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Vintage *Cherish*

The M.D. She Had To Marry

CHRISTINE RIMMER

Mills & Boon Vintage Cherish

Christine Rimmer

The M.D. She Had To Marry

«HarperCollins»

Rimmer C.

The M.D. She Had To Marry / C. Rimmer — «HarperCollins»,
— (Mills & Boon Vintage Cherish)

MARRY IN CONVENIENCE...All her adult life Lacey Bravo had loved Logan Severance, but the good doctor—always hell-bent on doing the right thing—had never even made an improper advance toward her. Well, maybe one, about nine months ago. So the about-to-be single mom knew Logan would come after her, demanding marriage. It was just a question of when....LOVE IN LEISURE?Logan knew, the minute Lacey answered the door, stomach-first, that she had to marry him. But first things first—there was a baby to be born! There’d be time enough afterward to convince her that what began out of necessity could turn into love. And to convince himself, as well...

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“This baby changes everything, Lace.”

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Tenderness welled in her. He had traveled such a long way, and he wasn't going to get what he came for—what he would say he wanted.

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She clasped her hands beneath the hard swell of her belly. “Your idea of the right thing and mine are not the same, Logan.”

The M.D. She Had to Marry

Christine Rimmer



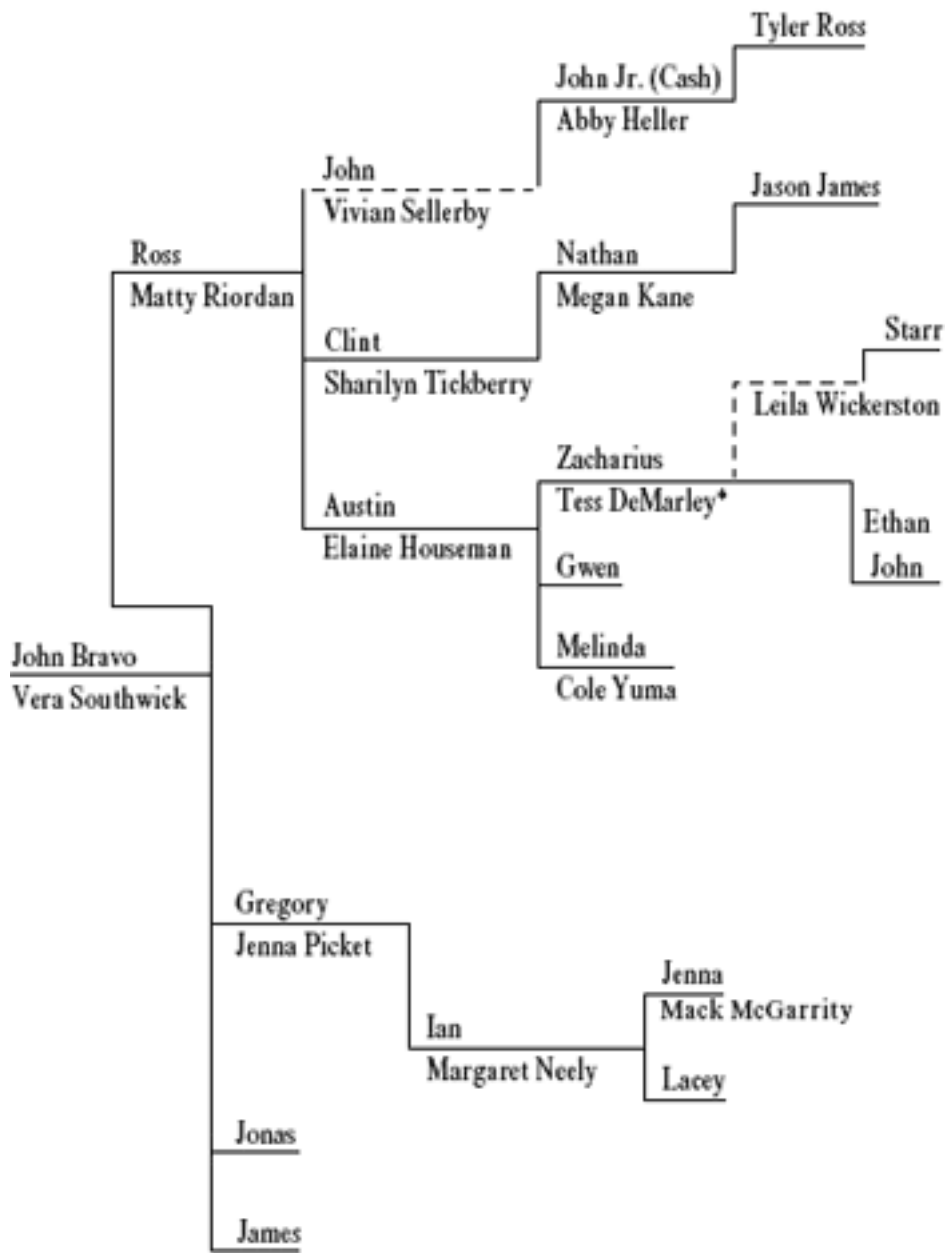
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For Auralee Smith,
my mom, who's already had
one or two dedicated to her.
But such a terrific mom should get
grateful dedications on a regular basis.
I love you, Mom.
Here's to you...again.

CHRISTINE RIMMER

came to her profession the long way around. Before settling down to write about the magic of romance, she'd been an actress, a sales clerk, a janitor, a model, a phone sales representative, a teacher, a waitress, a playwright and an office manager. Now that she's finally found work that suits her perfectly, she insists she never had a problem keeping a job—she was merely gaining “life experience” for her future as a novelist. Those who know her best withhold comment when she makes such claims; they are grateful that she's at last found steady work. Christine is grateful, too—not only for the joy she finds in writing, but for what waits when the day's work is through: a man she loves who loves her right back and the privilege of watching their children grow and change day to day. She lives with her family in Oklahoma.

THE BRAVOS



(Broken lines indicate previous marriages)
* One child from a previous marriage: Jobeth

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Chapter One

On a sunny afternoon at the end of June, Lacey Bravo returned to the old homesteader's cabin behind the horse pasture at the Rising Sun Ranch to find Dr. Logan Severance waiting for her.

She had known he would come. Still, the sight of him, there in the shade of the rough-shingled overhang that served as the cabin's front porch, sent her pulse racing. Her palms on the steering wheel went clammy with sweat. She felt pulled in two directions at once. Her foolish heart urged her to rush into his arms. And something else, some contrary creature inside her, wanted only to spin her new SUV around and speed away, leaving nothing but a high trail of Wyoming dust in her wake.

Neither action was really an option. Throwing herself into his arms would only embarrass them both. And as for running, well, Lacey had done plenty of that before she was even out of her teens. Eventually, she'd given it up. It never solved anything.

With a weary sigh, Lacey pushed the door open and maneuvered herself out from behind the wheel and down to the ground. She shut the door. Then, with as much dignity as she could muster, given that lately she tended to waddle like a duck, she plodded to the rear of the vehicle to get the two bags of groceries she had picked up in town.

She barely got the back door up before Logan was at her side. "I'll take those for you."

Her initial reaction was to object, to lift her chin high and announce haughtily, "I can carry my own groceries, thank you."

But she stifled the impulse. There would be dissension enough between them. There always had been. And now, with the baby coming, the opportunities for argument would no doubt be endless. Better to keep her mouth shut whenever possible.

His dark gaze swept over her. She wore a tent-like denim jumper, a pink T-shirt and blue canvas ballerina flats.

Ballerina. Hah. An image from an old Disney movie, of a hippo in ballet shoes and a tutu, flitted through her mind.

No, she was not at her best. And he looked great. Terrific. Fit and tanned, in khaki pants and a cream-colored polo shirt. He looked like a model on the cover of a Brooks Brothers catalog—and she looked like someone who'd eaten a beach ball for lunch. She knew she shouldn't let that bother her. But it did.

"Hasn't your doctor told you that at this point in your pregnancy, you shouldn't be driving?"

She gritted her teeth and granted him the tiniest of shrugs.

"Is that a 'yes'?"

Lacey exerted superhuman effort and did not roll her eyes. "Yes, Doctor. That is a 'yes'."

He made a low, exasperated sound. "Then what are you doing behind the wheel of a car?"

"I treasure my independence."

The words may have sounded flippant, but Lacey did mean them. Doc Pruitt, who ran the clinic in the small nearby town of Medicine Creek, had been nagging her to avoid driving. And Tess, her cousin's wife, who lived in the main ranch house not a half a mile away, would have been glad to take Lacey wherever she needed to go. But to Lacey, a car—and the possession of the keys to it—meant self-determination. Never would she willingly give that up.

Except, perhaps, for the love of this man.

But not to worry. Her independence was safe. Logan's heart was otherwise engaged.

"Lacey," he said, in the thoroughly superior tone that had always made her want to throw something at him. "There are times in life when independence has to take a back seat to necessity. It's not good for you, or the baby, for you to—"

"Logan, can we at least get inside before you start telling me everything I'm doing wrong?"

He blinked. Maybe it actually occurred to him that he'd started criticizing her before he'd even bothered to say hello. Whatever. Without another word, he scooped her grocery bags into his big arms and turned toward the cabin. Lacey was left to shut the rear door and trudge along in his wake, across the bare dirt yard, past the dusty midnight-blue luxury car he had driven there and up the two rickety steps to the cabin's front entrance. On the porch, he stood aside for her to open the door. Then she moved out of his way to let him go first.

They entered the main living area, which was small and dark and simply furnished. Lacey loved the cabin—had loved it on sight. Though the light was never good enough to paint by, the rough plank walls pleased her artist's eye. And the layers of shadow were interesting, dark and intense in the corners, fading out to a pleasant dimness in the center of the room. Beyond the main room, there was a small sleeping nook in the northeast corner and a bathroom in a lean-to outside the back door.

Logan didn't seem to share her admiration for her rustic surroundings. His dismissing glance flicked over the stained sink, the old iron daybed bolstered to double as a sofa, and the faded curtain that served as a door to the sleeping nook.

He dipped his head at the grocery bags. "Where do you want these?"

Lacey moved to clear a space on the old pine table, shifting a stack of books, a sketch pad, a box of pastels and some pencils to one of the four ladderback chairs. "Right here." She pulled the chain on the bulb suspended over the table. The resulting wash of light was harsh, but functional.

Logan moved forward and slid the groceries onto the table, then stepped back. They regarded each other. She saw that there were circles under those fine dark eyes of his.

Was it only the severity of the light? No. Now that she stared directly at him, she could see more than irritated disapproval in the sculpted planes of his face. She saw weariness. Reproach and concern were there, too.

She cleared her throat and spoke gently. "Did you drive all the way from California?"

He shook his head. "I flew out of Reno. To Denver, where I transferred to a smaller plane, which got me to Sheridan. Then I rented a car for the rest of the trip."

"You must be tired."

His mouth tightened. She read the hidden meaning in his expression. He'd come to take care of her, whether she liked it or not. His own comfort was nothing. "I'm fine."

"Well. I'm glad to hear it."

The silence stretched out again. Maybe he was thirsty. "Do you want something to drink?"

He shrugged, then answered with a formality that tugged at her heart. "Yes. Thank you. Something cold would be good."

"Ginger ale?"

"That's fine."

She went to the refrigerator, which was probably a collector's item—it stood on legs and had a coil on top. She took out a can, then turned to the cabinet over the one tiny section of counter.

"Never mind a glass," he said. "Just the can is fine."

She handed it to him across the table, absurdly conscious of the possibility that their fingers might brush in passing. They didn't.

She gestured at the chair in front of him. "Have a seat."

He ignored that suggestion, popped the top on the can and took a long drink.

She stared at his Adam's apple as it bobbed up and down on his strong, tanned throat and tried to ignore the yearning that flooded through her in a warm, tempting wave.

She wanted him.

Even big as a cow with the baby they had created together, she'd have happily sashayed right over to him and put her mouth against that brown throat. With delight, she would have teasingly scraped the skin with her teeth, stuck out her tongue and tasted—

Lacey cut off the dangerous erotic thought before it could get too good a hold on her very healthy imagination. As if she even could sashay, big as she'd grown in the last month or so.

Logan set the ginger ale can on the table. "How long have you been here?"

"Seven weeks."

He waited, clearly expecting her to elaborate. When she didn't, he asked, softly, "Why?"

She looked away, realized she'd done it, and made herself face him again. "Why not? This ranch has been in my family for five generations. My second cousin, Zach, runs the place now."

"That doesn't answer my question. What made you choose to come here?"

"Jenna suggested it." As Lacey said her sister's name, it became clear to her that she'd been avoiding saying it. For her own sake or for Logan's, she couldn't be sure. But the name was out now. And the world hadn't stopped. "She and Mack stayed here for a few weeks last year."

There. She had said both of the dangerous names. Jenna and Mack. The woman Logan loved. And the man who had taken her from him.

Lacey watched for his reaction. If he had one, he wasn't sharing it. His face remained composed. He didn't even blink.

"Jenna knows—about you and me?" His voice was cautious, but resigned.

"Yes."

"She knows that the baby is mine?"

Lacey nodded. "I told her about you and me not too long after it happened—and about the baby a few months ago. She wanted me to go and stay with her and Mack in Florida for the birth."

"Why didn't you?"

Lacey stared at him. Did he really want to hear the answer to that one? Apparently he did, or he would not have been so foolish as to ask.

She shrugged. "I didn't want to intrude on their happiness." Jenna and Mack were like newlyweds, having recently reunited after years apart. "And Jenna is pregnant, too. Her baby is due in September."

Logan glanced down at the table between them. He might have been looking at the bags of groceries, or the empty soda can—or simply not looking at her. "Well," he said, "Jenna always did want lots of kids."

"Yes. She did."

Logan raised that dark gaze once more. "So you came here."

Lacey nodded. "It's peaceful and it's beautiful. And I have family around, ready to help if I need it. It was the perfect place to come and have my baby."

He let a moment of charged silence elapse before announcing, "You should have come to me."

Well, she thought. We're into it now, aren't we? She knew where he was headed, of course. She'd known from the moment she saw him on the front step. And even before that. She'd known what Logan Severance would do from the first day she admitted to herself that she was pregnant—because she knew him.

And she had her refusal, complete with excellent reasons for it, all ready to give to him.

But the thought of hashing through it all made her feel about as tired as he looked. And her back was aching.

If he wanted to stand up for this, fine. He could stand. She'd rather take it sitting down.

Lacey pulled out a chair and lowered herself into it.

Logan waited to speak again until she was settled—and until it became clear that she wasn't going to respond to his last remark. "The baby's due in a week or so, right?"

"Yes." Her shoulders kept wanting to droop. She pulled them back and met his eyes. "Everything's fine. Normal. I got an appointment with the doctor here as soon as I arrived. He's been taking good care of me."

Logan looked irritatingly skeptical. "You've been watching your diet, taking it easy?"

Oh, why did he so often manage to make her feel like some incompetent, irresponsible child? Apparently, old behavior patterns did die hard. In spite of the dramatic shift in their relationship last fall, right that moment the years seemed to peel away. She was the bratty kid with a chip on her shoulder and he was the annoyingly straight-arrow boyfriend of her big sister.

“Lacey. Answer me. Have you been taking care of yourself?”

“Honestly, everything is fine.”

That gained her a disbelieving glare. “Why didn’t you contact me earlier?”

“I contacted you as soon as I could bear to. And if we’re into ‘why didn’t you,’ then why didn’t you call the number I gave you and let me know that you were on your way here?”

“And have you tell me not to come? I don’t think so.”

Her mouth felt so dry all of a sudden. It was one of the many bothersome things about pregnancy. Cravings came on out of nowhere. She wanted water. She could already taste its silky coldness on her tongue. She started to push herself to her feet again.

Logan frowned. “What is it?”

“Nothing. I just want a drink of water, that’s all.”

“I’ll get it.”

“No, don’t bother. I can—”

But he was already striding to the sink. He took a glass from the corner of the counter, rinsed it, and filled it from the tap. Then he carried it to her and held it out.

She looked at the glass and then up, into his eyes. His kindness and concern did touch her. He was a good man, always had been. Much too good for the likes of her. She felt a smile flirting with the corners of her mouth. “You know, until a few years ago, there was no running water or electricity here in the cabin. It cost a bundle, apparently, to run electrical lines and water pipes out here. But my cousin Zach had it done last summer. Pretty convenient, huh? Otherwise, you’d have had to head for the well out back to fill that glass for me.”

“Just drink.” His voice was gruff.

This time, as he passed her the glass, his fingers did brush hers. His fingers were warm. She wondered if hers felt cold to him.

“Thank you.” She drank. It was just what she’d wanted, clear and cool and satisfying as it slid down her throat.

“More?”

She shook her head, set down the glass.

Logan pulled out the chair nearest hers and dropped into it. He braced his elbows on his knees and leaned toward her. The light caught and gleamed in his dark hair.

His eyes were softer now. “I didn’t call when I got your letter because I knew you would only try to talk me into staying away.”

Her smile started to quiver. She bit the corner of her lip to make it stop. “That’s true. I would have.”

“It wouldn’t have worked.”

“I know. You’ll do what you think is right. You always have.” Except during those five days last September, a voice in her mind whispered tauntingly. Then you did things you didn’t approve of. And you did them with me.

He looked down at the rough boards between his feet, then back up at her. “This baby changes everything, Lacey.”

She wanted to touch him. The slight brushing of their fingers a moment before had whetted her appetite for the feel of him. Oh, to simply reach out and run her fingers through that shining dark hair, to trace his brows, to learn again the shape of his mouth.

Tenderness welled in her. He had traveled such a long way and he wasn’t going to get what he came for—what he would say he wanted, what he would call the right thing.

He said it then, as if he had plucked the words right out of her mind. “We have to do the right thing now.”

She sat back in her chair and clasped her hands beneath the hard swell of her belly. “Your idea of the right thing and mine are not the same, Logan.”

He answered her with measured care. “The right thing is the right thing, period.”

“Fine. Whatever. The point is, I’m not going to marry you.”

Chapter Two

Logan had pretty much expected this. He straightened in the chair and kept his voice level and reasonable. “Before you turn me down flat, let’s discuss this a little. You’re in no position to raise a child on your own, and I’m willing to—”

“Logan, I told you. No. It’s a two-letter word meaning negative, out of the question. Uh-uh. Forgetaboutit.” She pushed herself to her feet. “We are not getting married.”

“Why not?”

She stared at him for a moment, then made a show of hitting her forehead with the heel of her hand. “What? You can’t figure that one out for yourself?”

“Spare me the theatrics. Just answer the question. Why not?”

Muttering under her breath, she turned to her groceries, grabbed a box of Wheat Thins in one hand and a can of cocoa mix in the other and started toward the ancient wood-burning stove that crouched against the wall by the front door.

His frustration with her got the better of him. “Sit down,” he commanded.

It was the wrong thing to say, and he knew it. But something about Lacey Bravo tended to bring out the tyrant in him.

Why was that? He had no idea. He considered himself a reasonable, gentle man, as a rule. He was a reasonable, gentle man as a rule. Ask just about anyone who knew him.

Lacey ignored his command. She reached the stove and put the crackers and cocoa mix on the open shelf above it. Then she turned for the table again and shuffled his way, her abdomen heavy and low in front of her—low enough, in fact, to make him suspect that the baby inside her had already dropped toward the birth canal.

It could be less than a week before she brought his child into the world.

They needed to get married.

She reached into the bag again. He stood. “Lace. Stop. You know we have to talk about this.”

She took her hand out of the bag and raked that thick gold hair of hers back from her forehead. “Not about marriage, we don’t.”

“I disagree. I think marriage is exactly what we do need to talk about. I think that—”

She put up both hands, palms out. “Wait. Listen. You’re the baby’s father. And of course, you’ll want to see him or her, to be a part of his life. I understand that and I can accept that. But it really isn’t necessary for you to—”

“It damn well is necessary. You’re having my baby and a baby needs a mother and a father.”

“I told you. The baby will have a mother and a father. They just won’t be married to each other, that’s all.”

“A two-parent home is important to a child.”

“Sometimes a two-parent home isn’t possible.”

“In our case, it’s entirely possible. I want to marry you. We’re both single. I make a good living and I do care for you. I believe that, deep in your heart, you also care for me. I know I’m rough on you sometimes, rougher than I have a right to be. But I’ll work on that, I promise you.”

She said nothing, only looked at him, shaking her head.

He thought of more arguments in his favor. “We have...history together. I feel I really know you, that you really know me. We could build a good life together, I’m sure of it.”

Still, she didn’t speak.

A grotesque thought occurred to him. “Is there another man? Is that it?”

She closed her eyes and sucked in a breath.

He realized that, if there was another man, he didn’t want to know. Which was irrational. Of course, if there was someone else, he needed to know.

He asked again. "Lace? Is there another man?"

"No," she said in a tiny, soft voice. "No one. There hasn't been anyone. Since you. Since quite a while before you, if you want to know the truth."

Relief shimmered through him. "Good. Then there's nothing to stop you from marrying me."

She backed up and let herself down into the chair again. "How can you say that?"

"Lace—"

"No, Logan. I am not going to marry you." She looked up at him, blue eyes glittering in defiance, mulishly determined to do exactly the wrong thing.

Impatience rose in him again. "Why not?"

She glared at him. "You keep asking that. Do you really want an answer? Do you really want me to say it right out?"

He didn't.

But he wasn't about to tell her that. She'd only look at him as if he'd just proved her point.

"Let me put it this way," she said with heavy irony. "If I ever do get married, it won't be to a man who's in love with my big sister."

He tried not to flinch as the words came at him.

And he did realize the opportunity they presented. Now was his chance to tell her firmly that he was not in love with Jenna. But somehow, he couldn't quite get the denial out of his mouth.

Lacey smiled sadly, shook her head some more, and murmured his name in a knowing way that made him want to grab her and flip her over his knee and paddle her behind until she admitted he was right and accepted his proposal. Until she confessed how glad she was that he had come at last, that he was ready, willing and able to make everything right.

Lacey wasn't confessing anything. She said, "I have my own plans. I'm staying here in Wyoming until the baby's born and I'm back on my feet. Then I'll return to L.A."

Absurd, he thought. Impossible. And harebrained, as well. "You can't be serious. There is no way you can support both yourself and a child on what you make working odd jobs and selling a painting every now and then."

"We'll get by. Jenna and I sold our mother's house. I have money put aside from that, and a new car, so the baby and I will be able to get around. In fact, I have everything I need." Her full, soft mouth stretched into a smile—a rather forced one this time. "And besides, I know you'll help out."

He reminded himself that he would not lose his patience again. She had always been like this. Impetuous and wild. Running away whenever things didn't go her way. A virtual delinquent as a teenager, hanging out with all the troublemakers at Meadow Valley High. And then, at twenty, taking off for Los Angeles to study under some famous painter, sure she would "make it" as an artist. Six years had gone by since then. She hadn't made it yet.

Now she proposed to drag his baby to Southern California to scrape and starve right along with her.

It wasn't going to happen. "I'll help out, all right," he said. "We'll get married. You'll live with me. You can paint your paintings in Meadow Valley just as well as in L.A."

"I said no, Logan. And I meant it."

He folded his arms across his chest—mostly to keep himself from reaching out and strangling her. "This isn't last September. You can't just explain to me how I don't love you and I'm only on the rebound from your sister and it's time we both moved on."

"You happened to agree with me last September, in case you've forgotten."

Had he agreed with her? Maybe. He'd been confused as hell last September. Hard to remember now what he had felt then.

Jenna had left with Mack McGarrity.

And then, out of nowhere, her little sister, who had always irritated the hell out of him, showed up on his doorstep, real concern for him in her gorgeous blue eyes and a big chocolate cake in her hands.

“You need chocolate, Dr. Do-Right,” she had said. “Lots of chocolate. And you need it now.”

Dr. Do-Right. He hated it when she called him that. He had opened his mouth to tell her so—and also to tell her to please go away.

But she just pushed past him and kept walking, straight to his kitchen. She put the cake on the counter and began rifling the drawers. It didn’t take her long to find the one with the silverware in it.

“Ah,” she said. “Here we go.” She grabbed a fork, shoved the drawer shut and thrust the fork at him, catching him off guard, so that he took it automatically. “Eat.”

He looked at the fork and he looked at the cake.

Damned if she didn’t know just what he was thinking. “No,” she said. “No plate. No nice little slice cut with a knife. Just stick that fork right in there, just tear off a big, gooey bite.”

He stared at her, stared at her full mouth, at her flushed face, her wide eyes...

And he realized that he was aroused.

Aroused by Jenna’s troublemaking little sister, damned if he wasn’t.

He had set down the fork, backed her up against the counter and spoken right into that deceptively angelic face of hers. “Shouldn’t you be back in L.A. by now?”

Her breathing was agitated, though she tried to play it cool. “I told Jenna I’d take care of things here.”

“I don’t need taking care of.”

She didn’t say anything, just looked at him through those blue, blue eyes.

“You’d better go,” he had warned.

She made a small, tender sound.

And she shook her head.

They ate the cake some time after midnight, both of them nude, standing in the kitchen, tearing into it with a pair of forks, then feeding each other big, sloppy bites.

Lacey shifted in her chair. Logan’s eyes looked far away. She wondered what he was thinking.

He blinked and came back to himself. “I don’t want to analyze last September. It happened. We weren’t as careful as we should have been and now you’re having my baby. You know damn well how I feel about that.”

Yes, she did know. He was just like Jenna. He wanted children. Several children. He also wanted a nice, settled, stay-at-home wife to take care of those children while he was out healing the ills of the world. A wife like Jenna would have been.

In almost every way, Logan and Jenna had been just right for each other. Too bad Jenna had always loved Mack McGarrity.

Logan held out his hand.

Lacey knew that she shouldn’t, but she took it anyway. He pulled her out of the chair. He would have taken her into his arms, but she resisted that.

Her belly brushed him. They both hitched in a quick breath at the contact and Lacey pulled her hand from his.

She turned toward the table, toward the grocery bags still waiting there, thinking that the move might gain her a little much-needed distance from him.

It didn’t. He stepped up behind her, so that she could feel him, feel the warmth of him, close at her back.

He spoke into her ear, his voice barely a whisper. “You need me now, Lace. Don’t turn me away. Give me a chance. I want to marry you and take care of you...of both of you.”

Oh, those were lovely words. And, yes, they did tempt her.

But it wouldn’t work. She had to remember that. It couldn’t work.

He did not love her. He couldn't even say that he no longer loved her sister. He'd marry her out of duty, in order to claim his child.

And she would spend her life with him feeling like second best, wondering when he kissed her if he was imagining her sister in his arms. She didn't want that. They had too many differences as it was. Without love on both sides, they wouldn't stand a chance.

Gently, he took her shoulder, the touch burning a path of longing down inside of her, making her sigh. He turned her to face him.

And he smiled. "I'm feeling pretty determined, Lace."

She smiled right back at him. "So am I."

"We'll see who's more determined of the two of us. I'm not going away until you come with me."

"Then you're in for a long stay in Wyoming."

"I can stay as long as I have to."

"You couldn't stay long enough."

"Watch me."

"What about your practice? How will your patients get along without you?"

"Don't worry about my patients. I have partners to cover for me. I can stick it out here for as long as it takes."

"Oh? And where will you be staying? Have you made reservations at the motel in town?"

"No. I'll stay here with you."

He looked so certain, so set on his goal. She couldn't stop herself. She touched the side of his face. The stubble-rough skin felt wonderful—too wonderful.

She jerked her hand back, thinking how much one thoughtless touch could do. In a moment, she'd have no backbone left. Whatever he wanted, she'd just go along.

"You can't stay here," she said in a breathless tone that convinced neither Logan nor herself. "It's out of the question."

He pressed his advantage. "Look. You're alone here. The baby's due any day now. I don't even see a phone in this cabin. How will you call for help if there's an emergency?"

She tipped her chin higher. "I'm in no danger. The main ranch house is nearby—you must have driven past it to get here."

He nodded. "I stopped in there for directions, as a matter of fact. And it's too far away. You could have trouble reaching it, if something went really wrong."

"I have a cell phone. I can call for help if I need to."

"You're telling me that a cell phone actually works out here?"

"Yes."

He made a small chiding noise. "Not very dependably, though. I can see it in your eyes."

"It doesn't matter. I'm perfectly safe here."

"Not in your condition. You know you shouldn't be alone."

He was starting to sound way too much like her cousin. Zach—and Tess, too—had been nagging her constantly of late, trying to get her to move to the main house now that her due date was so close. She kept putting them off.

She did plan on moving, as soon as the baby came. Tess already had a room ready for the two of them, with a nice big bed for her, and a bassinet and a changing table and everything else that the baby would need.

But right now, Lacey felt she was managing well enough. And the cabin did please her. She had music—a boom box and a pile of CDs in the sleeping nook. She read a lot and she sketched all the time. Lately, since just before she'd come to Wyoming, she'd discovered that she no longer had the kind of total concentration it took to work seriously on a painting. But that was all right. She sensed that it would come back to her, after the baby arrived—no matter what Xavier Hockland, her former teacher and mentor, chose to believe.

And certainly she could manage to make it to the main house when her labor began. Tess could take her to the hospital from there.

Logan began prowling around the room. He stopped by the big stove. “What do you use to heat this place?”

“Wood. Lately, the weather’s so mild, I hardly need heat, though. And if I do, I only have to build one fire, in the morning. By the time it burns down, it’s warm outside.”

“How do you cook?”

“Same thing. I build a fire.”

“You’re chopping wood in your condition?”

She made a face at him. “No. Zach takes care of it. He keeps the wood bin out in back nice and full.”

“But you have to haul it in here and build the fire yourself?”

“It’s not that difficult, Logan.”

“Heavy lifting is a bad idea at this point. Your doctor should have told you that.”

“Logan. Come on. Stop picking on sweet old Doc Pruitt. I only carry in a few pieces of wood at a time. There honestly is no heavy lifting involved.”

He marched over to her again. “You need help around here. And even if you won’t marry me, I think I have a right to be here when my baby is born.”

She opened her mouth to rebut that—and then shut it without making a sound. He was right. If he wanted to be here for the birth of their child, who was she to deny him?

“Who knows?” he added. “You might even need a doctor in a hurry. Then you’d be doubly glad that I stuck around.”

Score one more for his side. She could go into labor any time now. If, God forbid, anything should go wrong before she reached the hospital in Buffalo, it wouldn’t hurt to have a doctor at her side.

And who was she kidding, anyway?

Beyond the issues of her isolation in the cabin, of a father’s rights and Logan’s skills as a physician, there was her foolish heart, beating too hard under her breastbone, just waiting for any excuse to keep him near for a while.

It astonished her now, to look back on all those years growing up, when the name Logan Severance had inspired in her a feeling of profound irritation at best. Logan Severance, her sister’s perfect, straight-A boyfriend, who played halfback on the high school football team, took honors in debate and went to University of California in Davis on full scholarship. Logan Severance, who seemed to think it was his duty to whip his sweetheart’s messed-up little sister into shape. He was always after her to stand up straight, carping at her about her grades, lecturing her when she ran away or got caught stealing bubble gum from Mr. Kretchmeir’s corner store.

Sometimes, she had actually thought that she hated him.

But not anymore.

Now she knew that she loved him. She had figured that out last September, on the fifth glorious day of their crazy, impossible affair. It turned out to be the last day. As soon as she admitted the grim truth to herself, she had seen the self-defeating hopelessness of what she was doing. She had told him she couldn’t see him anymore.

He had called her three times after she returned to L.A. She’d found his messages on her answering machine and played each of them back over and over, until they had burned themselves a permanent place in her brain. She had memorized each word, each breath, each nuance of sound...

“Hello, Lacey. It’s Logan. I was just—listen. Why don’t you give me a call?”

“Lacey. Logan. I left a message a month ago. Did you get it? Are you all right? Sometimes I... Never mind. I suppose I should just leave you alone.”

“Lace. It’s Logan. If you don’t call me back this time, I won’t try again.”

She had started to call him a hundred times. And she had always put the phone down before she went through with it, though she had known by his second call that she was carrying his baby, known that eventually she would make herself tell him.

Known he would come to her as soon as she did.

And that once he came, it would be harder than ever to send him away.

He smoothed a coil of hair back from her cheek. She savored the lovely, light caress.

He murmured so tenderly, "Say I can stay."

She put off giving in. "I don't want to hear any more talk about marriage. It's out of the question, Logan. Do you understand?"

His eyes gleamed in satisfaction. "That's a yes, right?"

"Not to marriage."

"But you'll let me stay here with you."

"Just until the baby's born. After that, you have to go. We can make arrangements for you to see the baby on a regular basis, and we can—"

He put a finger against her lips. "Shh. There's no need to worry about all that now."

She pulled her head back, away from the touch of that finger of his. It was too tempting by half, that finger. She might just get foolish and suck it right inside her mouth.

His grin seemed terribly smug.

She told him so. "I do not like the look on your face."

"What look?" He reached for one of the grocery bags. "Come on. I'll help you put this stuff away."

Chapter Three

As soon as the shopping bags were emptied, Logan went out and got his things from the car. There was only one bureau in the dark little cabin. A scarred mahogany monstrosity with a streaked mirror on top. It loomed against the wall by the rear door, sandwiched between a pair of crammed-full pine bookcases. Lacey gave him three of the eight drawers. He'd traveled light, so everything fit in the space she assigned him.

As he unpacked, Lacey sat in the old rocker in the corner, watching him, rocking slowly, her abdomen a hard mound taking up most of her lap, her head resting back, those blue eyes drooping a little.

When he finished, he shoved his empty bag and extra shoes under the daybed. Then he dropped onto the mattress, which was covered with a patchwork quilt. "That's that."

"Umm," she said softly. The rocker creaked as she idly moved it back and forth.

He leaned an elbow on the ironwork bedstead and allowed himself the luxury of just looking at her.

She looked good. Her skin glowed with health and her golden hair still possessed the glossy sheen he remembered. Pregnancy seemed to agree with her. That pleased him. He wanted more children, after this one. A whole house full. It wouldn't be the way it had been when he was a boy, just him and his father and the endless string of housekeepers who had never managed to take the place that should have been filled by a wife and mother.

His kids would have more than that. His kids would have brothers and sisters—and both of their parents. There would be noise and laughter and a feeling of belonging.

Lacey went on rocking—and she smiled.

He wanted to touch her, to put his hand on the fine, smooth skin of her cheek, to run it down over her throat and then over her breasts, which looked sweet and firm and full, even beneath the shapeless denim dress she wore. He wanted to spread both hands on her belly, test the hardness of it now, when she was so close to term, maybe even get lucky and feel his baby kick.

But he knew she wouldn't allow such intimate explorations of her body. Not now. Not so soon after he'd forced himself back into her life.

He was going to have to wait to have his hands on her. Probably until after he had managed to convince her to marry him.

Well, fair enough. He'd waited nine months, telling himself most of the time that this physical yearning he felt for Jenna's little sister would eventually pass.

It hadn't. And recently he'd allowed himself to accept the fact that it was only Mother Nature playing at irony.

Lacey Bravo, of all people, was his sexual ideal.

Explain it? He couldn't, didn't really even care to. Human beings were primates, after all, aroused by things they didn't consciously understand. By certain scents and secretions. Desire had nothing at all to do with logic. It was a chemical reaction, the natural attraction of one healthy specimen for another, designed to perpetuate the species.

Now that Lacey was having his baby and he meant to marry her, he found it a real bonus that he wanted her so much. They might have their problems in a lot of different areas, but he didn't think sex was going to be one of them.

She stopped rocking and lifted her head off the backrest. "Are you tired?"

He almost said no. But then he reconsidered. He could use a nap, as a matter of fact. He'd been up well before dawn. And he hadn't been getting much sleep in the last week anyway, not since her letter had arrived.

“A little,” he said. “I’ll lie down for a while if you will, too.” He wanted to make certain she got plenty of rest.

“It’s a deal.” She put both hands on the rocker arms and levered herself to a standing position.

He asked, in a tone as offhand as he could make it, “Is there a double bed behind that curtain?”

She gave him a lazy grin. “Nice try. You get the daybed.” She shuffled out the back door. After a few minutes, he heard the toilet flush. She came back in, only to disappear behind the curtain in the corner.

He paid a short visit to the bathroom himself, then took off his shoes and lay down. Like every other piece of furniture in the cabin, the bed appeared to be something salvaged from an earlier era. It had creaky springs and a lumpy mattress and it wasn’t long enough to fully accommodate his six-foot-three-inch frame. But he stretched out as best he could, letting his stocking feet hang over the edge and pulling one of the long sausage-shaped bolster pillows under his head.

A strange kind of peace settled over him, a deep relaxation, a sense of well-being. It was a state he hadn’t experienced in a long time. He dropped off to sleep like a rock falling down a well.

The next thing he knew, someone was knocking on the door.

Logan bolted to a sitting position, blinking and staring around him, wondering where the hell he was.

Then it all fell into place. The long trip from California. To this cabin. In Wyoming. Lacey. Pregnant with his baby. She was resting now, on the other side of that curtain over there. He glanced at his Rolex. She’d been in there for less than an hour.

And whatever idiot had dropped in for a visit would probably wake her with the next knock.

He jumped to his feet and padded swiftly to the door. When he pulled it open, he found a cowboy on the other side. Behind the cowboy, hitched to one of the poles that held up the porch, a handsome horse with a reddish-brown coat let out a low snort and flicked his shiny tail at a couple of flies.

The cowboy lifted his hat in greeting, then settled it back on his head. “I’m Zach Bravo.” His gaze shifted down, paused on Logan’s stocking feet, then quickly shifted up again. “Just thought I’d stop by and check on things out here.”

“Logan?” It was Lacey’s voice, sounding slow and sleepy, from the other end of the room. “Who is it?” She stood just beyond the curtain in the corner, her feet bare, her face soft and her hair mussed from sleep.

“It’s Zach,” said the cowboy, craning to see around Logan, who had positioned himself squarely in the open doorway.

Lacey grinned and started toward them. “Come on in. I can probably scare up a beer if you want one.”

Zach Bravo stayed where he was. “No. Got to get a move on. Never enough hours in a day around here. But Tess asked me to see if you wanted to come over to the house for dinner tonight. Around six?”

Logan stepped aside a little as Lacey came up next to him. “Zach, this is Dr. Logan Severance, a...dear friend.” Logan didn’t miss her slight hesitation over what to call him. He’d bet his license to practice medicine that Zach Bravo didn’t miss it either.

“Pleased to meet you.” The rancher held out a tough brown hand.

Logan took it, gave it a firm shake. “The pleasure is mine.”

“You’ll come for dinner then...both of you?”

Lacey lifted an eyebrow at Logan. He nodded and she smiled at her cousin. “We’ll be there. Six o’clock.”

“So I’m your dear friend,” Logan challenged the minute Zach Bravo had mounted his horse and trotted away down the dirt road that led to the cluster of ranch buildings just over the next rise.

Lacey made a noise in her throat. “What should I have said? Former lover? The father of my child?”

“How about husband?”

“But that wouldn’t be true, now, would it?”

“We could make it true.”

She looked at him for a long, cool moment, then announced defiantly, “Zach comes out to check on me two or three times a day, which is just another reason why I’m perfectly safe on my own here.”

“I’d say he came to check on me this time.”

“Right. He’s protective. More proof that I’m in no danger at all, as I’ve constantly tried to make you realize. You simply do not have to stay in this cabin with me. If you want to be here when the baby’s born, you could take a room in the motel in town and—”

“I’m not leaving, Lacey—and your cousin strikes me as a conservative man, the kind of man who would feel a lot better if you were married to the father of your child.”

She put her hands on her hips. “You are truly relentless. Now we should get married so as not to offend Zach’s conservative sensibilities?”

“I’m only pointing out that—”

“Logan. You said you would drop it.”

Lacey gave him her best unwavering stare. She was wondering, as she had more than once in the past nine months, how she could love such an obnoxious man.

He stared right back, which forced her to demand, “Are you dropping it, Logan?”

He made a growling sound. “All right, all right. I’m dropping it.”

“Good.”

His handsome face had settled into a scowl. She watched him rearrange it to something more gentle. “We’ve got another hour and a half before we have to make our appearance at your cousin’s house. Why don’t you go on back behind that curtain and lie down again?”

She blew a tangled curl out of her eye. “No, thanks. I’m wide awake now.” She marched to the sleeping nook, ducked inside and came out with her lace-up hiking boots.

His eyes narrowed with suspicion. “What are you doing?”

She sat in the rocker and pulled on one of the boots. It wasn’t easy, working around the bulge of her stomach, but she’d had a lot of practice in the past few weeks. Huffing and puffing, she tied the boot, pulled on the other one, tied it up, too.

“Lacey.”

She stood, turned to the bureau, picked up the brush lying on top and went to work on her hair. Their eyes met in the mirror. “I’m going out behind the cabin a ways. There’s a creek that runs by back there. Very picturesque. I’ve been doing a few sketches. Willows and cottonwoods, a few cows and their calves...” He was scowling again. She pretended not to notice. “I’ll be back in an hour or so, in plenty of time for dinner with Zach and Tess and the family.”

“Are you sure that you should—?”

She turned and pointed the brush at him. “Don’t, all right? Just...don’t. Nothing’s going to happen to me down by the creek. It’s barely a hundred yards from the back door, for heaven’s sake.”

“What if some big bull comes at you?”

“It’s not an issue.”

“This is a cattle ranch, isn’t it? If I’m not mistaken, bulls live on cattle ranches.”

She struggled to contain her building exasperation. “There’s a barbed-wire fence that runs between this particular spot on the creek and those cattle I mentioned. If there are any bulls nearby, they would most likely be on the other side of that fence.”

“But—”

“Read my lips. I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll come with—”

“Logan. Stop. If you insist on staying here, in a twenty-by-twenty-foot space with me, we’re going to have to give each other a little breathing room. I am going alone.”

He shut his mouth, made another growling sound and then dropped to the side of the daybed. “Great. Fine. Do what you want to do. You never in your life did anything else.” He braced his elbows on his spread knees and shook his head at his stocking feet.

Tenderness washed through her. She set down the brush. “You’re the one who needs more rest. Come on. Stretch out and sleep for an hour. You’ll have the cabin all to yourself. Forget all your cares and I’ll wake you up when I get back.”

He didn’t say anything, just went on staring at his socks.

“Logan...”

“All right. I’ll take a damn nap.” He lay down on his back with his feet over the edge, turned his face to the wall and shut his eyes.

Smiling to herself, Lacey collected her sketch pad and a couple of nice, soft pencils from the chair where she’d set them earlier. Before she went out, she couldn’t resist whispering, “Sleep well.”

“Thanks,” he grumbled, neither turning his head nor opening his eyes. “Be careful, for God’s sake.”

“I will, Logan. I promise you.”

He was sound asleep when she returned, lying in almost the same position she’d left him in, his hands folded on his chest. His head, however, was turned toward the room now.

Lacey stood over him, admiring the beauty of his body in repose, thinking that maybe she could do a few sketches of him sleeping—nothing too challenging right now. She wasn’t up for it. But she could certainly line out a few ideas in pencil.

Then, later, after the baby came, she could go back to what she’d started, delve more deeply. She loved the softness of his face when he was sleeping. And something else. Some...determined vulnerability. Some aspect of his will that came through even when he was unconscious, some sense that he distrusted the necessity of surrendering to sleep.

He had a wonderful face, handsome in a classic way. And very masculine—she’d always thought so, even before she realized she was in love with him. A broad forehead, a strongly defined supraorbital arch, so the eyes were set deep, shadowed in their sockets. Cheekbones and jawline were clean and clear-cut and his finely shaped mouth possessed just enough softness to betray the sensuality she’d discovered with such delight during their five incredible days together last fall.

Though he didn’t know it, she had painted him. A number of nudes, from memory, in the first months after their affair. She believed they were her best work so far. And she had exercised great ingenuity, in all of them, so as not to reveal his face.

Had she been wrong to paint him without his knowledge? After all, Logan Severance was not the kind of man who posed for nude studies—let alone the kind who would allow them to be hung in an art gallery for all the world to see. Those paintings weren’t in any gallery yet. But someday they would be. Lacey had told herself that she’d protected his privacy by obscuring his face. But sometimes she felt just a little bit guilty about them, wondered what his reaction would be if he ever saw them—which he would probably have to. Someday.

She wasn’t particularly looking forward to that day.

“What are you staring at?”

Caught thoroughly off guard, Lacey gasped and stepped back. She could have sworn he was sound asleep just seconds ago. But those eyes looking into hers now were clear and alert.

“Well?”

The truth slipped out—or at least, some of it. “I was thinking that I’d like to sketch you while you’re sleeping.”

“Why?”

“Something in your face. Something...unguarded, but unwillingly so. It’s very appealing.”

He grinned. “You like me best unconscious, is that what you’re telling me?”

She’d regained her composure enough to reply smartly, “I wouldn’t have put it that way, but now that you’ve done it yourself...”

“Marry me. You can watch me sleep for the rest of our lives.”

She resolutely did not respond to that. “We should go. It’s quarter of six.”

At the big side-gabled wood frame ranch house, Zach introduced his family to Logan.

“This is Tess.” He put his arm around his wife. “And our daughters, Starr and Jobeth.”

The older of the two girls, a beauty of about eighteen, with black hair and Elizabeth Taylor eyes, gave him a polite “Hello.” The younger one, Jobeth, who looked ten or eleven, smiled shyly and nodded.

Next, Logan shook Edna Heller’s slim, fine-boned hand and learned that she had once been the ranch’s housekeeper but now was one of the family; her only daughter had married a Bravo cousin, Cash. She lived in the foreman’s cottage, which was just across the drive from the main house.

“And this is Ethan John,” Tess said. She held up a big, healthy blue-eyed baby. “Ethan is just six months old today.” The baby gurgled out something that sounded almost like a greeting.

They ate at the long table in the Bravos’ formal dining room. Ethan John sat in his high chair and chewed on a teething ring and occasionally let out a happy, crowing laugh.

“Ethan’s already had his dinner,” Tess explained. “We enjoy having him with us during meals, but we don’t enjoy watching the food fly. So I feed him early and he sits with us and everybody’s happy.” Tess turned her smile on Logan. “Do you have children, Mr. Severance?”

Logan answered that one carefully. “Not yet.”

“You plan to, then?”

He sent a significant glance at Lacey, who was sitting directly to his left. She smiled at him, an innocent, what-are-you-looking-at-me-for? smile. Apparently, he was on his own here.

“Yes,” he said. “I plan to have children...very soon.”

Now it was Zach and Tess’s turn to trade glances. And the two girls, as well. They looked at their parents first, then swapped a glance of their own. Edna Heller somehow managed to make eye contact with all four of the others. She shared knowing looks with Zach and Tess, and right after that flashed a “mind your business, girls,” expression at their daughters.

Lacey was grinning. Apparently she thought the whole exchange of meaningful looks rather amusing.

Logan didn’t. As far as he was concerned, those flying glances were just more proof that Lacey needed to come to her senses and marry him immediately. It was an embarrassment to sit here with this nice family and have them all wonder what the hell was going on between their unmarried pregnant cousin and the strange man who’d shown up out of nowhere this afternoon—and appeared to have set up housekeeping with her.

He wanted to get the truth out in the open. He wanted to say bluntly, That’s my baby Lacey’s carrying and I’ve come to marry her and take her home with me where she belongs.

But he couldn’t do that. Not here at the Bravo dinner table, with a girl of Jobeth’s age listening in.

“How do you and Lacey know each other?” asked Edna Heller. She was a small, slender woman, probably in her fifties, and very feminine—though in her eyes Logan could see a glint of steel. Not much would get by her.

She was smiling at him in the most polite way and waiting for an answer. Unfortunately, the truth wouldn’t sound good at all. I’ve been in love with Lacey’s sister since I was eighteen years old. Jenna was going to marry me—until she decided to run off with Mack McGarrity instead.

Lacey came to his rescue on that one. “Logan and Jenna went to school together. Logan’s been sort of a big brother figure to me over the years.”

Edna Heller’s eyebrows rose daintily toward her hairline. “Ah. A big brother figure.”

“He’s always felt he has to take care of me. He still feels that way. Don’t you Logan?”

“That’s right.”

“That’s...admirable of you, Mr. Severance.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Heller.”

“You know, for years my son-in-law, Cash, imagined himself a big brother to my Abigail. But then he married her and found out he was deeply in love with her. Abigail, of course, always worshipped him.”

“Oh, really?” Logan said, for lack of something better to say.

Lacey couldn’t let Edna’s observation go unchallenged. “Are we supposed to be noting similarities between Cash and Abby—and Logan and me?”

“Well,” said Edna airily. “Only if the shoe fits, as they say.”

“The shoe does not fit. Logan and I are not getting married. And if you ask him, he’ll tell you he never got any worship from me.”

Edna might give the Bravo daughters stern looks admonishing them to stay out of others’ affairs, but she clearly thought of herself as someone who had a right to be in the know. She turned to Logan. “Well, Mr. Severance?”

Lacey hasn’t fully accepted the idea yet, but we are getting married, he thought. He said, “No. Worship is not the word I would use to describe Lacey’s feelings for me.”

“What word would you use, then?”

He shrugged. “Let’s just say it wouldn’t be worship and leave it at that.”

There was a silence, which was quickly filled with nonsense syllables from the baby and the clink of silver against china plates.

Zach said, “More potatoes, Logan?”

“Yes, please. This is a terrific meal, Tess.”

Tess colored prettily at the compliment. “Well, I must confess. Edna always does the potatoes around here. I swear she has a way of making them light enough that they could get right up and float off your plate.”

Edna smiled graciously—and went back to her velvet-gloved interrogation. “And how long will you be staying on the Rising Sun, Mr. Severance?”

He shot a look at Lacey. She’d had a lot to say a minute ago. Maybe she’d want to put her two cents in on this one.

But not this time. She only looked back at him, thoroughly annoying in her pretended innocence.

He shrugged. “I’ll be here a week or two. At least until the baby’s born.”

“You’re a doctor, you said?”

“That’s right. I’m in family practice.”

“This is...a vacation then?”

“Not really. I’m here to...help Lacey out, in any way I can.”

Glances went flying again. He almost wished they would all just say what they were thinking. Then he could answer them. He could explain his position and enlist their aid in convincing Lacey to see things his way.

“Well,” said Tess, taking pains to remain neutral. “We hope you’ll enjoy your stay.”

He was neutral right back at her. “I’m sure I will.”

The baby dropped his teething ring. Tess picked it up, wiped it off, and handed it to him, then suggested casually, “We’ve been trying to talk Lacey into moving to the house.”

Lacey reached down the table to brush Tess’s arm. “Stop worrying. I told you, I’m just fine at the cabin for right now.”

Tess sighed. “I disagree. And I wish Dr. Severance would help me to change your mind.”

Fat chance, Logan thought. He said, “I’ve known Lacey for fifteen years. In all that time, I haven’t changed her mind about a single thing.”

Lacey laughed. The musical sound tingled along his nerves and warmed something down inside him. “That can’t be true, Logan. You must have changed my mind about something in a decade and a half. It’s not as if you haven’t tried.”

He turned his head and looked right at her. The reaction was instantaneous—that chemical thing between them, which unscientific men called desire. It heated his blood, made him glad his lap was covered by Tess Bravo’s lace tablecloth.

He should not allow her to do this to him. She was nine months’ pregnant, for pity’s sake. He ought to be ashamed of himself.

He arched an eyebrow at her. “You’re right.” To his relief, his voice sounded fine, level and calm. It gave no inkling of what had just happened under the table. “It’s incredible when you think about it. But it’s true. I have never changed your mind about a single thing.”

“Yes. Yes, you have.”

“Oh, come on, Lacey.”

“I remember distinctly—”

She didn’t either, and they both knew she didn’t. “What?” he demanded. “You remember what?”

The baby, in his highchair, chortled to himself as a slow smile curved Lacey’s eminently kissable mouth. For a moment, Logan thought she would actually say something about the two of them, about how she’d never in her life imagined him as a lover—but that was one thing he had definitely changed her mind about. He had to resist the urge to clap his hand over her mouth.

And then she said, “Broccoli.”

He didn’t think he’d heard her correctly. “Broccoli?”

Lacey nodded. “You convinced me to give it a try. You said I would like it raw. With ranch dressing.”

He stared at her, thinking, Liar. You never ate any broccoli for me—raw or otherwise.

“Yes.” That smile of hers was too innocent by half. “Broccoli. Remember?” She was blatantly teasing him, pouring on the innuendo.

But it could be worse, he reminded himself. At least she hadn’t said what he’d feared she might.

He forced a smile to answer hers and let her have her silly lie. “I don’t know how I could have let myself forget.”

“More string beans?” Tess asked him.

He thanked her and spooned a second helping onto his plate.

The talk turned to safer subjects.

Zach asked Jobeth about a calf she had chosen to raise herself as a 4-H project.

Jobeth explained how she planned to experiment with different varieties of feed.

Then Tess wanted to know how things were going for Starr. Evidently, the older girl had a job at a local shop called Cotes’s Clothing and Gift.

“A summer job is a summer job,” Starr said. “It gets a little boring, but it’s not that bad. Mr. Cotes offered me four more hours on Saturdays. I’m going to take them. Might as well make use of my free time this summer. When school starts, I want to keep my focus on studying, where it belongs.”

“Our Starr is a straight-A student,” Edna declared with pride.

A contrary glint came into the girl’s impossibly beautiful violet eyes. “At least I am now.”

Zach frowned. “We are proud of you. Very, very proud.”

Starr lifted her lovely chin. “Thanks.”

Evidently, the girl had had some problems in the past. Logan wondered what, but the subject had already shifted again.

Zach was suggesting that Logan might want to saddle up and ride with him and Jobeth and the men sometime in the next few days. He could see how things were done on a working cattle ranch.

Logan confessed, “I think I’ve been on a horse about three times in my life. And they weren’t very lively horses, if you know what I mean.”

Zach chuckled. “We’ll find you something sweet-natured and easy-going—or you can ride in one of the pickups. Your choice.”

“Then I’d enjoy a tour, Zach. Thanks.”

Beside him, Lacey slid back her chair and stood. “Excuse me.”

Apprehension pulling a thread of tightness across his chest, Logan looked up over the ripe curve of her belly and into her eyes. “What is it? Are you feeling all right?”

She laughed and put her hand on his shoulder. It felt good there. Damn good. “Relax. I’m fine. I need to...make use of the facilities, that’s all.”

“You’re sure. If something’s—”

She lifted her hand and stroked the hair at his temple. “Logan. Eat.” Her hand was cool and her eyes were a summer sky—clear, stunningly blue. A smile quivered across that soft mouth of hers. He had to remind himself that they were not alone, or he would have laid his palm on her belly, a possessive touch, which would have felt totally appropriate then. At that moment, she was all softness, all openness. And all for him.

But then she seemed to catch herself. She jerked her glance away. Her smile vanished.

She dropped her hand. “I’ll be right back.” She slid around the chair and headed for the hall.

He watched her until she’d disappeared from view, reluctant to relinquish the sight of her, wondering at her swift change of mood. For a moment, she had been so damn...tender.

Just as she’d been when he woke and found her standing over him in the cabin an hour before. He’d seen the softness in her eyes then, too. And something else. Worry, maybe.

But softness, definitely.

And even earlier, while he unpacked his few things. She had sat in that rocker and watched him, a dreamy, contented expression on her face.

As if she...

It came to him. Right then, at the Bravo family’s dinner table, as he watched her waddle away through the living room, then disappear beyond a door that led to the front hall. It all snapped into place.

For Lacey, this was more than a matter of sexual attraction. More than affection, more than the commonality of a shared past. More even than the most important issue of the child she was about to have.

She was in love with him.

It made perfect sense. The abrupt way she had broken it off in September—that must have been when she had realized.

And what about the times he had called her and she’d never called back? That hadn’t been like her. Before, she would have called, if only to insist that she was fine, that he was not to worry about her, that he needed to get on with his life and let her get on with hers.

Yes. She was in love with him—and she feared, because of Jenna, that he would only hurt her.

He wouldn’t. Never. Jenna was gone for good now, living in Florida with Mack McGarrity, a baby on the way. She was no threat to what Logan and Lacey might share.

Damn. Lacey loved him.

True, he didn’t have a lot of faith in love lately. He’d loved Jenna for all those years and in the end, his love had not been enough to hold her.

But this situation was different. He was already committed to making a life with Lacey. He had been from the moment he’d learned that she carried his child. If Lacey thought herself in love with him—whatever the hell that really meant—it could only work in his favor.

A lightness seemed to move through him. A feeling of rightness, of ease.

And of power, too.

She loved him.

He knew now, with absolute certainty, that she would say yes to him. She had that wild streak. And she was willful. She might not be the wife that Jenna would have been. But she would be his in a way that Jenna never had.

She was already his.

Because she loved him. Lacey Bravo loved him.

He hadn't realized that doubt had been eating at him, eroding his self-confidence, setting his nerves on edge. He hadn't realized it until now, when doubt was gone.

He turned back to the table, a grin pulling at his mouth—and found six pairs of eyes focused on him. Even the baby was watching him.

“That girl's a pistol,” Edna muttered under her breath.

“She's independent,” said Tess warmly, speaking right up in Lacey's defense. “I admire independence.”

Edna gave Tess a fond smile. “Of course you do. So do I. But the fact remains. She needs a husband.”

Zach Bravo was still staring at Logan. “You're here to marry her,” he said. It wasn't a question.

Logan felt satisfaction, to have it out in the open, to be able to answer simply, “I am.”

Zach nodded. “Better not waste any time about it. That baby is likely to show up any minute now.”

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