.

They watched a movie together, then Sasha went into the bathroom to bathe, don her pajamas and dutifully brush her teeth, all of these enterprises closely supervised by Valentino. In the meantime, Tricia folded out the living room couch, retrieved the extra bed pillows from the coat closet and fluffed them up so Sasha would be as comfortable as possible.

The little girl insisted on checking Tricia's cell phone, just in case there had miraculously been an answer from Diana and Paul, and seemed mildly disappointed when there wasn't. "Missing your mom and dad?" Tricia asked softly, sitting down on the hide-a-bed mattress while Sasha squirmed and stretched, a settling-in ritual she'd been performing since she was a toddler.

"A little bit," Sasha admitted wisely. "But I like being here with you and Valentino and Winston, too."

Tricia kissed her forehead. "And we like having you here," she said. "In fact, we love it."

Sasha snuggled down in her covers, while Valentino took up his post nearby, eschewing his dog bed for a hooked rug in front of the nonworking fireplace. "And you love me, too, right?"

Tricia's throat tightened again, and she had to swallow a couple of times before she replied, "Right. I love you very much."

Sasha's eyes closed, and she sighed and wriggled a little more. "Love—you—" she murmured.

And then she was sound asleep.

CHAPTER SIX

BRODY AND CONNER stood in the side yard of the main ranch house that blue-skied morning, keeping the length of a pitchfork handle between them, watching as two shiny RVs pulled out onto the county road, one after the other. Both horns tooted in cheery farewell and that was it. Melissa and Steven and the kids were on their way back to Stone Creek, Arizona, in the Bradmobile, while Davis and Kim were heading for Cheyenne, where they intended to pick up their just-weaned Yorkie pups.

And Conner was alone on the place with his brother, which was the only thing worse than being alone on the place period. Brody served as a reminder of better times, when they'd been twin-close, and instead of assuaging Conner's loneliness, it only made him feel worse, missing what was gone.

Since country folks believe it's bad luck to watch people out of sight when they leave a place, especially home, Conner turned away before the vehicles disappeared around the first bend in the road and made for the barn. He'd saddle up, ride out to check some fence lines and make sure the small range crew moving the cattle to the other side of the river, where there was more grass, was on the job.

The crossing was narrow, through fairly shallow water, and the task would be easily accomplished by a few experienced cowpunchers on horseback, but Conner liked to keep his eye on things, anyhow. Some of the beeves were bound to balk on the bank of that river, calves in particular, and stampedes were always a possibility.

Conner was surprised—and not surprised—when Brody fell into step beside him, adjusting his beat-up old rodeo hat as he walked.

"So now that the family is out of here," Brody said mildly, "you're just going to pretend I'm invisible?"

Conner stopped cold, turning in the big double doorway of the barn to meet Brody's gaze. "This is a working cattle ranch," he reminded his brother. "Maybe you'd like to sit around and swap lies, but I have things to do."

Brody shook his head, and even though he gave a spare grin, his eyes were full of sadness and secrets. "Thought I'd saddle up and give you a hand," he said, in that gruff drawl he'd always used when he wanted to sound down-home earnest. He came off as an affable saddle bum, folksy and badly educated, without two nickels to rub together, and that was all bullshit. No one knew that better than Conner did, but maybe Brody was so used to conning people into underestimating him, so he

could take advantage of them when they least expected it, that he figured he could fool his identical twin brother, too.

Fat chance, since they had duplicate DNA, and at one time they'd been so in sync that they could not only finish each other's sentences, they'd had whole conversations and realized a lot later that neither of them had spoken a single word out loud.

"Thanks," Conner said, without conviction, when the silence became protracted and he knew Brody was going to wait him out, try to bluff his way through as he'd do with a bad poker hand, "but it's nothing I can't handle on my own." Like I've been doing all these years, while you were off playing the outlaw.

Of course, Conner had had plenty of help from Davis along the way, but that wasn't the point. The ranch was their birthright—his and Brody's—and Brody had taken off, leaving him holding the proverbial bag, making the major decisions, doing the work. And that, Conner figured, was a big part of the reason why he didn't have what he wanted most.

Brody sighed heavily, tilted his head to one side, as though trying to work a kink out of his neck, and looked at Conner with a mix of anger, amusement and pity in his eyes. Then he rubbed his stubbly chin with one hand. "This place," he said again, and with feigned reluctance, "is half mine. So are the cattle and the horses. While I'm here, I mean to make myself useful, little brother, whether you like it or not."

Conner unclamped his back molars. "Oh, I remember that the ranch is as much yours as it is mine," he responded grimly, forcing the words past tightened lips. "Trust me. I'm reminded of that every time I send you a fat check for doing nothing but staying out of my way. That last part, I did truly appreciate."

Brody chuckled at that, but his eyes weren't laughing. "God damn, but you can hold a grudge like nobody else I ever knew," he observed, folding his arms. "And considering my history with women, that's saying something." He paused, taking verbal aim. "You want Joleen back? Go for it. I'm not standing in your way."

Conner spat, though his mouth was cotton-dry. "Hell," he snapped. "I wouldn't touch Joleen with your pecker."

Brody lifted both eyebrows, looking skeptical. "You know what's really the matter with you, little brother? You're jealous. And it's got nothing to do with Joleen or any other female on the face of this earth. It's because I went out there and lived, did everything you wanted to do, while you stayed right here, like that guy in the Bible, proving you were the Good Son."

Conner's temper flared—Brody's words struck so close to the bone that they nicked his marrow—but he wasn't going to give his brother the satisfaction of losing it. Not this time. "You're full of shit," he said, turning away from Brody again and proceeding into the barn, where he chose a horse and led it out of its stall and into the wide breezeway. Brody followed, selected a cayuse of his own, and the two of them saddled up in prickly silence that made the horses nervous.

As usual, it was Brody who broke the impasse. He swung up into the saddle, pulled down his hat yet another time, which meant he was either rattled or annoyed or both, and ducked to ride through the doorway into the bright October sunshine.

"What would you say if I told you I'd been thinking about retiring from the rodeo and settling down for good?" he asked, when they were both outside.

"I guess it would depend on where you planned on settling down," Conner said.

"Where else but right here?" Brody asked, with a gesture that took in the thousands of acres surrounding them. The Creed land stretched all the way to the side of the river directly opposite Tricia McCall's campground. "I respect Steven's decision to buy a place with no history to it, make his own mark in the world instead of sharing this spread with us, but I'm nowhere near as noble as our cousin from Boston, as you already know."

Conner made a low, contemptuous sound in his throat and nudged his horse into motion, riding toward the open gate leading into the first pasture. The range lay beyond, beckoning, making him want to lean over that gelding's neck and race the wind, but he didn't indulge the notion.

He didn't want Brody thinking he'd gotten his "little brother" on the run, literally or figuratively. "You're right about this much, anyway," he said, his voice stony-quiet. "You're nothing like Steven."

Brody eased his gelding into a gallop just then, but he didn't speak again. He just smiled to himself, like he was privy to some joke Conner didn't have the mental wherewithal to comprehend, and kept going.

The smug look on Brody's face pissed Conner off like few other things could have, but he wouldn't allow himself to be provoked. He just rode, tight-jawed, and so did Brody, both of them thinking their own thoughts.

About the only thing he and Brody agreed on, Conner reflected glumly, was that Steven, as much a Creed as either of them, should have had a third of the ranch and the considerable financial assets that came along with it. Steven had refused—hardheaded pride ran in the family, after all—and set up an outfit of his own outside Stone Creek.

He'd met and married Melissa O'Ballivan there, Steven had, and he seemed happy, so Conner figured things had worked out in the long run. Still, he could have used his cousin's company and his help on the ranch, since Brody was about three degrees past any damn use at all.

It might have been different if Steven had ever wanted for money, but his mother's people were well-fixed, high-priced Eastern lawyers, all of them. Steven, whom Brody invariably called "Boston," had grown up in a Back Bay mansion, with servants and a trust fund and all the rest of it. Summers, though, Steven had come west, to stay on the ranch, as his parents had agreed. And he'd been cowboy enough to win everybody's respect.

Even though he could have had an equal share of the Colorado holdings, which included the ranch itself, some ten thousand acres, a sizable herd of cattle, and a copper-mining fortune handed down through three generations, multiplying even during hard times, Steven had wanted two things: a family and to build an enterprise that was his alone.

And he was succeeding at both those objectives.

Conner, by comparison, was just walking in place, biding his time, watching life go right on past him without so much as a nod in his direction.

Brody had accused him of jealousy, back there at the barn, claiming that Conner had played the stay-at-home son to Brody's prodigal, and was resentful of his return. The implications burned their way through Conner's veins all over again, like a jolt of snake venom.

Conner had to give Brody this much: it was true enough that he'd gotten over Joleen with no trouble at all. What he hadn't gotten over, what he couldn't shake, no matter how he tried to reason with himself, was being betrayed by the person he'd been closest to, from conception on.

The idea that Brody, so much a part of him that they were like one person, the one he'd been so sure always had his back, would sell him out like that, with no particular concern about the consequences and no apology, either, well, that stuck in Conner's gut like a wad of thorns and nettles and rusted barbed wire. It chewed at him, on an unconscious level most of the time, but on occasion woke him out of a sound sleep, or sneaked up from behind and tapped him on the shoulder.

Brody's presence wasn't just a frustration to Conner—it was a bruise to the soul.

Reaching the herd, the brothers kept to opposite sides, helping the four ranch hands Conner and Davis employed year-round—there had been three times that many at roundup—drive nearly three hundred bawling, balking, rolling-eyed cattle across the ford in the river.

The work itself was bone-jarringly hard, not to mention dusty and hot, even though summer had passed. It took all morning to get it done, because cattle, which, unlike dogs and horses, are not particularly intelligent, can scatter in all directions like the down from a dandelion gone to seed. They get stuck in the mud and sometimes trample each other, and many a seasoned cowboy has fallen

beneath their hooves, thrown from the saddle. Once in a while, the man's horse fared even worse, breaking a leg or being gored by a horn.

Brody proved to be as good a hand as ever, considering that he probably did most of his riding for show now that he was a big rodeo star, but what did that prove? Good horsemen weren't hard to come by in that part of the country—lots of people were practically born in the saddle.

Good brothers, though? Now, there was a rare commodity.

Once all the cattle were finally across the river, enjoying fresh acres of untrampled grass, their bawls of complaint settling down to a dull roar, Conner spoke briefly with the foreman of the crew and then reined his horse toward home. He wanted a shower, clothes he hadn't sweated through and a sandwich thick enough to cut with a chain saw. For all his lonesomeness, an emotion endemic to bachelor ranchers, he wanted some time alone, too, so he could sort through his thoughts at his own pace, make what sense he could of recent developments.

No such luck.

Brody caught up to him as he was crossing the river, their horses side by side, drops of water splashing up to soak the legs of their jeans.

It felt good to cool off, Conner thought. At least, on the outside. On the inside, he was still smoldering.

"That old house sure has seen a lot of livin'," Brody remarked, once they'd ridden up the opposite bank onto dry land, standing in his stirrups for a moment to stretch his legs. The ranch house, though still a good quarter of a mile away, was clearly visible, a two-story structure, white with dark green shutters and a wraparound porch, looked out of place on that land, venerable as it was. A saltbox, more at home in some seaside town in New England than in the high country of Colorado, it was genteel instead of rustic, as it might have been expected to be.

In the beginning, it had been nothing but a cabin—that part of the house was a storage room now, with the original log walls still in place—but as the years passed, a succession of Creed brides had persuaded their husbands to add on a kitchen here and a parlor there and more and more bedrooms right along, to accommodate the ever-increasing broods of children. Now, the place amounted to some seven thousand square feet, could sleep at least twelve people comfortably and was filled with antique furniture.

Conner, spending a lot of time there by himself, would have sworn it was haunted, that he heard, if not actual voices, the echoed vibrations of human conversation, or of children's laughter or, very rarely, the faint plucking of one of the strings on his great-great-grandmother Alice's gold-gilt harp.

Spacious and sturdily built, the roof solid and the walls strong enough to keep out blizzard winds in the winter, the house didn't feel right without a woman in it. Not that Conner would have said so out loud. Especially not to Brody.

"I guess the old place has seen some living, all right," he allowed, after letting Brody's comment hang unanswered for a good while.

"Don't you get lonely in that big old house, now that Kim and Davis are living in the new one?"

Conner didn't want to chat, so he gave an abrupt reply to let Brody know that. "No," he lied, urging his tired horse to walk a little faster.

"You remember how we used to scare the hell out of each other with stories about the ghosts of dead Creeds?" Brody asked, a musing grin visible in spite of the shadow cast over his face by the brim of his hat.

"I remember," Conner answered.

They were nearing the barn by then. It was considerably newer than the house, built by the grandfather they'd never known, after he came home from the Vietnam War, full of shrapnel and silence.

He'd died young, Davis and Blue's father, and their mother hadn't lasted long after his passing. Now and then, in an unguarded moment, Conner caught himself wondering if he'd stayed single because so many members of the family had gone on before their time.

"You ever smile anymore?" Brody asked casually, as they dismounted in front of the barn. "Or say more than one or two words at a time?"

"I was thinking, that's all," Conner said.

"All the way up to five words," Brody grinned. "I'm impressed, little brother. At this rate, you're apt to talk a leg right off somebody."

Conner led his horse inside, into a stall. There, he removed the gear and proceeded to rub the animal down with one of many old towels kept on hand for that purpose. "I don't run on just to hear my head rattle," he said, knowing Brody was in the stall across the aisle, tending to his own horse. "Unlike some people I could name."

Brody laughed at that, a scraped-raw sound that caused the horse he was tending to startle briefly and toss its head. "You need a woman," he proclaimed, as if a man could just order one online and have her delivered by UPS. "You're turning into one of those salty old loners who talk to themselves, paper the cabin walls with pages ripped from some catalog, grow out their beards for the mice to nest in and use the same calendar over and over, figuring it's never more than seven or eight days off."

A grin twitched at Conner's mouth at the images that came to mind—there were a few such hermits around Lonesome Bend—but he quelled it on general principle. "That was colorful," he said, putting aside the towel and picking up a brush.

When Conner looked away from the horse he was grooming, he was a little startled to find Brody standing just on the other side of the stall door, watching him like he had a million things to say and couldn't figure out how to phrase one of them.

Sadness shifted against Conner's heart, but he was quick to dispense with that emotion, just as he had the grin.

"Sooner or later," Brody said, sounding not just solemn, but almost mournful, "we've got to talk about what happened."

"I vote 'later,'" Conner replied, looking away.

"I'm not going anywhere, little brother," Brody pressed quietly. "Not for any length of time, anyway. And that means you're going to have to deal with me."

"Here's an idea," Conner retorted briskly. "You stay here and manage the ranch for a decade, as I did, and I'll follow the rodeo circuit and bed down with a different woman every night."

Brody laughed, but it was a hoarse sound, a little raspy around the edges. "I hate to tell you this, cowboy, but you're too damn old for the rodeo. That stagecoach already pulled out, sorry to say."

The brothers were only thirty-three, but there was some truth in what Brody said. With the possible exceptions of team and calf roping, rodeo was a young man's game. A very young man's game, best given up, as Davis often said, before the bones got too brittle to mend after a spill.

Again, Conner felt that faint and familiar twinge of sorrow. He was careful not to glance in Brody's direction as he made a pretense of checking the automatic waterer in that stall. The devices often got clogged with bits of grass, hay or even manure, and making sure they were clear was second nature.

"What now, Brody?" he asked, when a few beats had passed.

"I told you," Brody answered, evidently in no hurry to move his carcass from in front of the stall door so Conner could get past him and go on into the house for that shower, the triple-decker sandwich and some beer. "I'm fixing to settle down right here on the ranch. Maybe build a house and a barn somewhere along the river one of these days."

"There's a big difference," Conner said, facing Brody at long last, over that stall door, "between what you say you're going to do and what you follow through on—big brother. So if it's all the same to you, I won't hold my breath while I'm waiting."

Brody finally stepped back so Conner could get by him, and they both fell into the old routine of doing the usual barn chores, feeding the horses, switching some of the animals to other stalls so the empty ones could be mucked out.

"I meant it, Conner," Brody said gruffly, and after a long time. "This place is home, and it's time for me to buckle down and make something of the rest of my life."

Surprised by the sincerity in his brother's voice, Conner, in the process of pushing a wheelbarrow full of horse manure out to the pile in back of the barn, a fact that would strike him as ironic in a few moments, stopped and looked at the other man with narrowed eyes.

Brody's gaze was clear, and he wasn't smirking.

Conner almost got suckered in.

But then he reminded himself that this was Brody he was dealing with, a man who'd rather climb a tall tree to tell a lie than stand flat-footed on the ground and tell the truth.

"Brody?" he said.

"What?" Brody asked, a wary note in his voice.

"Go to hell," Conner answered, wheeling away with the load of manure.

* * *

"YES!" SASHA CRIED, glowing and fairly jamming Tricia's cell phone under her nose as she searched the commercial real-estate listings on the internet in her kitchen, hoping to discover that places like River's Bend and the derelict drive-in theater were finally starting to sell again. "Mom and Dad landed in Paris without a problem, and they think it would be wonderful if you and I went horseback riding on the Creed ranch next Sunday!"

Discouraged—there were no properties like hers for sale online, it seemed—Tricia smiled nonetheless. Above their heads, a light rain began to patter softly against the roof, and twilight, it seemed to Tricia, was falling a little ahead of schedule. Valentino and Winston were curled up together on Valentino's dog bed over in the corner, like the best of friends, snoozing away.

"Yep," Tricia said, accepting the phone and reading the text message for herself. "That's what it says, all right." She felt resignation—she'd been hoping Diana would refuse to grant Sasha permission to ride strange horses—but there was also a little thrill of illicit anticipation at the prospect of spending time with Conner Creed.

Of course, it would have helped if she'd known the first thing about horses, and if the very thought of perching high off the rocky ground in some hard saddle didn't scare her half to death. Sasha, perceptive beyond her tender years, rested a hand on Tricia's arm and looked at her with knowing compassion. "You can do this, Aunt Tricia," she said earnestly. "And I'll be right there to take care of you, the whole time."

Tricia's heart turned over. The child was only ten, but she meant what she said—she'd do her best to keep Tricia safe. And that was way too much responsibility for one little girl to carry.

"I'll be just fine," Tricia assured Sasha, giving her a quick, one-armed hug.

Sasha's attention had shifted to the computer monitor. "How are things in the real-estate business?" she asked, again sounding much older than she was.

Tricia sighed. "Not terrific, I'm afraid," she replied.

"Dad says the economy is coming back, no thanks to the politicians," Sasha told her. "He says he's nonpartisan, but Mom says he doesn't trust any elected official."

Tricia smiled and pushed back her chair, being careful not to bump Sasha. Ten years old, and the kid was using words liked nonpartisan. There was no question that homeschooling worked in her case, but was she growing up too fast? Childhood was fleeting and, sure, knowledge was power and all that, but Tricia couldn't help considering the possible trade-offs.

None of your business, she reminded herself silently, and turned up the wattage on her smile a little as she touched Sasha's nose. "Let's walk Valentino once more and then start supper."

Sasha glanced at the window and gave a little shiver. "But it's starting to rain," she protested, not quite whining, but close.

"You're from Seattle," Tricia pointed out. "You won't melt in a little rain."

"But Valentino is sleeping," Sasha reasoned, widening her eyes. "Maybe we shouldn't disturb him. And if we go out, Winston will be all alone in the apartment."

Tricia crossed to the kitchen door, took her jacket off one of the pegs and held Sasha's out to her. "Winston," she said, "will find ways to amuse himself while we're gone." Valentino awakened, apparently sensing that there was a walk in the offing, and stretched luxuriously. He went to Tricia, waited patiently for her to fasten the leash to his collar.

Sasha resigned herself to the task ahead and pulled on her coat. Her mind was like quicksilver, and she immediately backtracked to the Seattle reference Tricia had made earlier. "You're from Seattle, too," she said. "Are you ever coming back?"

"Yes," Tricia answered, though there were times when she wondered if she'd ever get out of Lonesome Bend. It wasn't just the properties her dad had left her—she'd made a lot of friends in town and, besides, the thought of leaving Natty alone in that big house bothered her.

They stepped out onto the landing and found themselves in a misty drizzle and a crisp breeze. It wasn't quite dark, but the streetlights had already come on, and a car splashed by, the driver tooting the horn in jaunty greeting.

Busy descending the outside stairs, Tricia and Sasha both took a moment to wave in response.

"Who was that?" Sasha inquired, taking Valentino's leash from Tricia when they reached the bottom.

Tricia laughed. "I have no idea."

"When, though?" Sasha asked.

Tricia blinked. The child did not do segues. "Huh?"

"When are you moving back to Seattle?" Sasha sounded mildly impatient now, as they crossed the lawn to step onto the sidewalk.

"When I sell the campground and the drive-in theater," Tricia answered, putting herself between the little girl and the dog and the rain-washed street. "And, of course, I'll have to make sure my great-grandmother will be looked after."

"Oh," Sasha said, her expression serious as she weighed Tricia's reply. "Then are you going to marry Hunter?"

Tricia sighed. For all their "carrying on," as Natty referred to it, she and Hunter had never actually talked about marriage. "Do you want me to?" she asked, stalling.

To her surprise, Sasha made a face. "No. I just want you to live close to us again, so we can do things together, the way we used to."

Tricia didn't pursue her goddaughter's obvious distaste for Hunter, though she felt a slight sting of resentment toward Diana for passing her unfair antipathy toward him on to the child. "You're going to be living in Paris for a few years, remember? So we won't be seeing each other as often anyway."

Sasha looked up at her with big, worried eyes. "I miss you when we're not together, Aunt Tricia," she said. "You are coming to visit us in Paris, aren't you? We could go to the top of the Eiffel Tower and visit the Louvre—"

"I'll do my best," Tricia promised quietly, hoping Sasha would cheer up a little. "France is a long way from here, though, and the airline ticket would cost a lot of money."

"I'll bet you could get a ticket with Dad's frequent-flier miles. He's got a million of them."

"We'll see," Tricia hedged, as they all stopped to wait for Valentino to sniff the base of a streetlight.

Sasha changed the subject again, this time to the horseback ride on the Creed ranch, scheduled for the following Sunday afternoon. She was practically skipping along the sidewalk, she was so excited.

Tricia listened and smiled, gently taking Valentino's leash from Sasha, but behind that smile, she was wishing for a gracious way to get out of the whole thing.

With Natty away, she really should help run the rummage sale and chili feed, and she'd already be super busy at the campground and RV park, with so many customers reserving spots. The biggest job—cleaning up—would come after everyone had gone home, but Murphy's Law would be in full operation throughout the weekend, too. Things invariably went wrong with this electrical hookup or that part of the antiquated plumbing. Such situations made for unhappy campers, and Tricia had to be on call to make sure the repairs were done promptly.

Where, she wondered now, had she thought she would get the time to go riding on the Creed ranch? And what if she got hurt?

Valentino made good use of his walk, and Tricia, carrying her trusty plastic bag, picked up after him.

Back at the apartment, Valentino and Winston greeted each other as joyfully as if they'd expected to be apart forever, touching their noses and then retiring to the dog bed again.

Tricia washed up and started supper—a simple meat loaf made from canned soup—and Sasha, having been granted permission, sat down in front of the computer and went online to check her email.

It seemed to Tricia that kids today came into the world already hard-wired for all forms of technology. When she was Sasha's age, she reflected, personal computers were just coming into common use, and things like digital cameras and MP3 players hadn't even been invented yet. She'd listened to CDs and watched movies on VHS and wondered how her parents, not to mention her great-grandmother, had gotten by with vinyl records and analog TV.

She was considering all this, and keeping one eye on Sasha and the display on the computer monitor, plus chopping vegetables for a salad to go with the already-baking meat loaf, when the wall phone jangled.

"Hello?"

"It's you, dear," Natty's quavery voice responded, with relief. Whom, Tricia wondered, had her great-grandmother expected to answer?

Natty promptly answered that unspoken question, as it happened. "I meant to call Conner Creed," she said. "I must have dialed your number out of habit. How are you, dear? How is Winston?"

Tricia barely registered the words that came after I meant to call Conner Creed, but she managed to get the gist of them. "Winston and I are both doing fine. How are you?"

Natty sighed. "I'm afraid I've developed a little hitch in my get-along," she said. Then, almost too quickly, she added, "Not that it's anything serious, of course. I planned to be back in Lonesome Bend before the weekend, so I could oversee the chili making, but it seems my heartbeat is a tiny bit irregular and the doctors don't want me traveling just yet."

Tricia was so alarmed that she forgot to ask why Natty wanted to call Conner. "Your heartbeat is irregular? I don't like the sound of that—"

"I'll be fine," Natty broke in, chirpy as a bird. "Don't you dare waste a moment worrying about me."

Tricia closed her eyes, opened them again. Forced a smile that she hoped would be audible in her voice. "I have a visitor," she said, and proceeded to tell her great-grandmother all about Sasha and the move to Paris. "Oh," honor compelled her to add, at the tail end of the conversation, "and I'm fostering a dog. I hope you don't mind. He's really very well behaved and Winston seems to like him a lot."

"I didn't object to Rusty," Natty said, sounding less shaky-voiced than before and thereby lifting Tricia's spirits, "and I certainly won't object to this one. You're alone too much. A dog is at least some company."

Sasha, eavesdropping shamelessly, frowned.

When Natty and Tricia finally said goodbye, Sasha planked herself in front of Tricia, hands on her hips. "You're just fostering Valentino?" Sasha demanded. "He doesn't get to stay with you?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONNER, WHO HAD taken his sandwich and his can of beer out onto the porch so he could watch the rain fall while he ate—and, in the process, ignore Brody—fumbled for his ringing cell phone, juggled it and finally rasped a gruff "Hello?" into the speaker.

His favorite elderly lady announced herself in a perky tone. "Natty McCall here," she said brightly. "I am speaking to Conner, aren't I?"

He chuckled. "You are," he said. Seated in the wooden swing some ancestor had added, Conner shifted to set the beer and his sandwich plate aside on a small wicker table. "Are you back in town, Natty, or do we have to get by without you for a little while longer?"

"You always were a charmer," Natty said, all aflutter. "Alas, I've been detained in Denver for a little longer, and I have a favor to ask."

Conner smiled at her terminology—the word detained made it sound as if she'd been arrested. "Have you been carousing around the Mile High City again, Natty?" he teased. "Riding mechanical bulls in honky-tonks and the like?"

She tittered at that, well aware that he was joking, but probably a little bit flattered to be thought capable of walking on the wild side, too. "I do declare," she said, and he could actually hear a blush in her voice.

That was when the screen door creaked on its hinges, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw Brody step out onto the porch. "You know you're my best girl," he told her. "What's the favor?"

Natty was warming to her subject; there was a sense of revving up in the way she spoke—it reminded him of the toy cars and trucks he and Brody had as kids, the kind a kid winds up by rolling them fast and hard on the floor before letting them speed away. "Nothing big," she said. "I'd like you to check on my house now and then, that's all. Just to make sure everything's all right with—well—with the plumbing and things of that sort."

Conner raised his brows slightly, avoiding Brody's gaze, though he could see out of the corner of his eye that his brother was leaning idly against the porch rail, rain dripping from the eaves in a gray curtain behind him, his arms loosely folded. He wasn't even trying to pretend he wasn't listening in.

"The plumbing?" Conner echoed, searching his memory for any occasion when Natty had expressed concern about the pipes in her house, to him, anyway.

It crossed his mind that the old woman might be up to some matchmaking between him and Tricia, but he quickly dismissed the thought as unworthy of Natty.

"Pipes can freeze, you know," Natty fretted, her voice still picking up speed. "And I would hate to come home and find that there had been a flood in my kitchen or something like that. Those floors are original to the house, and it would be a pity if they were ruined, being irreplaceable and all—"

"Natty," Conner interrupted gently.

She paused, drew an audible breath and let it out again. "What?"

"I'll be happy to check on the plumbing at your place," he said.

Brody grinned at that. Shook his head slightly, as if he was at once bemused and disgusted.

"It's mainly the pipes under the house that I'm concerned about," Natty went on. "I couldn't ask Tricia to crawl around under the house. There might be spiders."

"I'm on it," Conner reiterated, "but I do have one question." He'd never known Natty to miss the annual rummage sale/chili feed. She was, after all, the Keeper of the Secret Recipe. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Natty said briskly.

He suspected that she was fibbing, but challenging an old lady's statement hadn't been part of his upbringing. Elders, be they friends, like Natty, acquaintances or total strangers, were to be treated with respect—particularly if they happened to be female.

"You're sure?" he ventured just the same, slanting a glare at Brody then. Go away.

Brody, being Brody, didn't budge an inch. He just broadened his grin by a notch.

"I'm absolutely sure, Conner," Natty replied. Then she gave a trilling little laugh that sounded almost bell-like. Years fell away, and Conner could easily picture her as a young woman, and a pretty one, not unlike her great-granddaughter. "I'm perfectly fine. Fit as a fiddle."

"It's just that the rummage sale is coming up," Conner pressed, still concerned.

Brody frowned comically at this.

"I've stepped down from chairing the committee," Natty told him. "I am getting on a little, you know."

She'd been ninety-one on her last birthday, Conner knew, though he'd missed the party because he was down in Stone Creek at the time, helping Steven paint the nursery before the twins were delivered.

"You're younger than springtime," Conner said, recalling the line from one of the old songs Natty liked to play on her stereo.

"And you're full of beans," Natty shot back, always ready with another cliché. She was getting tired, though; he could hear that in her voice.

The chat ended soon after that and, for all Natty's insistence that she was "just fine," Conner was still worried. He sat there frowning for a few moments, then decided he'd head for Natty's house as soon as the chores were done the next morning. Take along some insulation and some duct tape to wrap around the pipes under the house.

Tricia probably wouldn't be around, of course. She'd be over at the campground, working, or maybe at the drive-in theater—a spooky place, closed down long before the multiplex movie houses in Denver came along—doing whatever might need doing.

He'd track her down, ask her if she'd spoken to Natty recently.

Brody, still lounging against the porch railing, shifted his weight from one side to the other, distracting Conner from his thoughts. "For a minute there," Brody said, in a low drawl, "I had high hopes that you were lining up a hot date."

Conner realized that he was still holding his phone and dropped it back into the pocket of the clean but worn flannel shirt he'd put on, along with a pair of jeans, after his shower. Then he reached for his beer and took a long draw of the stuff before answering, "There are other things in life besides getting laid, you know." The statement sounded prissy-assed even to him, and Conner immediately wished he could take it back.

"Like what?" Brody joked.

Conner didn't reply, but simply sat there, holding his beer and wishing Brody would go away. To another state, say. If not another planet.

"Once upon a time," Brody said easily, determined to push, "you had a sense of humor."

"I still do," Conner said, staring past Brody, into the gray drizzle. "When something's funny, I laugh."

Brody heaved a sigh. Pushed away from the porch rail, finally, to stand up straight. His arms fell to his sides. "It's hard to imagine that," he said, very quietly, and then he went back inside the house. The screen door shut behind him with barely a sound.

And Conner felt guilty. How crazy was that? If Brody had expected to just pick up where they'd left off—before their knock-down-drag-out over Joleen—he'd been kidding himself. Conner swore under his breath and used the heels of his boots to thrust the ancient porch swing into slow, squeaky motion.

Brody wouldn't stay long, he thought, trying to console himself. His brother was bound to get bored with Lonesome Bend and the ranch, sooner rather than later, and hit the road again, following the rodeo. Or some woman.

The rain picked up, and the wind blew it in under the roof of the porch, and Conner finally had to give up and go inside. He climbed the front staircase, noticing that the crystal chandelier was dusty, and headed for the master bedroom. The suite had belonged to Kim and Davis before they moved into the new house, and it didn't lack for comfort. There was a big-screen TV on one wall, and the private bath was the size of an NFL locker room, with slate-tile floors, a big shower with multiple sprayers and a tub made for soaking the ache out of sore muscles.

While all that space might have made sense for his aunt and uncle, it felt cavernous to Conner. He probably would have moved back into the room at the other end of the corridor—the one he'd shared with Brody and, in the summertime, Steven, too, when they were all growing up—but he knew Brody had stowed his gear in there.

Conner switched on the TV, then switched it off again, in the next moment. In his opinion, TV sucked, for the most part. He did enjoy watching athletic women in bikinis "surviving" in some hostile environment, but that was about all.

He hauled his shirt off over his head, to save himself the trouble of unbuttoning it, and tossed the garment to one side. Then he sat down on the edge of the bed, which was way too big for one person, and got out of his boots and socks. Standing up again, he dispensed with his jeans, too, and stood there, in the altogether, thinking Brody wasn't so far wrong, implying that he didn't have a life.

In the end, he tossed back the covers, crawled between them and reached for the thick biography of Thomas Jefferson sitting on the nightstand. He sighed. Another night with nobody but a dead president for company.

Yee-freakin'-haw.

* * *

TRICIA OPENED ONE EYE—how could it possibly be morning already?—and slowly tuned in to her surroundings, glimmer by glimmer, sound by sound, scent by scent.

The sun was shining. Rain dripped from the eaves, but no longer pelted the roof. The timer on the coffeepot beeped, and the tantalizing aroma of fresh brew teased her nose.

Valentino approached, laid his muzzle on her pillow, inches from her face, and whined almost inaudibly.

Something, somewhere, was clanging.

Tricia sat up, glanced at her alarm clock, which she'd forgotten to set the night before, and sucked in a breath. She'd overslept. And that wasn't like her at all.

Clang, clang, clang.

Since she was wearing a sweat suit, and she figured that was the next best thing to being fully dressed, Tricia didn't bother with a robe. Nor did she pause to put on the ugly pink slippers. Sasha, still clad in pink pajamas, joined her in the kitchen.

The child's eyes were big. "What is that?" she asked, nearly in a whisper.

"I'll find out," Tricia said, annoyed but not alarmed. She went to the sink and, wadding up a dish towel, wiped a circle into the steam covering the window so she could peer out at the backyard.

The driveway was empty.

"Is something going to blow up?" Sasha fretted, probably imagining an antiquated furnace, or even a steam boiler with a pressure gauge, chugging cartoonishly away in Natty's basement, building up to a roof-raising blast.

"No, sweetie," Tricia said, offering what she hoped was a reassuring smile. "I'm sure nothing is going to explode. This is an old house, and sometimes the pipes make odd noises. So do the floorboards."

"Oh," Sasha said, clearly unconvinced.

Valentino, meanwhile, was standing very close to Sasha, actually leaning into her side. Clearly, he was no guard dog.

"Wait here, while I go downstairs and have a look around," Tricia told them both.

Sasha swallowed visibly, looking small and vulnerable, and then nodded.

The clanging resumed, intermittent and muffled.

Tricia descended the inside stairway and followed the sound through Natty's chilly rooms to the kitchen.

Silence.

Then the clang came again, this time from directly under her feet.

Tricia started slightly, then after gathering her resolve, marched over to Natty's basement door. She barely registered the rapid rush of footsteps on the wooden stairs beyond—she hadn't had coffee yet—and she'd turned the knob and pulled before it occurred to her that the idea might not have been a good one.

A squeak scratched its way up her windpipe and past her vocal cords when she found herself staring directly into Conner Creed's smiling face. Because he was still on the basement stairs, they were at eye level.

And that alone was disconcerting.

"Sorry," he said, clearly delighted by her expression. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"What are you doing here?" The squeak had turned to a squawk, but at least she could speak coherently now. Tricia's heart seemed to be trying to crash through her rib cage.

Conner held up a roll of gray duct tape in one hand and a wrench—no doubt the source of the clanging sounds—in the other. "Plumbing?" he asked, as though he wasn't entirely sure what he'd been doing and wanted Tricia to affirm it for him.

She folded her arms, foolishly barring his way into the kitchen. "You could have knocked," she said.

Conner lifted one shoulder, lowered it again. His grin didn't falter. "Natty called me last night and asked me to wrap the pipes. I crawled around under the house with a flashlight for a while, making sure there weren't any obvious leaks, and then I checked the situation in the basement." He paused, ran his eyes lightly over Tricia's rumpled hair, coming loose from its braid, before letting his gaze rest on her lips for one tingly moment. "The padlock on the cellar door probably rusted through years ago. I didn't need the key Natty told me about."

At last, Tricia found the presence of mind to back up so Conner could step into the kitchen. Now he stood a head taller.

"I'll be happy to replace it," he added. His eyes narrowed a little as he watched her, as if he'd suddenly noticed something new and disturbing about her.

"Replace what?" she asked.

The grin returned, faintly insolent and, at the same time, affable. Even friendly.

"The padlock?" he prompted, in the same guessing-game tone he'd used moments before.

It was the most ordinary conversation—about padlocks and plumbing, for Pete's sake. So why did she feel like a shy debutante about to step onto the dance floor at her coming-out ball?

"Oh," she finally managed. "Right. The padlock."

Natty's kitchen was frigidly cold, and yet, because they were standing within a few feet of each other, the hard heat coming off Conner's body made Tricia feel as though she were standing in front of a blazing bonfire.

Or was she the source of it?

Conner set the duct tape and the wrench aside on a countertop, rested his hands on his hips. "Will you be joining us for the trail ride on Sunday?" he asked.

Not for the first time, Tricia had a strange sense of needing to translate the things this man said from some other language before she could grasp their meaning. “I—guess,” she said, recalling in the next instant that she’d promised Sasha the outing, and backing out wasn’t an option.

“But—?” he asked, watching her.

She finally rustled up a smile, but it felt flimsy on her mouth and wouldn’t stick. “It’s just that I’ve never been on a horse before,” she admitted.

His eyes lit at that, blue fire framed by a narrow rim of steely gray, and his mouth crooked up in that way Tricia couldn’t seem to get used to. “No problem,” he told her, his tone faintly gruff.

No problem.

Easy enough for him to say, she thought, just as Valentino and Sasha clomped down the stairs from her apartment. Conner Creed had probably been born in the saddle, growing up on a ranch the way he had. She, on the other hand, had never ridden anything more dangerous than a carousel.

“We’ll put you on one of the mares,” Conner went on, when she didn’t speak. “Sunflower would be a good choice—she’s three years older than dirt and you’d be more likely to get hurt riding a stick horse.”

Tricia was relieved and, at the same time, a little indignant. Before she could come up with a fitting response, however, Sasha and Valentino made their appearance.

Seeing Conner, Sasha beamed. “Hello, Mr. Creed,” she said.

He nodded to the child, smiled back. “It’s okay to call me Conner,” he told her.

Pleased, Sasha barely glanced at Tricia, stroking Valentino’s head as the two of them stood just inside the kitchen doorway. “I’m Sasha,” she announced.

“I remember,” Conner said easily. “My nephew, Matt, introduced us at the barbecue last weekend, didn’t he?”

Sasha nodded eagerly. “He’s pretty nice, for a little kid,” she said.

Conner chuckled and looked briefly in Tricia’s direction—just in time to catch her sneaking a step back. She felt magnetized, like a passing asteroid being pulled into the orbit of some enormous planet.

He smiled, dashing all hope that he hadn’t noticed.

Tricia’s cheeks flamed. She’d worked hard, ever since high school, to overcome her natural shyness, but when it came to this man, all that effort seemed to be for nothing. A look from him, a word, and every cell in her body suddenly leaped to electrified attention.

It was ridiculous.

“Do you think Natty’s all right?” he asked, his expression serious now. His face could change in an instant, it seemed, and that made him hard to read.

Tricia didn’t like it when people were hard to read.

“Why do you ask?” she inquired, a little jolt of alarm trembling in the pit of her stomach.

Conner wasn’t wearing a hat, being indoors, though she could tell that he’d had one on earlier. He ran the fingers of his left hand through his hair, watched with a smile in his eyes as Sasha excused herself and left the room, Valentino trotting alongside.

“I guess it bothers me a little that she’s staying on in Denver,” Conner sighed, when he and Tricia were alone in the big kitchen again. “It’s not like your great-grandmother to miss out on the big weekend, even if she has stepped down as head chili commando.”

Though quiet, his tone was so genuine that it touched something deep and private inside Tricia, stirred a soft but still-bruising sweetness where he shouldn’t have been able to reach. They were basically strangers, she and Conner—they certainly hadn’t been more than summer acquaintances growing up—and yet it was as if they’d known each other well, once upon a time and somewhere far, far away.

When she thought she could trust herself to speak, Tricia found another smile, and managed to hold on to it a little longer this time. In truth, she was worried, too. Should she mention that Natty was staying in Denver at the suggestion of her doctor?

No, she decided, in the next second. If Natty had wanted Conner to know why she'd postponed her return to Lonesome Bend, she would have told him herself.

"I'm sure she's fine," she said at last, though of course she wasn't sure at all. Natty had said her heart had been racing.

Conner studied her for a few moments, looking like he wanted to say something but wouldn't, and then he flashed that dazzling grin at her again. It was like stepping into the glare of a searchlight on a moonless night, and Tricia blinked once.

"You might want to keep it a little warmer in here," he said, in another of those hairpin conversational turns of his. "Even wrapped, some of the pipes might freeze if you don't turn on the heat."

Tricia nodded, feeling stupid because no response came to mind.

Conner grinned, gave his head an almost imperceptible shake. "Sorry if I scared you a little while ago, banging on the plumbing with my wrench. I got here a little earlier than I expected and, though it seems ironic now, I was pretty sure you'd already gone out."

Again she felt that sugary sting, inexplicably pleasant, but highly discomforting, too. "Natty asked you to come over," she said, with a verbal shrug, "and I'm sure she appreciates your help."

His grin was rueful now, but it tugged at her, nonetheless. "I'd do just about anything for Natty," he said, moving to retrieve the duct tape and the wrench from the nearby counter and then stopping to look back over one shoulder. "Turn up the heat," he added.

Tricia almost said, "I beg your pardon?" but she stopped herself in time. Nodded again.

"Sixty-eight degrees ought to do it," Conner said. He took another long, slow look at her. "See you around," he told her, heading for the back door.

See you around.

That was all he'd said. And it was a perfectly normal remark, too.

Just the same, Tricia stood as still as if her feet were glued to the floor until several seconds after he'd closed the door behind him.

The first thing she did, once she could move again, was turn the lock. The second was to find and adjust the downstairs thermostat.

Now, she thought, making the climb back up to her own space, if she could just turn down the heat inside herself.

Upstairs, she found Sasha eating cold cereal at the table, while Winston and Valentino enjoyed their separate bowls of dry food.

After pouring a cup of much-needed coffee, Tricia booted up her computer. The screen saver loomed up automatically, filling the monitor and taking Tricia a little aback, even though she'd seen that picture of herself and Hunter, in front of the ski lodge, at least a jillion times.

"Mom says you can do a lot better than Hunter," Sasha remarked casually, no doubt prompted by the photograph.

A little of Tricia's coffee splashed over the rim of her cup and burned her fingers, but beyond that, she showed no outward reaction. "Does she, now?" she asked, amused but mildly resentful toward Diana, too. Surely her very best friend in the world hadn't meant to make such an observation within her daughter's earshot.

"That's what she told my dad," Sasha said, and resumed her cereal crunching.

Tricia kept her back to the little girl, focusing on the computer's keyboard instead, going online and clicking on the mailbox icon at the top of the screen.

Normally, she would have felt a little thrill to find no less than three messages from Hunter in among the usual sales pitches for miracle vitamins, quick riches and sexual-enhancement products.

This morning, in the wake of another encounter with Conner Creed, all Tricia could work up was a dull sense of futility. Seattle seemed very far away, and so did Hunter.

Sasha, apparently, was determined to keep the verbal ball rolling. “I think Conner is really handsome,” she observed.

“Hmm,” Tricia responded noncommittally, without turning around. She’d opened the first of Hunter’s emails.

Hi, babe, he’d written.

Much to her own surprise, Tricia bristled a little. Babe? Mexican cruise or not, where did Hunter get off calling her babe? After all, the man virtually ignored her for weeks—if not months—at a time. Wasn’t that term a touch on the intimate side, considering how they’d drifted apart?

Tricia felt a twinge then; when her conscience spoke, it was usually in Diana’s voice. You did accept the invitation, Miss Hot-to-trot, came the brisk and typically no-nonsense reminder. Did you think Hunter was suggesting a platonic getaway?

Tricia’s spine straightened. Why—oh, why—had she blithely sidestepped what should have been obvious to anyone?—that she and Hunter would be sharing a cabin on the ship. And that meant sex.

“Oh, Lord,” she said aloud.

“Huh?” Sasha asked, from the table.

“Never mind,” Tricia said, focusing in on the rest of Hunter’s email.

It amounted to online foreplay, essentially, and she closed it with a self-conscious click of the mouse. Then she deleted it entirely. And felt even more foolish than before.

In that moment, she would have given just about anything to exchange some girl talk with Diana, despite the sure and certain knowledge that her best friend would tell her to kick Hunter to the curb and get on with her life.

With her friend in another time zone, though, and Sasha right there in the same room, a chat simply wasn’t feasible.

“Don’t you have to work today?” Sasha asked. Tricia hadn’t heard her push back her chair to rise, but the little girl was standing at her elbow now, studying her thoughtfully.

Tricia couldn’t find a smile. Maybe, she thought, with rueful whimsy, she could pick one up at the rummage sale.

“There isn’t much to do, with the camping season coming to an end,” she said. “We’re all ready for the weekend, so I thought we’d go over to the community center and help set up for the rummage sale.”

Sasha, who had probably never rummaged for anything in her admittedly short life, lit up at the prospect. “Awesome!” she enthused. “Can Valentino come, too?”

“I don’t think he’d enjoy that,” Tricia answered diplomatically. “What do you say we get ourselves dressed and take a certain dog out for a quick walk?”

CHAPTER EIGHT

BRODY WAS DEFINITELY up to something, though damned if Conner could figure out what it was. He’d helped himself to a pair of Conner’s own jeans, Brody had, and one of his best shirts, too, and he’d shaved for the first time since his return to Lonesome Bend. If his hair hadn’t been longer than Conner’s, and way shaggier, they’d have been mirror images of each other.

And if all that wasn’t bothersome enough, Brody not only had the coffee on by the time Conner wandered into the kitchen, after making the run into town to check on Natty McCall’s pipes, he was cooking up some bacon and eggs at the old wood-burning stove.

Conner meandered over to the counter, took the carafe from its burner and poured himself a dose of java. He’d been thinking about Tricia ever since he’d scared the hell out of her at the top of Natty’s basement steps that morning, and irritation with his brother provided some relief.

“Mornin’,” Brody sang out, as if he were just noticing Conner’s presence.

Conner squinted, studying his brother suspiciously. He'd gotten used to living his life as a separate individual since Brody left home, and it was a jolt to look up and see himself standing on the other side of the room. Gave him a familiar but still weird sense of being in two places at once.

"Since when do you cook?" he asked, after shaking off the sensation and taking a sip from his mug. Only then did he take off his coat and hang it from its peg by the back door.

Brody laughed at that. "I picked up the habit after I left home," he replied easily. "Believe it or not, I find myself between women now and then."

Conner rolled his eyes. "So then you just knock some hapless female over the head with a club and drag her back to your cave by the hair? Tell her to put a pot of beans on the fire?"

Brody slanted a look at him, and there was a certain sadness in his expression, Conner thought, unsettled. "I didn't mean it like that," Brody said, his voice quiet.

"Right," Conner said, his voice gone gruff, all of a sudden, with an emotion he couldn't name. He looked his brother up and down. "So what's up with the clothes?"

Again, the grin flashed, quick and cocky. Brody speared a slice of bacon with a fork and turned it over in the skillet before looking down at Conner's duds. "All my stuff is in the laundry," he said. "Hope you don't mind."

Conner scowled and swung a leg over the long bench lining one side of the kitchen table, taking more coffee on board and trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

"Would you give a damn if I did mind?"

Brody didn't say anything; he just went right on rustling up grub at the stove, though he did pause once to refill his own coffee cup, whistling low through his teeth as he concentrated on the task at hand. That tuneless drone had always bugged Conner, but now it really got on his last nerve.

"If you insist on staying," he told Brody's back, "why don't you bunk in over at Kim and Davis's place?"

Brody took his sweet time answering, scraping eggs onto a waiting platter and piling about a dozen strips of limp bacon into a crooked heap on top.

"I might have done just that," Brody finally replied, crossing to set the platter down on the table with a thump before going back to the cupboard for plates and flatware, "except that they've already got a housesitter, and she happens not to be one of my biggest fans."

Conner stifled an unexpected chuckle, made his face steely when Brody headed back toward the table and took one of the chairs opposite. They ate in silence for a while.

Kim had mentioned hiring somebody to stay in their house while she and Davis were on the road, Conner recalled. Most likely, it was Carolyn Simmons; she was always housesitting for one person or another.

"Carolyn," Conner said, out loud.

Across the table, Brody looked up from his food and grinned. "What about her?"

Conner felt his neck heat up a little, realizing that there had been a considerable gap between Brody's remark and his response. "I was just wondering how you managed to make her hate you already," he said, somewhat defensively, stabbing at the last bite of his fried eggs with his fork.

"I didn't say Carolyn hated me," Brody explained, the grin lingering in his eyes, though there was no vestige of it on his mouth. "I said she isn't one of my biggest fans."

He paused, finished off a slice of bacon, and finally went on. "We have a—history, Carolyn and I."

To Conner's knowledge, Brody hadn't been anywhere near Lonesome Bend in better than a decade, and Carolyn hadn't moved to town until a few years ago. Which begged the question, "What kind of history?"

Brody sighed deeply, crossed his fork and knife in the middle of his plate and propped his elbows on the table's edge, his expression thoughtful. Maybe even a little grim. His gaze was fixed on something in the next county.

"The usual kind," he said, at some length.

"How do you know her?"

Why, Conner wondered, did he want to know? He liked Carolyn, but things had never gone beyond that, attraction-wise.

Brody met his eyes with a directness that took Conner by surprise. "It's a small world," he said. After a beat, he added, "You interested in her? Carolyn, I mean?"

Conner made a snortlike sound, pushed his own plate away. "No," he said.

"Then why all the questions?"

"What questions?"

"'What kind of history?'" Brody repeated, with exaggerated patience. "'How do you know her?' Those questions."

"Maybe I was just trying to make conversation," Conner hedged. "Did you ever think of that?"

"Like hell you were," Brody scoffed, with a false chuckle. "You can't wait to see the back of me and we both know it. But here's the problem, little brother—I'm not going anywhere."

Something tightened in Conner's throat. He might have said he was sorry to hear that Brody was staying, but he couldn't get the words out.

Brody shoved back his chair and stood, picking up his empty plate to put it in the sink, the way Kim had trained all three of "her boys" to do after a meal, from the time they could reach that high. "I could tell you a few things, Conner," he said hoarsely, "if I thought there was a snowball's chance in hell that you'd listen."

With that, Brody turned and walked away.

He set his plate in the sink and banked the fire in the cookstove and slammed out the back door—after shrugging into Conner's flannel-lined denim jacket.

* * *

FOLKS WERE LINED up all the way to the corner that next Saturday morning when Tricia and Sasha drove past the community center and circled around back to park in one of a half-dozen spots reserved for volunteers. They'd already stopped by River's Bend, where every camping spot and RV hookup was in profitable use by the annual influx of visitors, just to make sure everything was in order.

Although they'd spent much of the previous day helping to set up for the big sale, and were therefore in the much-envied position of having seen the plethora of merchandise ahead of time, Sasha was impressed by the size of the crowd.

"There must be a lot of hoarders in this town," she said. "Why do they want to buy the stuff other people gave away?"

Tricia chuckled, then squeezed the Pathfinder into the last parking space and checked her watch. "It must be the thrill of the hunt," she answered. "Or it could be the chili. Natty's been offered a small fortune for the recipe."

Sasha considered the reply, still fastened into her booster seat, then observed, "It was funny, how you made all those other ladies turn their backs while you put in the secret ingredients."

After consulting Natty by telephone the day before, Tricia had run the family chili recipe to ground and memorized the unique combination of spices some ancestor had dreamed up. She had indeed insisted that all present look away while she extracted various metal boxes and sprinkle jars from a plain paper bag and added them to the massive kettles of beans already simmering on the burners of the community center's commercial-size stove.

Her great-grandmother's cronies, tight-lipped at all the "folderol" involved in keeping the formula a secret, had agreed only because the event just wouldn't be the same without Natty's chili. Indeed, Minerva Snyder had allowed, there might even be a riot if they failed to deliver.

Chuckling at the memory, Tricia got out of the rig and went to help Sasha release the snaps and buckles holding her in the booster seat.

Sasha's eyes twinkled with excitement. She'd sneaked a peek at the mysterious items while Tricia was doctoring the chili the day before and, given the child's IQ, Tricia had no doubt that she could have recited the recipe from memory. "Remember," Tricia said, putting a finger to her lips, "Natty doesn't want anybody to know what's in that chili."

After jumping to the ground, Sasha nodded importantly. "Well, there are beans and some hamburger. Everybody knows that part."

"Yes," Tricia agreed, going around behind the Pathfinder to raise the hatch. "Everybody knows that part." They'd left Valentino at home, contentedly sharing his dog bed with Winston while they both snoozed, but Tricia, feeling inspired, had scrounged up a few more donations the night before, including the pink furry slippers Diana had given her, tossing them into a cardboard box with some other stuff. She'd put the slippers at the bottom, hoping Sasha wouldn't spot them and report the incident to her mother the next time they talked or texted.

Just as Tricia turned around, having hoisted the somewhat unwieldy box into both arms, juggling it awkwardly while she shut the hatch again, Conner Creed walked up to her. Her breath caught, and the box wobbled in her arms.

Conner took it from her just before she would have spilled its contents into the dusty gravel of the parking lot.

How did he manage to startle her the way he did? Tricia wondered, bedazzled, as always, by his ready grin. It was an unfair advantage, that grin.

"Hello," she said stupidly.

"Howdy," he replied, holding the cumbersome box easily in his two muscular arms. He looked down at Sasha and winked. "Hey," he greeted the enthralled little girl. "Are we still on for the trail ride tomorrow afternoon?"

Sasha nodded eagerly and then blurted out a happy "Yes!" for good measure.

"Good," Conner said, heading toward the back door of the community center, which was propped open with a big chunk of wood that had probably served as somebody's chopping block, sometime way back. People in Lonesome Bend liked to put things to use, no matter how ordinary.

Tricia locked the Pathfinder with the button on her key fob and followed Conner and Sasha, who was practically skipping alongside the man, toward the rear entrance.

"More stuff?" one of the women in the kitchen chimed. Several volunteers had stayed through the night, keeping an eye on the simmering pots of chili. "That Kim. She always donates twice as much rummage as anybody else in town!"

Conner, his back still turned to Tricia, chuckled at that. "True," he said. "But Tricia brought these things."

Tricia peeked around him, waggled her fingers in greeting. Some of Natty's friends, like a flock of old hens, still had ruffled feathers from yesterday's intrigue involving the spices for the chili.

One or two straightened their apron strings, and another harrumphed, but these were small-town women, basically sociable, and they wouldn't hold a grudge—not against Natty McCall's great-granddaughter, anyway.

Conner seemed to know where to set the box down—there were plenty of last-minute donations, it appeared, even though the door was about to open to the anxious public.

"Thanks," Tricia said, as Conner passed her, doubling back toward the kitchen.

"You're welcome," he told her, with a nod of farewell.

She hadn't really expected Conner to hang around the rummage sale all day—it was a rare man who did—but Tricia felt oddly bereft when he'd left, and when Sasha tugged at her hand to get her attention, she realized she'd been staring after the man like some moonstruck teenager.

Carolyn Simmons turned up just then, greeting Tricia with a smile and a gesture toward the front of the building, where the waiting customers were already pressing their faces to the windows,

ogling the chicken-shaped egg timer, the row of ratty prom dresses, the chipped teapots, and the dusty books and the jumbles of old shoes piled on the table marked, “Everything 50 Cents!”

“Looks like we’re in for another big year!” Carolyn said. Her attractively highlighted blond hair was pulled up into a ponytail and, like Tricia, she wore jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt and sneakers.

“Looks that way,” Tricia agreed, while Sasha sat down on the lid of a donated cedar chest, which had been découpaged at some point in the distant past with what looked like pages torn from vintage movie magazines, and folded her hands to wait for the onslaught.

The whole thing probably seemed pretty exotic to a little girl raised in Seattle, Tricia thought, with that familiar rush of tenderness. What a gift it was, this visit from Sasha, and how quickly it would be over.

Evelyn Moore, one of the women from the kitchen, bustled to the foreground, holding a stopwatch in her plump hand, and a great production was made of the countdown.

“Three—two—one—”

New Year’s Eve in Times Square had nothing on Lonesome Bend, Colorado, Tricia thought, amused, when it came to ratcheting up the suspense.

At precisely nine o’clock, Evelyn turned the lock and took some quick steps backwards, in order to avoid being trampled by eager shoppers.

The next hour, naturally, was hectic indeed—at one point, when two women wanted the same wafflemaker and seemed about to come to blows, Tricia and Carolyn had to intervene.

“It probably doesn’t even work anymore,” Sasha observed, with a nod at the small appliance. She’d been helping to bag people’s purchases, and when Tricia’s pink slippers went for a nickel, she hadn’t so much as batted an eye. “And, besides, the cord is frayed.”

“The hunter/gatherer phenomenon,” Carolyn explained, though she looked as mystified as Sasha did.

Tricia gave one of Sasha’s pigtails a gentle tug. “Let me know when you’re ready to try the chili,” she said.

“We just had breakfast,” Sasha reminded her, casually horrified.

Tricia laughed and then there was a rush on the prom dresses and they both went back to work.

“Look,” Sasha said, when the rush had subsided a little, sometime later, “Conner’s back.” Her forehead creased into a frown. “Who is that woman with him?”

Tricia, feeling that annoying tension Conner Creed always aroused in her, turned to see a couple just coming through the main door. She blinked. The tension ebbed away.

The man smiling down at the beautiful red-haired woman, his hand pressed solicitously to the small of her back, wasn’t Conner. It was Brody.

Tricia couldn’t have said how she knew that, because the resemblance was stunning; Brody was a perfect reflection of Conner, right down to his clothes and a very recent haircut.

Back in the day, the Creed brothers had been infamous for impersonating each other and, not knowing them well, Tricia had been fooled, like almost everyone else.

Now, he approached her, the lovely Joleen Williams trailing behind him, bestowing her breathtaking smile on all and sundry. “Tricia,” he said, with a little nod.

Her hand tightening slightly on Sasha’s shoulder, to keep the child from blurting out something Tricia would regret, she replied, “Hello, Brody.” She looked past him, nodded. “Hi, Joleen. It’s been a long time.”

“Yes,” Joleen said thoughtfully, sizing Tricia up with a slow sweep of her emerald-green eyes. “So long that I can’t remember, for the life of me, who you are.”

“Tricia McCall,” Tricia offered, amused. Of course, being one of the most popular girls in town, Joleen wouldn’t remember her, the summer visitor who rarely said more than two words running.

Brody gave Joleen a mildly exasperated glance.

"You're Conner's twin," Sasha said, with the air of one having a revelation. "You were at the barbecue by the river."

"Yep," Brody said.

"You didn't look so much like him then," Sasha went on, nonplussed. "Your hair was longer and your clothes were different. Now, you look exactly like Conner. I thought you were Conner."

"Sasha," Tricia said, squeezing again.

Joleen, evidently bored, wandered off.

"How are people supposed to tell you apart?" Sasha demanded, as though confronting an imposter.

Brody chuckled. "I'm the good-looking one," he said.

Sasha wasn't amused, though Tricia, knowing her well, saw that she was softening a little.

"Most kids like me," Brody said, with a twinkle in his eyes, as his gaze connected with Tricia's again. "But I seem to be zero-for-zero with this one."

Sasha, Tricia noticed, was watching Joleen. "Is she your girlfriend?"

"Sasha!" Tricia said.

But Brody didn't seem to be bothered by the question. He crouched, so he could look directly into Sasha's face. "Nope," he said seriously. "Is that a good thing or a bad one?"

"Depends," Sasha answered, sliding another glance in Joleen's direction and neatly slipping out of shoulder-squeezing distance from Tricia. "Does Conner like her?"

Tricia's mouth fell open.

Brody chuckled, shook his head. "I don't think so," he said. As he straightened up again, he was looking at Tricia's overheated face. Something shifted in his eyes, with a distinct but soundless click. "Guess I'd better get in line if I want any of that famous chili," he finished, before walking away.

Tricia looked around for Sasha, found her behind the book table, looking very busy as she restacked the volumes into tidy piles. If Carolyn hadn't been standing right next to Sasha, Tricia probably wouldn't have noticed the way the other woman followed Brody's progress through the crowd.

She recalled something Carolyn had said the week before, when they were cleaning up after the barbecue at River's Bend. What a fool I was, way back when.

As though she'd felt Tricia watching her, Carolyn swung her gaze away from Brody and back to her friend's face. She made a funny little grimace and shrugged.

Tricia's curiosity was piqued, but she was a great believer in her late father's folksy philosophy: everybody's business was nobody's business. She didn't know Carolyn well enough to grill her about her fascination with Brody, though a part of her wished she did. Because then she would have had someone to confide in about Conner.

It was all so confusing, and Diana was so far away.

You, Tricia McCall, she thought glumly, are flirting with slut-dom. You're going on a romantic cruise with one man, and getting all hot and bothered over another. Not becoming. Not becoming at all.

Fortunately, there was a new run on the community center when the chili was finally served, and Tricia was so busy helping to ring up the sales—if making change from a cigar box could be called "ringing up"—that she didn't have a chance to think about Brody or Conner again until early afternoon.

There was a lull, so she and Sasha grabbed the opportunity to go home, take Valentino out for a walk and measure more of the top-secret spices into plastic bags, to be added to tomorrow's batch of chili as soon as the door closed on the last of the rummagers at six that evening.

They were about to head back, in fact, when a hired sedan drew up at the curb in front of the house and who should get out of the back, with the driver's careful assistance, but Natty McCall herself.

Tiny, with a cloud of silver hair pinned into a billowing Gibson-girl style, Natty reminded Tricia of the late stage actress Helen Hayes. She had beautiful skin, virtually wrinkle-free and glowing with good health, and blue eyes that snapped with intelligence, energy and, occasionally, mischief.

"Natty!" Tricia cried, descending on her great-grandmother with open arms. "You're home!"

"I couldn't stand being away any longer," Natty admitted, fanning herself with one hand. "Worrying about the chili recipe, I mean. Surely that wasn't good for my heart or my blood pressure."

Smiling, the balding, middle-aged driver left Natty in Tricia's care and went to collect her suitcases from the trunk of the Town Car.

"And who is this lovely person?" Natty asked, her gaze falling, benevolent but unusually weary, on Sasha.

Tricia made the introductions.

"And this is Valentino," Sasha chirped, indicating the dog, who seemed on the verge of genuflecting to Natty. She had that effect on people, as well as animals, with her queenly countenance. "He lives with Aunt Tricia, but she says she's not going to keep him."

"Famous last words," Natty commented wryly, allowing Tricia to take her arm and escort her toward the front steps, while Sasha and Valentino and the driver followed. "I have missed Winston sorely," the older woman confided, handing the key to Tricia, who unlocked the front door.

Winston was right there, waiting to greet his elderly mistress with a plaintive meow that might have translated as, Thank heaven you're home. Another day, and I would have starved.

Delighted, Natty scooped the cat up into her arms and held him while Tricia squired her to her customary chair in the old-fashioned parlor.

"You should have called," Tricia fretted, glad Conner had persuaded her to turn up the heat that morning, when he stopped by to bang on the pipes with a wrench. "I would have had a nice fire going, and prepared a meal—"

"Don't be silly, dear," Natty scolded, in her sweet way, once she was settled in her chair, Winston purring and turning happy circles in her lap. She handed her small, beaded purse to Tricia. "Pay the nice man, won't you?" she asked, indicating the driver.

Tricia settled up with the fellow from the car service, and he left. Natty's baggage stood in the entryway.

Both Sasha and Valentino seemed fascinated by the old woman. They stared at her, as though spellbound by her many charms.

"Would you mind building a fire now, sweetheart, and putting on a pot of tea?" Natty asked Tricia, stroking Winston with a motion of one delicate hand. The cat purred like an outboard motor.

"Of course I wouldn't mind," Tricia said, grateful, now, that Conner had laid a fire on the hearth and all she had to do was open the damper and light a match to the crumpled newspaper balled up under the kindling.

Soon, cheery flames danced on the hearth.

Tricia tucked a knitted shawl around Natty's shoulders before hurrying into the kitchen. While she was making the requested tea, she listened to the rise and fall of voices as her great-grandmother and her goddaughter chatted companionably, getting to know each other.

"And I think Aunt Tricia really likes Conner," Sasha was saying, as Tricia entered the parlor carrying a tea tray. "He likes her, too. You can tell by the way he looks at her. It's the same way my dad looks at a cheeseburger."

Natty smiled at that, and her wise, china-blue eyes shifted to Tricia with a knowing expression. "How is the rummage sale going?" she asked.

Tricia set the tray down, poured hot, fresh tea into a delicate china cup for her favorite elderly lady. "It's an enormous success, as always," she answered.

"You'd better get back there," Natty said, after taking a sip of tea. "I wouldn't put it past Evelyn to sneak a sample of that chili out of the community center and have it analyzed by some lab, just so she could find out what makes it so special."

Tricia smiled, sat down on the chair nearest Natty's. There were blue shadows under the old woman's lively eyes, and she looked thinner than she had before she left for Denver. "I'll guard that recipe with my life," she vowed, making the cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die sign. "But right now, I'm more concerned about you."

Sasha, by that time, was busy entertaining Valentino on the rug in front of the fire, so Tricia felt free to express her concern.

"I'll be perfectly all right," Natty said, looking down at Winston with a fond expression and continuing to stroke his sleek back. "Now that I'm home, where I belong."

"Just the same—"

Natty yawned and patted her mouth. "Winston and I," she said, "would love a nap." She sighed, a gentle, joyous sound, full of homecoming. "Right here, in our very own chair. Do hand me the lap robe, Tricia dear."

Tricia obeyed.

"I could stay here and look after Natty," Sasha said, in a loud whisper, when Natty had closed her eyes and, apparently, nodded off. "Valentino, too."

Tricia was reluctant to agree. After all, Sasha was only ten.

"Please?" Sasha prompted. "It's so nice here, with the fire and everything."

"You know my cell number," Tricia said, relenting. She nodded to indicate Natty's old-fashioned rotary phone, in its customary place on the secretary, over by the bay windows.

Sasha seemed to read her mind. "I know how to use one of those, Aunt Tricia," she said patiently. "Dad bought one on eBay last year, and he showed me how it works."

Tricia chuckled. "Okay," she said, with a fond glance at Natty, who was snoring delicately now, obviously happy to be home. In a day or two, she'd probably be her old self again. "I won't be long, in any case. I just have to make sure tomorrow's chili is underway."

"Valentino and I will take care of Natty," Sasha promised solemnly.

Overcoming her paranoia, Tricia went into Natty's kitchen, measured out the spices and peeked into the parlor once more as she passed.

Natty was unquestionably sound asleep. So was Valentino.

But Sasha sat on the ottoman at Natty's feet, watching her intently, as though poised to leap into action at the first sign of any emergency.

Touched, Tricia left the house again, with the chili ingredients safely stashed in her purse.

The rummage sale/chili feed was going at full tilt when Tricia arrived back at the community center, so she pushed up her sleeves and got busy helping, careful to keep her cell phone in the pocket of her jeans in case Sasha called.

After an hour, Tricia took a break and dialed Natty's number, just in case.

Natty answered, sounding quite chipper. Evidently, the nap had restored her considerably. "We're doing just fine, dear," the old woman said, in reply to Tricia's inquiry. "Sasha and I are about to play Chinese checkers, right here by the fire, where it's cozy." A girlish giggle followed. "The child swears by all that's holy that she's never played this game before, but I suspect she'll trounce me thoroughly at it, just the same."

Tricia smiled, impatient to join Natty and Sasha at home. She'd missed her great-grandmother sorely while she was away and, with the move to Paris looming, she wanted to spend as much time with Sasha as she could.

"No one ever beats you at Chinese checkers," Tricia said.

Again, Natty giggled. "I used to be pretty wicked at Ping-Pong, too, if you'll recall," she replied sweetly. "But I'm not as quick with a paddle as I used to be."

Tricia smiled again, recalling some lively Ping-Pong tournaments she and her dad and Natty had competed in, after stringing a net across the middle of the formal table in Natty's dining room.

Her great-grandmother had indeed been formidable in those days. Neither Tricia nor Joe had been able to beat her, except when she decided to throw a game so they wouldn't lose interest and stop playing.

"Shall I bring some chili home for supper?" Tricia asked, feeling an achy warmth in her heart that was partly love for the spirited old woman and partly nostalgia for those long-ago summers, when her dad was still around. "I'm sure there are some plastic containers I could borrow."

"Yes," Natty decided immediately. "And bring home some of Evelyn's cornbread, too, if the supply hasn't been exhausted already."

Tricia promised to head home with supper as soon as possible.

Along with Carolyn and several other volunteers, she waited on the steady stream of customers —it never ceased to amaze her how many people showed up for the event. Many of them, of course, were out-of-towners, staying at River's Bend, but the locals came in waves, often for both lunch and supper.

At six the last few stragglers wandered out, and Evelyn promptly locked up behind them.

By then, the huge kettles had been emptied, scrubbed and filled with fresh salted water and bags full of dried beans, and while the others sat at the public tables in the front of the community center, relaxing and enjoying a well-earned meal of their own, Tricia stirred spices into the cooking pots.

A few minutes later, Tricia left by the back door, carrying two bulky plastic-lidded bowls full of food, and spotted Carolyn, just getting into her aging compact car.

She made an oddly lonely figure, in the twilight-shadowed parking lot and, on impulse, Tricia called out to her. There was a kind of brave sadness about Carolyn that she hadn't noticed before.

Smiling, Carolyn turned from her open car door. "I should have thought of that," she said, with a nod to Tricia's takeout.

"There's plenty," Tricia said. "Why don't you join Natty and Sasha and me for supper?"

Carolyn hesitated—she looked tired—but then she gave a little nod. "I'd like that," she said.

"Good," Tricia said. "Follow me."

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