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LINDA LAEL
MILLER

MCNETTRICK'S
Heart

"[Miller] is one of the finest American writers in the genre."

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Mills & Boon M&B

Linda Lael

McKetrick's Heart

«HarperCollins»

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McKettrick's Heart / L. M. Lael — «HarperCollins», — (Mills & Boon M&B)

Keegan McKettrick has learned the hard way that women can't be trusted. The only female in his life these days is the young daughter he sees all too rarely, and his sole passion is for his job overseeing his family's corporation. Until beautiful but mysterious Molly Shields comes to Indian Rock on a mission – and keeping a suspicious eye on her becomes Keegan's full-time hobby... Molly doesn't know why she's attracted to a man who's determined to dig up dirt on her, even if he is gorgeous. But cynical Keegan might be the one person who can truly understand her shadowy past – and if the two can risk opening their hearts, they just might forge a brighter future.

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A classic tale of cowboys staking claim to their land—and the women they love...

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Praise for the novels of #1 New York Times and USA TODAY bestselling author Linda Lael Miller

“Miller tugs at the heartstrings as few authors can.”

—Publishers Weekly

“Miller crafts amazing, deep characters...

Thoroughly entertaining!”

—RT Book Reviews

“The amazing Miller...steals your heart with good stories about good people. Her overall theme of strength in family never fails to grab your attention and keep you coming back for more.”

—Fresh Fiction on A Lawman's Christmas

“Great reading for anyone who loves a family saga full of romance, adventure and handsome cowboys.”

—BN.com on The Creed Cowboys series

“Miller once again tells a memorable tale.”

—RT Book Reviews on A Creed in Stone Creek

“Miller's got major storytelling mojo for the second adventure set in Cave Creek, AZ.”

—Publishers Weekly on Deadly Deceptions

“Miller...is at her steamiest. This should delight any fan of family-centric romance, and followers of the McKetricks will be pleased to find Miller corralling all the series' characters together and tying up all their loose ends with grace and conviction.”

—Publishers Weekly on McKetrick's Heart

“This heartwarming and heartbreakingly poignant story is a fitting finale to Miller's McKetrick Men trilogy. Her characters just come to life and may produce both tears and laughter...this story [is] one not soon forgotten.”

—RT Book Reviews on McKetrick's Heart

McKetrick's Heart

Linda Lael

Miller



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Dear Readers,

I hope you've enjoyed revisiting the McKetrick men and the women they manage to turn into cowboys' brides. After reading Jesse and Cheyenne's story in McKetrick's Luck, then Rance and Echo's happy ending in McKetrick's Pride, I'm proud to present the final book in the McKetrick Men trilogy, McKetrick's Heart.

When Keegan McKetrick first encounters Molly Shields, he's furious to find her in his hometown of Indian Rock, Arizona. At the same time he's never been so attracted to a woman before. Both Molly and Keegan are deeply wary of love—and need to learn to trust their hearts....

I'm also delighted to announce that a brand-new trilogy of cowboys is coming your way! Be sure to look for the first title, Big Sky Country, from HQN Books in June. Set in Parable, Montana, this series will feature half brothers, headstrong women and big dreams under an even bigger sky. You won't want to miss this!

With love,



To Jerry and Anna Lael, with love

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Chapter 1

MOLLY SHIELDS FORCED herself to pause on the sidewalk in front of the huge brick house, draw a deep breath and let it out slowly. If she hadn't, she would have vaulted over the gate and covered the flagstone walk at a dead run.

Lucas.

Lucas was somewhere inside that enormous place.

But so was Psyche. And Psyche Ryan, at least in the eyes of the world, was legally Lucas's mother.

Everything within Molly rebelled against that single fact.

Purposefully Molly adjusted her perspective, along with the canvas backpack she'd carried from the gas station at the far end of Indian Rock, Arizona, after getting off the afternoon bus from Phoenix. Lucas wasn't her child; he was Psyche's.

The little boy was eighteen months old now—eighteen months, two weeks and five days. He'd been a newborn, pink and squalling, when she'd last seen him, held him in her arms—all too briefly—before giving him up. Psyche had sent a few snapshots in the interim—Lucas was solid, handsome and blond, with bright green eyes. Molly's own coloring, though her hair had darkened over time, but despite that, he resembled his late father more than her.

Now, in a very few minutes, maybe even moments, Molly would see the baby she still thought of as her own, at least in weak moments.

Perhaps she'd be allowed to hold Lucas. She ached to do that. To breathe in the scent of his hair and skin...

Careful, her practical side admonished.

It was miracle enough that Psyche, a virtual stranger and, it was to be remembered, a betrayed wife, had summoned Molly to this little town, with its shady streets, given all that had happened. She mustn't move too fast, or make a wrong move—miracles were rare and fragile things, to be handled with infinite care.

Molly worked the latch on the shiny black iron gate. The metal felt hot and smooth to the touch. A discreet little sign, fastened to the ornate fence, proclaimed the place a registered historic site.

Psyche had explained, in one of her emails, that the house on the corner of Maple and Red River Drive, her childhood home, had stood empty for nearly a decade. But today the vast lawn looked manicured, lilacs and roses bloomed in freshly mulched beds and the many mullioned windows shone. The white wooden trim looked freshly painted, and the brick, though time worn, was still damp in places from a recent power wash.

Molly forced herself to walk slowly up the walk, toward the front porch, part of which was screened in. No doubt there were patio chairs there, a little table and maybe even a wooden swing.

Molly pictured herself sitting in that swing, rocking Lucas to sleep on a warm summer evening, and her heart beat a little faster.

Psyche's child, she repeated to herself in a silent mantra. Psyche's child.

She had no idea why Psyche had summoned her, or how long she'd be staying. The woman had graciously offered first-class airfare from LAX, with a car and driver to meet her in Phoenix. But Molly, perhaps as a form of penance, had chosen to take the bus instead.

She'd have been wiser not to come at all, of course, but she hadn't been able to resist the chance to see Lucas.

The heavy front door swung open just as Molly reached the bottom step, jolting her out of her travel-weary speculations, and a middle-aged black woman appeared, thin and tall, clad in a crisp white uniform and sensible, crepe-soled shoes.

"You her?" she asked bluntly.

Molly was "her," all right. Lucas's birth mother, the woman who had slept with Psyche's husband. It didn't matter that Molly truly hadn't known he was married until it was too late. That was

always the excuse, wasn't it? She was intelligent, with a college education, her own business. Thayer had been a facile liar, but she should have seen the signs.

There were always signs.

Molly swallowed. Nodded in glum acknowledgment.

"Well, get yourself on in here," the woman said, fanning herself with one hand. "I can't stand on this porch all day with the door hanging open, you know. Air-conditioning costs money."

Molly hid a rueful smile. Psyche had mentioned her housekeeper several times over the past several weeks—said she was cantankerous, but kind, too. "You must be Florence," Molly said mildly, swallowing an urge to explain that she wasn't a home wrecker.

Florence frowned, spared an unfriendly nod. "Is that backpack all the luggage you brought?"

Molly shook her head. "I have some more stuff at the gas station," she replied. "It was too heavy to carry." Some of her private regrets were like that, too, but she slogged on, mostly because she didn't know what else to do.

Florence, practically bristling with disapproval, gave a sniff and adjusted her glasses. It was no great wonder that she hadn't put out a welcome mat, figurative or otherwise, given the things Psyche must have told her. Most of which, unfortunately, were probably true.

After issuing a harrumph, Florence stepped aside to let Molly pass. "We'll take the station wagon down there later, and fetch it all," Florence said. "Right now, Miss Psyche's upstairs resting, but I've got to keep an eye on her just the same." Behind her thick glasses Florence's chocolate-brown eyes glazed over for a moment, and she gave a sad huff of a sigh. "My poor baby," she added, addressing the shrubbery more than Molly. "It practically wore her out, getting this house opened and moving us in. If it was up to me, we'd have stayed right in Flagstaff, where we belonged, but there's no reasoning with that girl once she takes a notion."

Molly longed to ask about Lucas, but she had to tread carefully, especially around this longtime family retainer. Florence Washington had been Psyche's nanny until Psyche was old enough to go to school, then the family maid. When Psyche married Thayer Ryan, Mrs. Washington had stayed on to run the new household.

Molly felt a sick little flutter way down in the pit of her stomach.

Thayer was dead—he'd suffered a massive coronary a year before, at the age of thirty-seven—and while Molly wouldn't have wished him into an early grave, even after he'd all but ruined her life, she certainly hadn't mourned him, either.

She hadn't gone to the funeral.

She hadn't sent flowers, or even a card.

After all, how would she have signed it? "With sympathy, your late husband's mistress"?

Florence trudged off through an entryway with a grandfather clock and a curving staircase, and then down a long corridor, massive, drape-darkened rooms lining the passage on either side. Molly followed circumspectly, and they finally emerged into a sunlit kitchen with floor-to-ceiling windows forming the back wall and overlooking another enclosed porch. A flower-bright, sprawling yard lay beyond.

Molly finally shrugged out of her backpack and set it down on one of the chairs at the huge antique table in the center of the room.

"You might as well sit," Florence said.

Might as well, Molly thought. She was tired—she'd ridden more than one bus since leaving L.A. two days before—but her first inclination was still to ransack that mansion room by room, flinging open doors until she found Lucas.

She drew back one of the heavy oak chairs and sagged into it.

"Coffee?" Florence asked. "Tea?"

"Water would be good," Molly said.

"Fizzy stuff or regular?"

“Regular, please.”

Florence brought her a glass of ice and a bottle. While Molly poured, Florence took up an obstinate pose over by the sink, leaning against the counter with her arms folded.

“What are you doing here?” Florence demanded, evidently having withheld the question as long as she could.

Molly, about to take a sip of water, set her glass down again. “I don’t know,” she answered truthfully. Psyche had contacted her by phone a week before and issued an urgent summons, with very little accompanying explanation.

“We have to talk about this in person,” she’d said.

“Seems to me you’ve done enough damage,” Florence told her, “without coming here. Especially now.”

Molly swallowed. She was thirty years old, and she ran one of the biggest literary agencies in L.A., dealt with egotistical, high-powered authors, editors and movie people practically every day. Now, sitting in Psyche Ryan’s kitchen, clad in the jeans, T-shirt and sneakers she’d been wearing for forty-eight hours straight, she felt diminished, as though she’d regressed to her college days, when she hadn’t had the proverbial two nickels to rub together.

“Don’t give her a hard time, Florence,” a gentle voice interceded softly from somewhere behind Molly’s chair. “I asked her to come, and Molly was kind enough to agree.”

Both Molly and Florence turned, Molly rising so quickly that she nearly knocked over her chair.

Psyche stood framed in a doorway, a painfully thin woman clad in a peach silk robe and matching slippers. Two aspects of her appearance leaped out at Molly—one, Psyche was beautiful and, two, she was obviously bald beneath the little crocheted cap she wore.

“Will you look in on Lucas, please?” Psyche said to Florence. “He was still asleep a few minutes ago, but he’s not used to the house yet, and I’d rather he didn’t wake up alone.”

Florence hesitated, gave a terse nod, glowered once at Molly and left the kitchen.

“Sit down,” Psyche told Molly, gliding gracefully toward her.

Molly, who was used to giving orders, not taking them, immediately complied.

Psyche drew back the chair next to Molly’s and sat down with a little sigh and a gingerly wince. “Thank you for coming,” she said, offering a hand. “I’m Psyche Ryan.”

Molly shook the hand, found it weightless as a wad of tracing paper. “Molly Shields,” she replied. Her gaze drifted to Psyche’s cap, back to the pair of enormous violet eyes beneath it.

Psyche smiled slightly. “Yes,” she said. “I have cancer.”

A chasm opened in the bottom of Molly’s heart. “I’m sorry,” she said. About so much more than the cancer. “Is it...?”

“Terminal,” Psyche confirmed with a nod.

Tears of sympathy stung behind Molly’s eyes, but she didn’t allow herself to shed them. She didn’t know Psyche well enough for that.

Inevitably her mind fastened on Lucas.

Dear God, if Psyche was dying, what would happen to him? Having lost her own mother when she was fifteen, Molly knew the emptiness and constant undercurrent of fruitless searching that could result.

Psyche seemed to be tracking Molly’s unspoken thoughts—at least, some of them. She smiled again, reached across the tabletop to squeeze Molly’s hand. “As you know,” she said, “my husband is dead. Neither of us have any family. Since you’re Lucas’s biological mother, I hope...”

Molly’s heart leaped over the logical next conclusion, but she reined it in, back over the jump, afraid to risk the shattering disappointment that would follow if she was wrong.

“I’ve hoped you’ll care for him after I’m gone,” Psyche said. “Be his mother, not just on some paper in some file—but for real.”

Molly opened her mouth, closed it again, too shaken to trust her voice.

Psyche drew back a little, huddling in her exquisite peach robe, studying Molly with a worried expression. “Maybe I presumed too much, sending for you the way I did,” she said, very softly. “If you’d wanted to raise Lucas, you wouldn’t have given him up.”

Desperation, sorrow and hope swelled within Molly, a tangle of emotions she’d probably never be able to separate. “Of course I want him,” she blurted, lest Psyche reconsider and withdraw the offer.

Psyche looked relieved—and exhausted. “There are a few strings attached,” she warned quietly.

Molly’s heart scrambled up into the back of her throat. She waited, still terrified of tipping the balance the wrong way.

“Lucas must be raised in or around Indian Rock,” Psyche said. “Preferably in this house. I grew up here, and I want my son to do the same.”

Molly blinked. She owned a thriving literary agency in L.A., along with a house in Pacific Palisades. She had friends, an aging father, a life. Could she give all that up to live in a small, remote town in northern Arizona?

“Lucas will inherit a considerable estate,” Psyche went on. She took in Molly’s clothes and the worn backpack on the floor next to her chair. “I have no idea what your financial situation is, but I’m prepared to provide generously for you, until Lucas is of age, of course. You could turn the house into a bed-and-breakfast, if you wanted.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Molly said. “For you to give me money, I mean.” It was strange how quickly a life-changing decision could be made, if the stakes were high enough. Several of her clients, if not all, would balk when she told them she’d be operating out of Indian Rock from now on. Some would want out of their contracts, but it didn’t matter. Her bank accounts bulged, despite her lifestyle, and as agent of record she would collect commissions in perpetuity on the many works she’d already sold.

“Good,” Psyche said. She sniffled, took a tissue from the pocket of her robe and dabbed at her eyes.

For a few moments the two women sat in silence.

“Why did you give Lucas up?” Psyche asked. “Didn’t you want him?”

Didn’t you want him? The words blew through the bleak, weathered canyons of Molly’s soul like a harsh and bitter wind. She could have kept Lucas—she had the resources and certainly the desire—but she supposed that, like taking the bus from L.A., surrendering her son had been a way of punishing herself. “I thought he’d be better off with two parents,” she finally replied. It wasn’t the whole answer, but at the moment it was all she had to offer.

“I would have divorced Thayer,” Psyche said, “if it hadn’t been for Lucas.”

“I didn’t know—” Molly began, but she strangled on the rest of the sentence, couldn’t get it out.

“That Thayer was married?” Psyche prompted, not unkindly.

Molly nodded.

“I believe you,” Psyche said, surprising her. “Were you in love with my husband, Molly Shields?”

“I thought I was,” Molly replied. She’d met Thayer at a party in L.A., and immediately been swept away by his good looks, his charm and that sharp, albeit devious, mind of his. The pregnancy had been an accident, but she’d been happy about it, overjoyed, in fact—until she’d told Thayer.

After all this time, the memory of that day was still so painful that Molly turned away from it, pushed it to a back corner of her brain.

“My lawyer has already drafted the papers,” Psyche said, trying to rise from her chair, finding she was too weak and sinking into it again. “You may want to have them reviewed by counsel of your own before they’re finalized.”

Molly merely nodded, still absorbing the implications of Psyche’s words. Instinctively she got to her feet, helped Psyche to stand.

Almost as though she had radar, Florence reappeared, elbowed Molly aside and wrapped one strong arm around Psyche's waist to support her. "You'd better lie down again," the older woman said. "I'll just get you upstairs."

"Molly," Psyche put in quickly, almost breathlessly, as though she were afraid of being swept away before her son's fate was settled, "you come, too. It's time you got to know Lucas. Florence, you'll show Molly to her room, won't you? Help her get settled?"

Florence passed Molly a poisonous glance. "Whatever you want, Miss Psyche," she said, "that's what I'll do."

Molly trailed after the two women, down a hallway, into an elevator with an old-fashioned grate door. The little box lurched, like Molly's heart, as it sprang upward, shuddered its way past the second floor to the third.

Psyche slept in a suite of rooms boasting a marble fireplace, antique furniture, probably French, and elegantly faded rugs. A bank of windows overlooked the street on one side and the backyard on the other, and stacks of books teetered everywhere.

Distracted, yearning to see Lucas, Molly nonetheless spotted the names of several of her authors on the spines of those books.

"Through that doorway," Psyche said, pointing, as Florence steered her toward the bed.

Once again Molly called upon every bit of self-restraint she possessed to keep from running in that direction. Running to Lucas, her son, her baby.

The nursery, a sizable room in its own right, adjoined Psyche's. There was a rocking chair over by the windows, shelves jammed with storybooks, an overflowing toy box.

Molly took all that in peripherally, focused on the crib and the chubby toddler standing up in it, gripping the rails and eyeing her with charitable trepidation.

He seemed golden, a fairy child bathed in afternoon sunlight, his light hair gleaming and gossamer.

Molly, who wanted to race across the room and crush him to her, did neither. She stood still, just inside the doorway, letting the boy take her measure with solemn eyes.

"Hi," she said, smiling moistly. "I'm Molly."

And I'm your mother.

* * *

KEEGAN MCKETRICK STOOD impatiently beside his black Jaguar, waiting for the tank to fill and appraising the pile of designer luggage resting between the newspaper box and the display of propane tanks near the entrance to the town's only gas station/convenience store. Even from a distance, he could tell the bags weren't knockoffs, and whoever owned them had most likely come in on the four-o'clock bus from Phoenix. He pondered the mystery while his car guzzled liquid money.

He was replacing the hose when a familiar station wagon bounced off the highway and rolled by, with Florence Washington at the wheel.

Keegan wanted to duck into the Jag and drive off, pretend he hadn't seen the other car, but that would have gone against his personal code, so he didn't. He'd known Psyche Ryan, née Lindsay, was back in town, that she'd come home, with her adopted son, to die.

He'd geared himself up to go by and see her several times since her return to Indian Rock, but he'd been reluctant to call or knock on the door, in case he disturbed her. If she was as sick as he'd heard she was, she was practically bedridden.

The station wagon rolled to a stop over by the propane tanks and the Louis Vuitton bags.

As Keegan squared his shoulders, he saw Florence turn in his direction, gazing balefully through the window.

He reminded himself that he was a McKetrick, born and bred, and chose to advance instead of retreat, assembling a smile as he did so.

Meanwhile, the door on the passenger side sprang open, and a slight woman with shoulder-length honey-colored hair got out.

Keegan glanced at her, looked away, registered who she was and looked back. He felt the smile evaporate from his lips, and forgot all about his plan to ask Florence if Psyche was up to receiving visitors.

His jaw clamped as he rounded the back of the wagon to confront Thayer Ryan's mistress.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he growled. He couldn't recall her name, but he remembered running into her at a swanky restaurant up in Flag one night. She'd been sitting with Ryan, that scumball, at a secluded table, clad in a slinky black cocktail dress and dripping diamonds—gifts, no doubt, from her married lover, and almost certainly charged to Psyche, since Ryan had never had a pot to piss in.

The woman flinched, startled. A pink flush glowed on her cheekbones, and her green eyes flickered with affronted guilt. Still, her gaze was steady, and more defiant than ashamed.

"Keegan McKetrick," she said. Then she tried to go around him.

He blocked her way. "You have a good memory for names," he told her. "Yours slips my mind."

Florence, meanwhile, opened the back of the station wagon, presumably to stow the bags. "I'm not doing this all by myself," she said.

Keegan remembered his manners—at least partially—and waved Florence back from the luggage. "There's another bus tonight," he told the woman whose face and body he recalled so well.

"Molly Shields," she said, and raised her chin a notch to let him know she wasn't intimidated. "And I'm not going anywhere. Kindly get out of my way, Mr. McKetrick."

Keegan leaned in a little. Ms. Shields was a head shorter than he was, and he must have outweighed her by fifty pounds, but she didn't shrink back, and he had to accord her a certain grudging respect for that. "Psyche's sick," he said in a grinding undertone. "Just about the last thing she needs is a visit from her dead husband's girlfriend."

The flush deepened, but the spring-green eyes flashed with swift defiance. "Step aside," she said.

Keegan was still getting over the brass-balls audacity of her attitude when Florence interceded, poking at him with a finger.

"Keegan McKetrick," the old woman said, "either make yourself useful and load up those bags, or be on your way. And if you can take time out of your busy schedule, you might stop by the house one of these days soon and say hello to Psyche. She'd like to see you."

Keegan deliberately softened his expression. "How is she?" he asked.

Molly Shields took the opportunity to slip around him, grab one of the suitcases.

"She's bad sick," Florence answered, and tears glistened in her eyes. "She invited Molly here, and I'm not any happier about it than you are, but she must have a good reason. And I'd appreciate some cooperation on your part."

Keegan was both confounded and chagrined. He nodded to Florence, lifted two of the five suitcases by their fancy handles and hurled them unceremoniously into the back of the station wagon, doing his best to ignore Molly Shields, who sidestepped him.

"You tell Psyche," he said to Florence, "that I'll be by as soon as she feels up to company."

"She usually holds up pretty well until around two in the afternoon," Florence replied. "You come over tomorrow, around noon, and I'll set out a nice lunch for the two of you, on the sunporch."

Keegan didn't miss the phrase "for the two of you" and neither, he saw from the corner of his eye, did Molly, who was wrestling with the largest of the bags. "That sounds fine," he said, and jerked the handle from Molly's grasp to throw the suitcase in with the others.

She glared at him.

He went right on ignoring her.

"I'd best pick up some bread and milk while we're here," Florence said, addressing Molly this time. With that, she disappeared into the convenience store.

"Does Psyche know you were boinking her husband?" Keegan asked in a furious whisper the moment he and Molly were alone.

Molly gasped.

"Does she know?" Keegan repeated fiercely.

She bit her lower lip. "Yes," she said very quietly, when he'd just about given up on getting an answer.

"If you're trying to pull some kind of scam—"

Molly's shoulders had been stooped a moment before. Now she rallied and looked as though she might be about to slap him. "You heard Mrs. Washington," she said. "Psyche asked me to come."

"Not without a lot of setting up on your part, I'll bet," Keegan retorted. "What the hell are you up to?"

"I'm not 'up to' anything," Molly answered after an obvious struggle to retain her composure, such as it was. "I'm here because Psyche...needs my help."

"Psyche," Keegan rasped, leaning in again until his nose was almost touching Molly's, "needs her friends. She needs to be home, in the house where she grew up. What she does not need, Ms. Shields, is you. Whatever you're trying to pull, you'd better rethink it. Psyche's too weak to fight back, but I assure you, I'm not!"

"Is that a threat?" Molly countered, narrowing her marvelous eyes.

"Yes," Keegan retorted, "and not an idle one."

Florence returned with the bread and milk, went around to the other side of the car and put the groceries in the backseat. "If you two are through arguing," she said, "I'd like to get back to Psyche."

Keegan sighed.

Molly gave him one last viperous look and got in on the passenger side.

Keegan spoke to Florence over the roof of the ancient station wagon. "I'll be there at noon tomorrow," he said. "Should I bring anything?"

He'd be bringing plenty, counting the questions he wanted to ask Psyche.

At last Florence smiled. "Just yourself," she answered. "My girl will be mighty glad to see that handsome mug of yours."

Keegan might have grinned if he hadn't been mad enough to bite the top off one of the propane tanks and spit it to the other side of the road. "See you then," he said.

He stood watching as Florence fired up the wagon, popped it into gear and zoomed out onto the street.

"I'll be goddamned," he muttered.

Five minutes later, well down the road back to the Triple M ranch, where members of the McKetrick clan had lived for a century and a half, he punched a digit on his cell phone.

He got his cousin Rance's voice mail and cursed while he listened to the spiel. He'd undergone a transformation recently, Rance had, since he'd taken up with Emma Wells, who ran the local bookstore. Given up his high-powered job at McKetrickCo, the family conglomeration, and started ranching in earnest.

The beep sounded. "That bitch Thayer Ryan was screwing around with is in town," he snapped, without preamble, "and guess where she's staying? Psyche's place."

With that, he thumbed End and put a call through to Jesse, his other cousin. Jesse, who had a type-Z personality, was even harder to reach than Rance, since he refused to carry a cell phone. This time, Keegan didn't even get voice mail.

He was about to backtrack to town, figuring he'd find Jesse in the poker room behind Lucky's Bar and Grill, fleecing unsuspecting Texas hold 'em devotees of their hard-earned money, when he remembered that Jesse and his new bride, Cheyenne, were still away on their honeymoon.

A lonely feeling swept over Keegan, one he was glad no one was around to see. Jesse was in love with Cheyenne, Rance with Emma.

And he was alone.

His own marriage hadn't worked out, and his daughter, Devon, living in Flagstaff with her mother, visited only occasionally. Going back to the big house on the ranch was the last thing he wanted to do, but he couldn't face returning to the office, either.

A lot of the family members were agitating to take McKettrickCo public, and fight though he did, Keegan was outnumbered. He could already feel the company, the only thing that kept him sane, slipping away.

What would he do when it was gone?

Jesse, never involved beyond cashing his dividend checks, didn't give a damn. Rance, once willing to work eighteen-hour days right alongside Keegan, now preferred to spend his time with his kids, Emma or the two hundred head of cattle grazing on his section of the ranch.

Their cousin Meg, who was a force in the San Antonio branch of the company, might have taken Keegan's side, but she'd been distracted lately. Whenever she came to Indian Rock, she holed up in the house that had originally belonged to Holt and Lorelei McKettrick, way back in the 1800s, keeping a low profile and fretting over whatever was bugging her.

He might have talked to Travis Reid, the closest friend he had except for Jesse and Rance, or even Sierra, another of his cousins and Travis's wife. Sierra and Travis were busy moving into their new place in town, though, and no matter how cordially they might have greeted Keegan, he would have been intruding. They were practically newlyweds, after all, settling in to a life together, and they needed privacy for that.

All of which meant, when it came to trusted confidants, he was shit out of luck.

Chapter 2

MOLLY'S ROOM AND BATH were on the other side of Lucas's nursery, opposite Psyche's suite. She and Florence schlepped the bags up in the elevator, a few at a time.

Florence lingered in the hall doorway. "That boy looks a lot like you," she said with a nod toward Lucas's room. "Took me long enough, but I finally put two and two together. You're his mama, aren't you?"

Molly didn't answer. It was Psyche's place to tell Florence whatever she wanted her to know, and Molly wasn't about to overstep those bounds.

"Thayer and Miss Psyche tried to adopt a baby for years," Florence went on. "They got close a couple of times, but something always went wrong. The birth mother backed out, or a relative stepped in to claim the child. I can't tell you how it grieved me, watching Miss Psyche put on a brave face, swallowing her disappointment, keeping her hopes up. Then all of a sudden, here's Lucas. The perfect green-eyed, blond-haired baby boy. I should have guessed he came out of your affair with Thayer."

Molly, in the act of unpacking one of her bags, stiffened, and her gaze sliced to Florence's face. Outside, on the front lawn, the sprinkler system came on, making a chuckety-chuckety sound, and the scent of fresh-cut grass blew in through the open windows on a soft breeze. "None of this," she said, "is Lucas's fault."

Florence spared her a dry smile. "So you do have some spirit," she observed. "You're going to need it, if you stay around here long. I'm headed downstairs shortly, to get supper started, but before I go, there's one more thing I want to say. I don't know why you're here, but I'll be watching you. You do anything—anything at all—to make things harder for my girl than they already are, and I'll make the devil himself look like an angel of mercy. You understand what I'm saying to you, Molly Shields?"

Molly kept her spine straight. She'd come to Indian Rock like a whipped dog, but she had Lucas to think about now, and it was time to put on her big-girl panties and take care of business. "I'd rather count you as a friend," she said, "but if you want a fight, I'll give you one."

Respect flickered in Florence's eyes, but it was gone in a moment. "Supper's at six," she said, and then she was gone, closing the door quietly behind her.

Molly knew that was a courtesy to Psyche, not her, but she appreciated it anyway.

She looked around the room that would be home for the foreseeable future—brick fireplace, gleaming brass bed, antique bureau and chest, chaise longue, plenty of bookshelves. All of them old-money shabby.

She smiled ruefully, thinking of her own ultra-modern place in L.A., where everything was new, with no history, no memories, no meaning. What a contrast.

The smile faded as she remembered the encounter with Keegan McKetrick back at the convenience store/gas station where she and Florence had gone to fetch her bags. She'd seen utter contempt in his eyes, and he'd certainly made no bones about wanting her out of Psyche's life and out of Indian Rock.

It had been a jolt, running into him. On some level, she realized, she'd still been smarting from their first encounter, in a Flagstaff restaurant, when Thayer had introduced her as a business associate.

Keegan hadn't believed him, even then.

And looking back, Molly knew she should have been far more suspicious of Thayer's glib reaction that night. In retrospect, it was a classic scenario—the guilty husband runs into a family friend and does a song and dance to explain the mistress away. Why hadn't she seen that?

Because you were a fool, that's why, she thought.

Molly opened a suitcase, found a floral sundress and fresh lingerie. She'd feel better after a cool shower, she reflected. More like her normal, competent self.

As for Mr. McKetrick's obviously low opinion of her, well, that didn't matter in the vast scheme of things. Lucas mattered. Psyche mattered.

Keegan McKetrick was a footnote.

She felt a pang, and her throat tightened.

If all that was true, why did it sting so much to recall the way he'd looked at her?

* * *

RANCE RODE ACROSS the creek on a paint horse Keegan hadn't seen before.

He might have come right out of the 1880s, the way he was dressed—boots, jeans, a Western-cut denim shirt and a beat-up old hat resurrected from his college-rodeo days.

"Got your message," Rance said in his usual taciturn way, reining in and swinging deftly down from the saddle.

Keegan glanced across the creek toward Rance's rustic, rambling ranch house, which faced his own, almost a mirror image. The two places dated back to the nineteenth century, when old Angus McKetrick and his four sons had still ridden the sprawling acres of the Triple M, though of course some modern conveniences had been added over the generations since. "You leave the girls home alone?" he asked, referring to Rance's young daughters, Rianna and Maeve.

"Emma's there," Rance said with a slight and faintly goofy smile. "She's making supper. You're welcome to join us if you want to."

Keegan felt bereft in that moment. He wanted to say yes, be part of a family, if only for an hour or two, but at the same time he wondered if he could cope with the contrast between his cousin's life and his own. "I might," he said to be polite, but he knew he wouldn't go, and Rance probably did, too.

Rance let the reins drop so the horse could graze on Keegan's lawn, which needed cutting. "What's this about Thayer's girlfriend moving in with Psyche?" he asked. "In the first place, I didn't know Thayer ever had a girlfriend."

Keegan shoved a hand through his hair. He'd been all-fired anxious to hash things out with Rance or Jesse or both of them, and had rushed outside when he'd seen his cousin crossing the shallow part of the creek. Now he wasn't sure how to put the whole thing into words. "He cheated on Psyche from day one," Keegan said after unclamping his back teeth. As kids, he and Psyche had made a

playground pact to get married when they grew up, and have a big family. If she hadn't been dying, he'd have grinned at the memory.

"I didn't know that," Rance replied quietly. He'd known about the pact, though. He and Jesse had teased Keegan unmercifully back in the day, but they'd been as smitten as he was. "I'd have blacked the bastard's eyes if I had."

Keegan recalled the night he'd run into Thayer and Molly, caught them sneaking around behind Psyche's back, and felt the same clench in the pit of his stomach as he had then. It had been part rage, that feeling, but part something else, too. Something he'd rather not identify.

"She's up to something," he said flatly.

"Like what?" Rance asked.

"I don't know," Keegan admitted after thrusting out an exasperated sigh. "According to Florence, Psyche invited that little viper for a visit. I figure Molly must have manipulated her into it somehow."

Rance arched an eyebrow. "It does seem like an odd arrangement. Mistresses and wives don't generally mix all that well, especially under the same roof." He paused for a beat. "Molly?"

"Molly Shields," Keegan said.

Rance's mouth quirked up at one corner, and a thoughtful smile rose into his eyes, but he didn't say anything.

"Psyche's a rich woman," Keegan reminded his cousin, getting agitated again. "It's got to be a scam."

Rance considered that. "Could be," he said. "Or maybe this—Molly Shields, was it?—maybe she's just looking for a chance to make amends. Psyche's dying. Ms. Shields did her wrong. Isn't it possible she's trying to set things right before it's too late?"

Keegan gave a snort. "Love," he told his cousin, "has softened your head."

Rance chuckled. "That's about all it's softened," he said.

Keegan grinned before he could catch himself. "You're a lucky son of a bitch," he told Rance. "So's Jesse."

"Your turn will come," Rance replied, and he looked dead serious.

"I'm through with marriage," Keegan answered. His ex-wife, Shelley, had cured him of any romantic notions he might have had where love and wedding cake were concerned. He was looking for regular sex of the no-strings-attached variety.

"I thought I was, too," Rance said. He looked back over one shoulder toward his own place, and the pull of Emma's presence was visible, for a fraction of a second, in the way he stood, leaning a little toward home.

"Pure luck," Keegan reiterated.

"Come on over and have supper with us," Rance urged, turning back to face Keegan again.

Keegan shook his head. "Not tonight," he said.

Rance clasped Keegan's shoulder briefly with one newly calloused hand. "I know it's hard on you," he said. "Psyche coming home to die and all. But she's not stupid, Keeg. If she asked that Shields woman here for a visit, she's got something in mind. You been to see her yet? Psyche, I mean?"

Again Keegan shook his head. Swallowed hard and looked away before meeting Rance's steady gaze once more. "I'm going there tomorrow, for lunch."

Rance nodded in solemn approval. "You tell Psyche I'll be by later in the week, when she's had more time to settle in."

"I'll tell her."

Rance started to turn away, whistled for the horse. He caught the reins in one hand, put a foot into the stirrup, turned back before mounting up to go back to his woman and his kids. "Keeg?"

Keegan waited.

“If there’s trouble and Psyche needs our help, we’ll give it. You, me and Jesse. In the meantime, try not to let this eat another hole in your stomach lining.”

Until he’d met Emma—known as Echo when she first came to Indian Rock—driving a bright pink Volkswagon with a white dog riding shotgun, Rance had been as committed to McKetrickCo as Keegan was. He’d worn three-piece suits, traveled all over the world driving the hard bargains he was famous for and put in eighteen-hour days when he was in town.

He’d fallen in love, hard and fast, like Jesse before him, and nothing had been the same since. Now here he was, warning Keegan about ulcers.

Keegan was still getting used to the change, and there were times when he thought he never would.

He managed another grin, nodded again. “Take care,” he said.

“Back at you,” Rance replied.

And then he was riding away. Watching him go, Keegan felt about as lonesome as he ever had, and given some of the things he’d been through, that was saying something.

* * *

PSYCHE WATCHED from her bedroom window with a slight, wistful smile as Keegan got out of his car in front of the house, steeled himself in that subtle but unmistakable way she knew so well and opened the front gate.

I should have married him, she thought.

“Keegan’s here,” she told Florence, who had helped her out of her nightgown and into a royal-blue silk caftan for the occasion. She’d actually considered wearing a wig, but in the end she’d decided on a scarf instead. It seemed less pitiful, somehow.

“I’d better get down there and open the door for him, then,” said Florence. “You want me to come back for you?”

Psyche squared her shoulders. Turned to face her old friend. “No,” she replied, summoning up a smile that wouldn’t fool Florence for a moment. “I want to make an entrance.”

Florence smiled back, but tears shimmered in her eyes, too. She nodded once and left.

From the nursery, Psyche could hear Molly’s voice, comically high-pitched as she read Lucas a story. Psyche’s heart pinched; it was hard, withdrawing from her son so he could bond with Molly, but it had to be done. She’d fought the good fight. Psyche had done everything she could to stay alive, but it was a losing battle, and she knew it. Every day she was weaker than the one before. Every day the world seemed a little less real, a little less solid, as though she were retreating from it somehow, dissolving like a wisp of smoke.

She wasn’t even dead yet, she thought, and she already knew what it felt like to be a ghost.

Downstairs the doorbell chimed.

Supporting herself by keeping one hand to the corridor wall, Psyche made her slow way toward the elevator.

When the door opened on the first floor, Keegan was waiting there, quick to offer an arm and a gentle smile. His McKetrick-blue eyes were dark with a sorrow he was trying hard to hide.

Something swelled in Psyche’s throat. Made it impossible to speak.

Keegan took in the caftan and the flowing scarf. “You look as beautiful as ever,” he said.

Psyche knew he was lying, and she blessed him for it, and for giving her a moment to regain her composure. “Stop it, you flattering scoundrel,” she said. Then, with a twinkle, “But not right away.”

He laughed hoarsely and bent to kiss her forehead. He was still gripping her arm, firmly but gently, and when she wavered a little, turning to lead the way to the back sunporch, where Florence had set the table for lunch, he swooped her up into his arms and carried her.

Tears stung her eyes. She had forgotten such gallantry existed.

When they reached the rear of the house Florence was there, arranging snow-white peonies, big as salad plates, in a shimmering crystal bowl.

Psyche gasped at the sight of her favorite flower. It was the third of July, and the last of the peonies in her garden in Flagstaff had been gone for two weeks. “Where on earth did you get those?” she asked Florence, putting a hand to her heart.

“Keegan brought them,” Florence said, sniffing once before resetting her shoulders to their usual proud lines.

Keegan lowered Psyche carefully into one of the chairs at the table. His neck was a little flushed.

Psyche strained to kiss his cheek and gave voice to an earlier thought. “I should have married you, Keegan McKetrick.”

He smiled. “I tried to tell you,” he teased.

“Sit down so I can serve this lunch,” Florence blustered, uncomfortable with all the emotion. “I been slaving in that kitchen all morning long.”

Keegan chuckled, drew back the chair next to Psyche’s and sat.

Florence brought in a tureen of chilled avocado soup and a platter of biscuits first, then one of her complicated and patently delicious salads. In the meantime, Keegan popped the top on the bottle of vintage champagne chilling in the center of the table and poured some into Psyche’s flute, then his own.

“Ambrosia,” Psyche said after taking a sip.

Keegan raised an eyebrow. “Are you supposed to have alcohol with your medication?” he asked.

Psyche laughed and toasted him before raising the glass to her lips again. After swallowing, she retorted cheerfully, “The stuff could kill me.”

Keegan’s smile was gentle, but his eyes were moist. “That’s not funny,” he said.

Psyche reached out and clasped his hand, but just for a moment. She still had some pride, and it was bad enough letting her childhood sweetheart see her as an invalid without his feeling her bony fingers and tremulous grasp. “Yes, it is,” she argued. “And don’t you dare feel sorry for me, Keegan McKetrick. I could not bear that.”

After that, they ate. It gave them something to do, though Psyche suspected Keegan’s appetite was no better than her own, and he, like her, was just going through the motions. Neither of them would have hurt Florence’s feelings for the world.

“I have a favor to ask of you,” Psyche said when they’d both given up and pushed their plates away.

Keegan waited.

Psyche suppressed an urge to lay a hand to his cheek, to tell him not to look so sad, that everything would be all right. Instead, she stared at the peonies for a long time, until they blurred into a misty mass of feathery white.

“Lucas is going to inherit a great deal of money,” she said finally. She sat up very straight and prayed Keegan wouldn’t interrupt, because it would take all she had to say what she had to say, and starting over would probably be impossible. “Except for Florence, there’s nobody in the world I trust as much as you. She’s getting older, though, and when I—when I die, she’s going to Seattle to live with her sister. I made her promise she would. Molly—” Out of the corner of her eye Psyche saw him stiffen at the name, and she rushed to get all the words out. “Molly will raise Lucas, but I’d like you to serve as my executor. See that my son’s estate is protected and preserved.”

“Psyche—”

She raised a hand. “Don’t,” she said. “Let me finish, please.”

He nodded.

“Teach Lucas to ride horseback, Keegan. Teach him not to be afraid. Teach him to play baseball and to—and to be a boy.”

“Let me bring him up, Psyche,” Keegan said, and she knew he meant it, bless his heart.

“He needs a mother,” Psyche insisted.

“You’re his mother,” Keegan replied. “That isn’t going to change.”

Psyche began to cry. Grabbed up a linen table napkin and swabbed at her wet face. “Molly’s going to adopt him,” she said. “As soon as I’m gone. I’ve already made all the preliminary arrangements.”

Keegan frowned. “Why her? Of all people, Psyche, why her?”

Psyche wouldn’t, couldn’t, look at him again. The linen napkin wafted to the stone floor of the porch, and she intertwined her fingers in her lap. “So you knew, then? About Molly and Thayer?”

“I knew,” Keegan confirmed, biting out the words.

“Something good came out of their affair, Keegan,” Psyche said, desperate to make him understand. Lucas would need him in the years to come. Her boy would need a man to help him grow, and Keegan McKetrick was the best one she knew.

She saw the realization dawn in his eyes. They widened, then narrowed.

“She’s his biological mother,” he rasped.

Psyche nodded. “Thayer came to me only a few hours after Lucas was born and told me everything. He begged me not to divorce him—said we could raise Lucas together, as our son, that Molly was willing to give him up. The simple truth is I wanted a child so badly that I agreed.”

“Oh, my God,” Keegan said on a long breath.

“I loved Lucas with all my heart from the first moment I saw him,” Psyche went on, because she was almost out of strength. “I’ve never regretted what I did, not for a moment. I want him to have a good life, Keegan, and you and I both know, that takes more than money. Please—tell me you’ll look after him... .”

Keegan slid out of his chair, crouched beside Psyche, took both her hands in his, held them with a gentleness that tore her heart like paper.

“I give you my word, Psyche,” he said, looking up at her.

She smiled through her tears. Pulled a hand free to stroke his sleek chestnut hair lightly. “McKetrick-true?” she asked.

“McKetrick-true,” he promised.

She sagged with relief and exhaustion, let herself cry against his strong shoulder. “I should have married you,” she said again.

He held her. “Let’s pretend you did,” he replied gruffly. “I’ll take care of your boy, Psyche—just as if we’d made him together.”

Psyche gave a shuddering sob. “Thank you,” she murmured.

As surely as if she’d had the room wired for sound, Florence appeared. “You’re all done in, Miss Psyche,” she said. “Time you rested for a spell.”

Psyche nodded, her head still resting on Keegan’s shoulder.

He stood, lifted Psyche into his arms again. Carried her—not to the elevator, but up the winding staircase at the front of the house. The one she’d come down, in a prom dress, so long ago. He’d been waiting shyly at the bottom that night, in a tuxedo, with a white peony corsage in his hand.

He mounted the second staircase, too, without so much as breathing hard. Florence followed at a slower pace.

When they reached the third floor Molly was standing in the corridor, watching with sad, enormous eyes.

Psyche felt Keegan tense.

Molly stepped aside.

“This way,” Florence said grimly.

Keegan carried Psyche into her room, laid her gently on the bed. Bent to kiss her forehead.

“Don’t forget your promise,” Psyche told him.

“McKetrick-true,” he reminded her. He curved a little finger, and Psyche hooked it with her own.

Then she smiled, closed her eyes and gave herself up to sleep.

* * *

MOLLY WAITED in the hallway outside Psyche's room, longing to disappear but too stubborn to run.

After a few minutes Keegan came out. Stopped when he saw her standing there. Narrowed his gaze.

"Is she—is Psyche all right?" she asked.

He hesitated, took a step toward her, stopped again.

Molly stood her ground.

"Bad news for you," Keegan said in a scathing undertone. "She's still alive."

Fury surged through Molly; trembling violently, she clenched her fists at her sides. If it hadn't been for Lucas, and for poor Psyche, she might have launched herself at him, kicking and slugging.

Psyche's door was closed from inside with an eloquent little snap.

Molly advanced, looked right up into Keegan's outraged face. "Of all the reprehensible things to say!" she whispered.

He grasped her elbow and shuffled her down the hall, well away from Psyche's door—and Lucas's. "You want to hear 'reprehensible,' lady? Reprehensible is sleeping with another woman's husband, then having the gall to move into her house and take over raising her son!"

He's my son! Molly wanted to shout. But of course she didn't. She simply stood there, drawing deep breaths and releasing them slowly until she knew she could address this impossible man without shrieking every word.

Keegan only made matters worse. Jabbing at Molly's collarbone with the tip of one index finger, he growled, "Get ready for the fight of your life, Ms. Shields. Psyche believes she's doing the right thing, the honorable thing, letting you adopt Lucas, because you're his birth mother. But there's one flaw in her logic—one she's too sick and too weak and too damn desperate to see. If you'd really wanted that baby, you wouldn't have signed off on him the way you did."

Molly couldn't have been more stunned if Keegan had struck her a physical blow. She felt light-headed, swayed and reached out to press a hand to the wall of the corridor, so she wouldn't fall.

Keegan was relentless. "I'll stop you any way I can," he said. "You may pull off this—adoption—but I'm the executor of Psyche's estate, and you won't get a plugged nickel of that kid's money, so if you've got a boyfriend waiting in some tropical hideaway for your ship to come in, honey, you'd better just write this con game off as a loss and get on the next bus out of town!"

That did it. Molly drew back her hand, and she would have slapped him, except that he caught her wrist in a hold that was just short of painful.

Tears of dizzying anger and frustration rushed to her eyes. "You—don't—understand," she said, and it was as if someone else had spoken the words, from a distance.

"I understand plenty," Keegan snapped, flinging her hand free. "You're the one who doesn't get it, sugarplum. You're in way over your head here. Go find another gravy train."

Molly rallied. "You listen to me, you obnoxious bastard!" she choked out in a whisper that scraped at her throat like a wad of steel wool. "I'm not a crook, and I'm not some airheaded little bimbo you can bully onto a bus, either!"

He glared at her.

She glared back.

Both of them took deep breaths.

"This isn't over," he said.

"It sure as hell isn't," she replied.

He turned and stormed down the hall to the top of the stairs.

Molly just stood there, leaning against the wall, afraid her legs wouldn't support her if she tried to walk.

When she felt able, she made her way back into the nursery.

Lucas slept, curled into a plump little ball in the middle of his crib, one thumb in his mouth. The windows were closed and latched, but a breeze ruffled his fine spun-gold hair just the same.

Wild thoughts rushed through Molly's head, an onslaught, sweeping all logic and reason before them.

She could snatch him up in her arms, make a run for it.

Disappear.

Empty her bank accounts.

Start over somewhere, with a new name. Dye her hair, and Lucas's, too. Call him Tommy or Johnny...

Stop, she thought.

She couldn't do that to Lucas, or to Psyche.

She couldn't do it to herself.

She moved to the windows, looked down at the street just in time to see Keegan standing beside his car, staring upward. She could have sworn their gazes collided—she actually felt the impact—but of course that was impossible. He'd have no way of knowing which room she was in.

She was certain of one thing, though.

He was going to make trouble.

Molly folded her arms and dug in her heels.

"Bring it on, Mr. McKetrick," she said softly.

In the next moment, with a decisive, angry grace, he got into the Jag, slammed the door and drove away.

Molly waited a few moments, then slipped out of Lucas's room and into her own. Her cell phone was on the dresser, charging.

She unplugged it, punched in a number.

"It's about time you called," her assistant, Joanie Barnes, said. "Where are you?"

"Indian Rock, Arizona," Molly answered, suddenly weary, sagging onto the side of her bed. She'd told Joanie, and everyone else who inquired, that she was attending a writers' conference in Sedona, trolling for promising new authors. Only one person in L.A. knew the truth, and that was her dad.

"You didn't make plane or hotel reservations," Joanie accused. "I know, because I checked. And Fred Ettington said he drove you to the bus station."

Molly sighed, pushed back her hair. Fred ran a car service, and she kept him on retainer to ferry important clients and editors to and fro when they were in L.A. on business. Desperate to get to Arizona and see Lucas, she'd called Fred out of habit, never thinking that he might blab.

Given a do-over, she'd take a taxi.

"Atmosphere," she said brightly.

"What?" Joanie asked.

"The bus. I rode it for atmosphere."

"You can't beat a bus for that," Joanie remarked sarcastically. "And what the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm writing a book," Molly lied.

"Oh," Joanie said, patently unconvinced and making no effort to disguise the fact. "Right."

"How are things going at the office? Any messages?"

"Only about a thousand," Joanie retorted. "Godridge didn't make the bestseller lists, and he's threatening to sign with some New York agent. And then there's Davis. He's called about fifty times, frantic because he keeps getting your voice mail."

Molly closed her eyes. Denby Godridge—"God" for short, at least around the office—was a grizzled old Pulitzer Prize winner with a major attitude and steadily declining book sales. She could handle him, though she didn't relish the prospect. Davis Jerritt was another client—and another

matter. His horror-suspense novels were runaway bestsellers, and the work in progress featured a psychotic stalker. A former actor, Dave liked to get into character when he was writing, and Molly had been selected to play the stalkee.

“Tell him I’m dead,” she said.

“Davis or God?” Joanie quipped.

Molly sighed again. “Look—I can’t explain right now, but there are some things I have to handle, so I’m going to be out of the loop for a while.” Like, forever. She paused, searching for words, and finally settled on a partial truth, strictly as a last resort. “I think I might need a lawyer.”

Chapter 3

UNTIL HE DROVE INTO TOWN the next morning and saw the carnival setting up in the vacant lot behind the supermarket, Keegan had forgotten, first, that it was Saturday and, second, that it was the Fourth of July. Later there would be a community picnic and barbecue at the park, and when it got dark enough, the fireworks would begin.

Muttering, he reached for his cell phone and speed-dialed Shelley’s number in Flagstaff. He’d promised to call Devon the night before, so they could make plans to spend the weekend together in the Triple M, but because of the situation with Psyche and Molly Shields, he’d neglected to do it.

“Hi, Dad,” Devon said eagerly.

“Hi, babe,” Keegan replied, pulling over to the side of the road, across from Echo’s Books and Gifts and the Curl and Twirl, so he could concentrate on the conversation with his daughter. “Got your bags packed? I can be there in forty-five minutes.”

There was short, pulsing silence. Then, “Mom said you forgot me. That’s why you didn’t call.”

Keegan grasped the steering wheel tightly with his free hand. “I blew it big-time, Devon,” he replied, “and I’m sorry. But you’re my best girl, and I could never forget you. I’ll explain on the drive down here from Flag, okay?”

“Okay,” Devon answered, brightening a little.

“On my way,” Keegan said.

“I’ll be waiting,” Devon promised.

And she was. Long-legged and gangly, with blondish-brown hair reaching to the middle of her back and huge brown eyes, she sat on the steps in the portico at Shelley’s, an overnight bag and a giant pink teddy bear beside her.

Seeing Keegan pull up, she leaped to her feet and snatched up the bag and the bear to hustle toward his car.

Behind her the front door opened, and Shelley stepped out. She was a beautiful woman, and someday Devon would look just like her. A one-time flight attendant for an upscale charter jet outfit, as well as a former Playboy centerfold, Shelley had a face and body that were categorically perfect. Unfortunately, her personality wasn’t.

Shit, Keegan thought. He’d hoped to avoid his ex-wife.

Hell, he’d been trying to do that since about an hour after he married her.

He got out of the car, came around to meet Shelley while Devon stowed her gear in the backseat of the Jag, then jumped in on the passenger side up front to buckle her seat belt.

“She waited all evening for you to call,” Shelley said. She was wearing a skimpy tank top and jean shorts with frayed hems—designer stuff, probably, made to look as though it came from a discount store.

Keegan thrust out a sigh. “You could have called me, you know.”

“It’s not my job to monitor your schedule,” Shelley retorted.

Conscious of Devon watching them through the windshield, Keegan kept his temper. “I should have called,” he said tersely. “I didn’t. Shoot me.”

Shelley smiled bitterly. “Oh, I’d love to shoot you, Keegan. If only there weren’t that troublesome little matter of prison, I probably would.”

Keegan unclamped his back molars by an act of will. “Sucks to be you,” he said.

“You wish,” she retorted. “Thanks to our divorce settlement, and Rory, it’s really pretty excellent to be me.”

“I’m so happy for you,” Keegan told her.

She grinned. “No, you’re not,” she countered.

“You don’t miss much, do you?”

“Bite me, Keegan.”

“That’s Rory’s job, thank God.”

Shelley’s saucy little smirk faded to a pout. “Rory and I want to live in Paris,” she said. “I surfed the internet and found a wonderful boarding school for Devon.”

It wasn’t the first time Shelley had mentioned moving to Paris, but the boarding school was a new element. “You and Rory can go live in Riyadh, for all I care,” Keegan told her. “But you’re not taking my daughter out of the U.S. Period.”

“She’s not your daughter,” Shelley said.

Keegan felt nothing for Shelley, but the words struck his solar plexus like a ramrod, just the same. He stole a glance in Devon’s direction. It would have been impossible for her to overhear, but for all he knew, the kid read lips. Thank God she was smiling blissfully at the prospect of a weekend on the Triple M.

“We were legally married when Devon was born,” he said evenly. “Unless you want to go on TV and let Maury Povich announce the results of a DNA test to the nation, you’re up shit creek and the paddle’s miles downstream.”

Shelley glared.

“I guess Rory could adopt her,” Keegan went on, having no intention of letting that happen while he still had a pulse, “but it would mean the end of the child support, wouldn’t it?”

“I freaking hate you, Keegan McKetrick.”

He chucked her chin, because he knew it would piss her off. “Right back at you, kiddo,” he said. Another glance at Devon told him the kid was worried. He smiled at her, then gave Shelley a jaunty wave and turned his back on her.

“Fuck you, Keegan,” Shelley told him.

He faced her again, smiled warmly, for Devon’s sake, and kept his voice low. “We might still be married,” he said, “if you’d limited yourself to that. Sleeping with me, I mean. But that would have cramped your style, wouldn’t it, Shell?”

“Like you were so perfect,” Shelley challenged, but she’d pulled in her horns a little.

“Nice talking to you,” he said. Then he opened the door on the driver’s side and slipped behind the wheel.

Shelley stood watching from the portico as they drove away, her face like a gathering storm.

“I don’t want to go to Paris,” Devon told him.

Startled, Keegan gave her a sidelong glance. Maybe she’d heard all or part of his conversation with Shelley after all. God, he hoped not.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said.

They pulled out onto a quiet, tree-lined street, in one of the best neighborhoods in Flagstaff. Despite her coffee-tea-or-me experience with the airline and the centerfold, Shelley probably would have been renting a single-wide in some trailer park if it hadn’t been for him. She had the financial instincts of a crack addict.

“I can’t speak French,” Devon told him.

He reached across to squeeze her shoulder, found it stiff with tension. “You’re not going to France,” he said.

“Mom says it’s romantic. Paris, I mean. She gets all dreamy when she talks about it. She and Rory are going to hold hands in the rain.”

Keegan suppressed a sigh. Rory worked as a personal trainer. Shelley didn't work at all. If she and Rory got married, there would be no more alimony, and she'd have to sell the fancy house and split the proceeds with her pesky ex, settlement notwithstanding.

All of which meant he wouldn't be shopping for a wedding gift anytime soon. Damn it.

"I've been thinking, Dev," he said, stepping carefully into a delicate subject. "How would you feel about coming to live with me on the ranch? Permanently, I mean?"

"Mom won't let me," Devon answered, and out of the corner of his eye Keegan saw her shrink in on herself, shoulders stooped, chin lowered to rest in the pink fluff on top of the teddy bear's head. She had a death grip on the stuffed animal, both arms locked around it. "She needs the child support."

Keegan's stomach clenched like a fist. "She told you that?"

"I heard her and Rory talking."

Silently Keegan cursed his ex-wife and her muscle-brained boyfriend. "She loves you, sweetheart. You know that."

Devon shrugged. "Whatever." After a short silence, she added, "They fight a lot."

It was all Keegan could do not to pull a U-turn in the middle of the street, speed back to the house and confront Shelley, back-to-the-wall style. "Is that right?" he asked carefully. Moderately.

Inside, he seethed.

He'd talked to Travis Reid, who was his attorney as well as a friend, about suing Shelley for full custody. Travis figured things would get ugly if he did, and most of the fallout would come down on Devon.

"About money," Devon went on, mercifully oblivious to the turmoil going on inside the man she believed to be her father. "That's mostly what they fight about. Rory wants to get married, but Mom says they'll be broke if they do."

Keegan's sinuses burned, and the backs of his eyes stung. He drew a deep breath. "You like this Rory yahoo?"

Another shrug of shoulders too small to carry the burden of two parents who despised each other, plus a boyfriend. "He's all right," Devon said.

"You aren't going to any boarding school in Paris," Keegan told her. It wasn't much in the way of consolation, but it was all he had to give at the moment.

"You promise?"

"As God is my witness," Keegan said.

Devon quirked a grin. "Scarlett O'Hara said that in *Gone with the Wind*."

"Okay." Honesty time—the kid had enough deception to deal with. "I didn't see the movie."

"There's a book, Dad." She imparted this information gently.

"I know that, shortstop."

"Did you read it?"

He laughed. God, it felt good to laugh. How long had it been?

"Is there a quiz?"

Devon released her grasp on the bear long enough to slug him affectionately on the upper arm. "No, silly," she said. Then, in that confounding way of females, heading full steam in one emotional direction and suddenly hairpinning into a one-eighty, her eyes filled with tears. "How come you don't like Mom?"

For the second time that day Keegan pulled off onto the side of the road. He laid both hands on the wheel, deliberately splayed his fingers to keep from making fists; any reference to Shelley had that effect on him, and it was time he got the hell over it. "We've discussed this before, Dev," he said. "When people get divorced, they tend to be mad about it for a while."

"You and Mom were mad before you got divorced," Devon pointed out.

Keegan sighed. It was true. He'd been twenty-four when he married Shelley—stupid and horny, on the outs with Psyche. Out to prove God knew what.

“I’m sorry, Dev,” he said. “I’m really sorry for everything we put you through.”

“People shouldn’t get married if they don’t like each other.”

For some strange reason, Molly Shields flashed into his mind. “You’re right,” Keegan replied. “They should like each other first. Be friends.”

“Did Uncle Jesse like Cheyenne?”

Keegan considered. “I think he did.”

“Even when they first met?”

“They had some rocky times, but, yeah, I think they were friends.”

“Before they fell in love?”

“Before they fell in love.”

“Uncle Rance and Emma, too?”

A bleak sensation passed through Keegan’s spirit, cold and hollow. “Them, too,” he said.

Devon beamed. “So you just have to find some woman you like, and be sure you’re friends, and then you can get married.”

“It’s not that simple, Dev.”

“Sure it is,” she said.

“You’d like that? If I got married again?”

“If she was nice to me, like Emma is to Rianna and Maeve. They like her a lot. She lets them help in the bookstore, just like they were grown-ups. And they get to try on her shoes, too. She has lots of shoes.”

“So does your mom,” Keegan suggested, at a loss.

“She won’t let me try them on, though,” Devon said.

“There’s something to be said for wearing your own,” Keegan reasoned, baffled. “Isn’t there?”

“It’s not as much fun,” Devon explained. “How many ten-year-olds do you know with high heels?”

“You’re too young for high heels.”

Devon rolled her eyes. “Dad, you’re such a guy.”

He grinned. “Yeah,” he said. “And you’re stuck with me for the duration, kid. Furthermore, I don’t own a single pair of high heels.”

She laughed, and the sound rang in the confines of that car like the peal of a bell from some country church steeple.

Keegan shifted the Jag back into gear, checked the rearview and pulled out onto the road again. “You hungry?”

“Starved,” Devon said, sucking in her cheeks in a comical effort to look emaciated. “Mom’s a terrible cook, and Rory won’t eat anything but trail mix.”

“I guess I saved you from a terrible fate—breakfasting at Casa de Idiot.”

Devon giggled again, and Keegan wondered why it made his vision blur for a moment.

They stopped at a pancake house, stuffed themselves with waffles. Keegan would have preferred to keep the conversation light, but he’d promised to explain why he hadn’t called Devon the night before, as agreed, and she pressed the issue.

He told her about Psyche. How they’d been friends since they were little kids, and now she was really sick. He’d gone to visit Psyche, he told Devon, and he’d been so upset when he left her, he hadn’t been able to think of much else.

Devon’s eyes rounded. “Is she going to die?”

Keegan swallowed. “Yes,” he said.

Devon slid out of the booth, rounded the end of the table and squeezed in beside Keegan. Laying her head against his arm, she murmured. “I’m sorry, Dad.”

Keegan’s throat closed. He blinked a couple of times.

“You want to cry, huh?” Devon asked softly.

He didn't dare answer.

"Poor Daddy. It's hard to be a man, isn't it?"

He swallowed. Nodded.

"Do you wish you'd married Psyche?"

The question surprised him so much that he turned and stared down into his daughter's—his daughter, by God—upturned and innocent little face. "No," he said. "I don't wish that."

"Why not?"

He managed a smile. "Because I wouldn't have you," he told her. "And that's something I can't imagine."

"Know something, Dad?"

"What?"

"I love you."

He kissed her forehead, held her close against his side. "I love you, too, monkey," he croaked. They just sat there like that, side by side in a restaurant booth, for a while. "You had enough of those waffles?" he asked finally.

She nodded. "Let's hit the trail."

He laughed. "We're out of here."

* * *

MOLLY PAUSED outside the bookshop, peering through the display window at the latest bestsellers. Two of her authors were represented—unfortunately, neither of them was Denby Godridge. She dreaded calling the arrogant old tyrant—smoothing his ruffled feathers would take a lot of emotional energy—but she would have to do it. And soon.

Lucas, sitting in his stroller, reached up and laid a hand on the glass, making a little-boy smudge. While Molly was scrambling for a tissue to wipe it clean, the bookshop door opened and a woman peeked out, smiling. She was blond and about Molly's age, and warmth glowed in her eyes.

"Emma Wells," the woman said, putting out a hand and holding the door open with one slender hip.

"Molly Shields," Molly answered, shaking the offered hand.

"Come in," Emma said. "I just made fresh coffee, and I promise, you don't have to buy anything."

Molly smiled. Since her arrival in Indian Rock she'd met exactly three people besides Lucas: Psyche, Florence and Keegan McKetrick. Her relationship with Thayer precluded friendship with all three of them, though Psyche had been kind. Molly was a woman with an active social life, a mover and a shaker, and she missed the buzz, the power lunches, the parties-with-a-purpose.

Since she'd boarded the bus in L.A., though, she'd become a person she didn't know how to be.

"I'd like some coffee," she said. "And I might even buy a book."

Emma laughed and stepped back to admit her.

The shop was small and cozy, brightly lit. Two little dark-haired girls played in the children's section, clomping around in high heels selected from a massive pile.

The sight did something strange to Molly. Filled her with a nameless, bittersweet yearning so strong that she clasped the handle on Lucas's stroller hard to steady herself.

Meanwhile Emma crouched to smile at Lucas. "Hey, there, handsome," she said. "What's your name?"

"It's Lucas," Molly told her.

The little girls clomped over to inspect him.

"I'm Rianna," the smaller one said. "And this is my sister, Maeve. We've got a dog, but he's at the vet, getting neutered. He has to stay there till Tuesday." She looked up into Molly's face, her expression earnest. "Does Lucas like dogs?"

"I don't know," Molly said.

“Our dog’s name is Scrapers, and he doesn’t bite. Dad got him at the pound when Snowball had to go home with her real owners.”

Scrapers. Snowball. There was obviously a story here, but Molly couldn’t guess what it was.

She didn’t know any children. Was this the kind of thing they liked to talk about? She glanced hopefully at Emma, who was still on her haunches, admiring Lucas. Her pink skirt fluffed out around her in a spill of soft material. “That’s really nice,” she said.

Before Molly could figure out what was really nice, the conversation hit a snag.

“How come you don’t know if your own little boy likes dogs?” Rianna asked, clearly concerned.

“Lucas and I are . . . just getting to know each other,” Molly said awkwardly.

“Enough questions,” Emma told the child gently, straightening. Her expression was solemn as she regarded Molly. “How about that coffee I promised?”

Molly nodded gratefully. “Thanks,” she said.

“Do you take sugar and cream?”

“Black, please,” Molly answered.

Rianna and Maeve went back to their shoe pile.

Lucas fidgeted, wanting out of the stroller.

Emma went up the back stairs.

Molly was just standing there, minding her own business and waiting for Emma to come back with the coffee, when the shop door banged open behind her.

A girl-child dashed in, long butternut hair flowing behind her. “Shoes!” she yelled.

Molly smiled—until she saw the man coming through the doorway in the little girl’s wake.

Keegan.

McKetrick.

“I do read, you know,” Molly said defensively, to explain her presence.

Keegan’s jaw tightened, but he didn’t say anything.

Molly flushed, furious with herself. It was free country, for Pete’s sake. She didn’t need a reason to be in a bookstore.

Keegan crouched in front of the stroller, much as Emma had done a few minutes before. “Hey, buddy,” he said.

“Hey, buddy,” Lucas echoed.

Keegan smiled at that, and Molly was thunderstruck by the effect of it. The man’s whole countenance changed when he wasn’t being a judgmental hard-ass. There might even be a human being in there somewhere, behind all that attitude.

As if he felt her gaze on him, Keegan looked up.

The second Ice Age arrived instantly.

“Does Psyche know you’re here?” he asked, rising to his full height.

Molly’s face heated. “No,” she snapped, keeping her voice down because of Lucas and the three little girls parading around in Emma’s high-heeled shoes. “I thought we’d make a break for it, Lucas and I. I plan to push his stroller overland. We’ll travel by night and sleep in trees during the day.”

He chuckled, and the sound was even more disconcerting than the smile had been.

Molly was still getting over it when Emma returned with the coffee.

“Keegan!” she cried, and stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek.

“Tell me you’ve come to your senses,” Keegan teased. “You’re dumping Rance and marrying me.”

Molly, standing on the edge of the encounter, wondered what it would be like to know this other Keegan.

Emma handed Molly a ceramic mug filled with fresh coffee, but she was looking at Keegan. Smiling. “You’re a shameless flirt,” she accused.

The little girl who'd come in with Keegan high-heeled it over to Molly. "Do you like shoes?" she asked.

"I have a closetful," Molly said, confused.

"I'm Devon," the child told her. "Devon McKettrick. This is my dad."

Molly smiled stiffly. "Hello, Devon," she responded, glancing at Keegan. "My name is Molly Shields. Your dad and I have already met."

"She has a lot of shoes," Devon told her father.

"Go play," Keegan answered.

Devon didn't move. She looked down at Lucas, then up at Molly. "Is this your little boy?"

Molly didn't know how to answer.

"Go and play, Devon," Keegan repeated.

"I'm just trying to find out if she's on the market," Devon told him.

Emma laughed.

Keegan's neck reddened.

"Are you married?" Devon persisted, turning back to Molly, keen as a prosecutor pursuing a point of law in a courtroom.

"Devon," Keegan warned.

"No," Molly said nervously. "No, I'm not married."

"But you have a baby?"

Keegan awaited her answer.

Emma shuffled Devon off to join the other kids at the shoe-fest.

"What's with that kid and shoes?" Molly asked, to forestall the sarcastic remark Keegan had surely been planning to make.

"It's a fixation, hopefully temporary," Keegan said. "How's Psyche?"

Molly sighed, saddened. "Weak. She's hoping to attend the Fourth of July picnic and stay for the fireworks, though."

Pain flashed in Keegan's eyes. He started to say something, then stopped.

Molly felt compelled to speak, even though she knew it would have been better to hold her tongue. "Florence and I both thought she should rest," she said, "but Psyche's got her heart set on joining the celebration. So we're bringing her."

Keegan considered the plan in silence, probably disapproving.

Molly pushed the stroller over to the counter and set the coffee mug down. "I guess Lucas and I had better be getting back," she said. She smiled at Emma. "Thank you."

"Come back soon," Emma said, looking puzzled.

Keegan held the door open so Molly could push the stroller out onto the sidewalk. Was he being courteous, or did he just want to get rid of her as quickly as possible?

He followed her outside. "Molly?"

She turned, frowning.

"I could give you and the boy a ride back to Psyche's," he said.

"Do you have a car seat?" Molly heard herself ask. As if she'd get in a car with Keegan McKettrick, after the way he'd treated her.

He shook his head.

"We'll walk, then," Molly said righteously.

It gave her some satisfaction to march off down the street without once looking back.

But not much.

* * *

SEATED ON THE FRONT PORCH swing, Psyche watched through the screen as Molly pushed Lucas up the walk. He'd fallen asleep in the stroller, hunkered down, with his head lolling to one side.

“They’re bonding,” she said to Florence, who was setting out a light lunch on the small wrought-iron patio table.

Florence grumbled as she poured lemonade into chilled glasses, one for Psyche, one for Molly and one for herself.

“Give her a chance, Florence,” Psyche pleaded softly.

“She’s probably some kind of crook,” Florence whispered. “Keegan thinks so, and so do I.”

“Well, you’re both full of sheep-dip,” Psyche said. “I had Molly’s background checked. Do you think I’d hand my baby over to some stranger?”

“No telling what you’d do,” Florence grouched.

“Hush,” Psyche said, but gently. She’d been younger than Lucas when Florence had joined the family, pushed up her sleeves and put Psyche’s topsy-turvy world to rights. Her parents, both alcoholics, had been content to donate money from a distance and leave their only child’s upbringing to a person they referred to, on the rare occasions they referred to Florence at all, as “the domestic.”

Molly stopped at the bottom of the porch steps, crouched to unbuckle Lucas’s safety strap, hoisted him into her arms. He rested his head on her shoulder and snoozed on.

Molly carried Lucas up the steps with an ease Psyche envied.

There were so many simple things she couldn’t do anymore.

“Here,” Florence said, reaching out for Lucas. “I’ll put the little guy down for his nap. He can have lunch later.”

“Let Molly do it, Florence,” Psyche said.

Molly gripped Lucas a little more tightly and made for the door.

Florence stepped out of the way, but only at the last possible moment.

“She’s a stranger,” the older woman insisted, once Molly was well inside and she’d closed the heavy door. “Whether you paid a bunch of fancy detectives to investigate her or not!”

“Nonsense,” Psyche replied, sitting down at the table and reaching for her lemonade with an unsteady hand. “She’s Lucas’s mother.”

“You’re Lucas’s mother,” Florence said staunchly.

Psyche shook her head. “I’m a ghost,” she said pensively. The lemonade was ice-cold and struck just the right balance between sour and sweet. She relished the taste, though she knew it would probably make her violently ill later on. Almost everything she ate or drank did. Calling a halt to the chemotherapy hadn’t relieved her of the nausea.

“Don’t you talk that way!” Florence scolded, shaking a finger under Psyche’s nose the way she had when she was a little girl, tracking in mud from the backyard or fidgeting in church.

“Why not?” Psyche asked, nibbling at a corner of a little sandwich with smoked salmon and cream cheese inside. “It’s the truth.”

“I’ve never heard such silliness!” Florence ranted on. “You’re as alive as I am. As alive as anybody.”

“No, I’m not. It’s strange, Florence, but the grass seems greener than I’ve ever seen it, and the sky is bluer. I hear every bird, every bug rubbing its wings together in the flower beds. And yet there’s something—remote about it all. As though I’m...receding into another place.”

Florence, reaching for a sandwich of her own, suddenly bent her head, curved her always-straight shoulders inward and began to sob.

“I can’t bear it,” she cried. “Why isn’t it me that’s dying? I’ve lived my life—”

“Shh,” Psyche told her, rising to stand beside Florence, put an arm around her and kissed the top of her head. “It’s all right.”

“It isn’t all right!” Florence fumed. “It’s a damn shame, is what it is! It isn’t fair!”

“You were the one who told me life isn’t fair, so we oughtn’t to expect it to be,” Psyche soothed. “Remember?”

Florence looked up, her beloved face ravaged by grief. “You’re like my own child, my own baby girl... .”

Psyche’s heart turned over. “I know,” she said. “I know.”

“Look at me, carrying on!” Florence boomed, straightening her shoulders, picking up a table napkin and swabbing at her tears. “You need me to be strong, and I’m falling apart like an old potato sack with its seams bursting.”

“It’s all right,” Psyche repeated.

The door opened again, and Molly stood on the threshold, looking as though she didn’t know whether to join Psyche and Florence or dash back into the house.

“Come and sit down, Molly,” Psyche said. “I want to hear all about your walk with Lucas.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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