



Baby's First
CHRISTMAS



TINA LEONARD
LAURA MARIE ALTOM

Mills & Boon M&B

Laura Marie

Baby's First Christmas

«HarperCollins»

Marie L. A.

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Baby's First Christmas

The Christmas Twins

By

Tina Leonard
Santa Baby

By

Laura Marie Altom



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The Christmas Twins

By

Tina Leonard

Dear Reader,

I love Christmas stories! They are one of my favourite things to write because, for me, the underlying themes of the season are family, friends and tradition. And a Christmas story is a chance to relive all of those wonderful emotions!

I hope you'll enjoy the story of Zach Forrester and Jessica Tomball Farnsworth, two very different personalities from opposite walks of life. I believe that Christmas works its magic on the most stubborn people, and magic in even the most challenging of circumstances can bring love to the most impossible situation. May your holiday season be lit by this very special spirit of love, charity and fulfilment.

Best wishes and much love,

Tina Leonard

About the Author

TINA LEONARD loves to laugh, which is one of the reasons she enjoys writing. In another lifetime, Tina thought she would be single and an East Coast fashion buyer forever. The unexpected happened when Tina met Tim again after many years—she hadn't seen him since they attended school together. They married and now Tina keeps a close eye on her school-aged children's friends! Lisa and Dean keep their mother busy with soccer, gymnastics and horseback riding. They are proud of their mum's "kissy books" and eagerly help her any way they can.

Tina hopes that readers will enjoy the love of family she writes about in her books. A reviewer once wrote, "Leonard has a wonderful sense of the ridiculous", which Tina loved so much she wants it for her epitaph. Right now, however, she's focusing on her wonderful life and writing a lot more romance! You can visit her at www.tinaleonard.com.

"I've tried to be perfect. I've lived in a world. Imperfect is a lot more fun."

—Jessica Tomball Farnsworth.

"I've tried to be perfect. I've lived in a world that wants perfect. Imperfect is a lot more fun."

—Jessica Tomball Farnsworth

Chapter One

Zach Forrester freely admitted that boredom was his worst enemy.

He didn't mind living in Tulips, Texas, on the Triple F ranch, but he wanted to do more in his life than just take care of a family property. He had plans to build a new elementary school in the small town, a challenge he would enjoy.

But now it was time for a different challenge. Maybe the late September moon was getting to him, but excitement seemed to be a hard-to-find commodity.

One thing was for certain, he wasn't giving up his life the way Duke had, to diapers and a wife and a round-cheeked baby. He loved his little nephew, but a baby put a certain stop to one's life. Nor would he ever let a woman lead him around by the nose as Liberty had Duke. She had left the altar with Duke standing at it, then made a surprise return with his baby, finally marrying Duke in a wonderfully romantic ceremony.

Of course, Duke was insanely happy with his new wife and child, but it had been hell on Duke getting there. Zach had to admit it had been fun watching his older brother struggle mightily to get his woman. *Everything always seems to come easy for my brother and sister and harder for me.*

He was enjoying his pity party as he drove, until he saw the hot pink convertible T-bird and the madwoman standing next to his favorite bull, which she'd clearly hit. She was talking on her cell phone as if it was just any old piece of meat she'd struck. But Brahma Bud was his best and finest!

Hopping out of his truck, Zach stared at the imperious woman with whiskey-colored hair. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

She snapped her cell phone shut. "I am *trying* to get this beast to move, Cowboy. He seems to think he has the right of way."

"He does!" Zach stared at his poor bull, which gazed back in return, not bothered in the least by the annoying woman who had hit him.

"Well, he's been having his way for an hour," she replied, her voice so haughty it belonged in New York. "Do you think you could move his plump hide?"

Perhaps Brahma Bud had only been lightly tapped, because the bull didn't seem any worse for wear. He did, however, seem quite mesmerized by the pink T-bird, and as Zach forced himself to calm down, he had to admit the car—and the woman—were definitely worth second looks. "What's the rush, City?"

"I have a life," she told him. "I just can't stand here and watch the grass grow."

Well, hell, Zach thought, wasn't she special. Of course, she certainly looked special in her tight dress. When she spoke, she emphasized her words so that all of her bounced in the right places. "He might move tomorrow," Zach said. "Once he gets to a spot he likes, he tends to stay there."

"You have *got* to be kidding me!" she exclaimed, enunciating and bouncing, to Zach's delight.

Ah, city folk. So much fun. He leaned against her T-bird and gave her his best leer. "When I get to a spot I like, I tend to stay there, too."

"Cowboy, I know all about guys like you, and believe me, the words are bigger than the deed. Just take your cow and go home, okay? And I won't charge you for the dent in my fender. Not to mention I think he used his antler to lift my skirt when I tried to make certain he was all right."

"Yeah, that would be the easy way out," Zach said slowly, suddenly realizing what he wanted more than anything was to shake things up, and this gal was a smoking-hot challenge even if she didn't know horns from antlers. "I'll do two things for you—one, I'll ask my prize longhorn here to move, if you're nice. Two, I won't ask why you're trespassing on my private drive, if you're nice. I won't even be mad that you hit my livelihood, here," he said, dropping a casual hand to Bud's horn. "However, I do insist upon a kiss."

She gasped. "I consider kissing to be sex. Why would I have sex with a stranger?"

He laughed out loud. “Make it a brotherly peck, then.”

“No. You’re weird. It might be catching.”

“I think you’re the weird one.” Crossing his arms, he decided this exceptional woman was his next challenge. “So, I noticed you didn’t protest that you had a boyfriend or were married or something.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I just broke up with my boyfriend. He was too possessive.”

Zach raised his brows. “Possessive?”

“He thought he owned me.”

“Boyfriends will act like that sometimes.” He wondered if he’d feel the same way if she was his girlfriend. *Nah*. He’d never felt that way about any woman. *Safe!*

Her back stiffened. “Being possessive is bad and being bossy is worse. But if you’d like to boss someone around, why don’t you tell that cow to move so I can get back on the road?”

He shook his head. “You’re not going anywhere.”

She put her hands on her hips, prepared to give him a nor’easter full of cold sass. “Why not?”

“It’s not just the fender you damaged. It’s hanging off.” He pointed to the front of her car. “And you have a flat tire. I notice you didn’t respond to my offer of a kiss, by the way.”

Jessica Tomball Farnsworth looked at the cowboy. He was hunky, to be sure, but so was her ex-fiancé. She’d learned that a man that hot was usually firing more than one pistol at a time—just as her possessive ex-boyfriend had. He’d found a more available set of female arms while she’d been away on business, traveling with her cosmetics company.

That thought led her to consider dropping straight into this willing man’s arms and slathering his face with kisses since he wanted kissing so badly. After all, revenge was sweet.

But she felt a stronger desire to get as far away from men as possible. She wasn’t bitter; she was simply willing to acknowledge that either she was a poor judge of character or all men were louses.

Until she had that figured out, she wasn’t kissing this cowboy, or any male. She narrowed her eyes at him. *Make that hot cowboy*. “Smooth come-ons like yours put me off.” Taking a deep breath for bravery, she gave the large animal a push on his rump to encourage him to move.

He swished his tail in response.

“We could be here all day,” the cowboy said.

This seemed, unfortunately, to be true. She had places she needed to be. With her heart beating too fast, she rose on tiptoe and kissed the cowboy full on the mouth, more than ready to get the hell out of wherever she was.

He looked at her when she sank back to ground level.

“You call that a kiss?”

“Yes, I do,” she said tartly. “Do you keep your promises or not?” A delicious zing of wonder had struck her when she’d brushed his lips, along with a wayward desire for more, more, more.

He took a peppermint from his pocket and let the giant bull smell it before tossing it into the winter-touched yellow meadow. The bull casually strolled after the candy treat while the man inspected the broken fence, which had allowed his beast to escape and wander the roadside. Never in her life had she seen an animal that big up close. But then its kind, curious eyes had stared over the hood at her, and she’d been grateful it didn’t appear to be hurt.

“Why do you keep animals like that?” she asked. “He deserves to be wild and free.”

The cowboy laughed. “He is wild and free, City. This is my best friend. He lives in the lap of luxury.”

He was clearly amused by her lack of knowledge of his world. Jessica sniffed, not liking his attitude at all. “I suppose you think it’s cute to give him candy. What happens when he gets a cavity?”

He sent a slow, amused grin her way. Shaking his head, he went to inspect her car.

Jessica ignored him, keeping her gaze on the bull, which appeared to be just as happy inside the meadow as out.

“What’s your name?”

“Jessica,” she said, unwilling to share more.

“Mine’s Zach,” he replied, though she hadn’t asked. “I can help you get on your way, Jessie.”

She turned, staring at him.

“Or you could kiss me again,” he said conversationally. “I know you liked it as much as I did.”

She gasped. “No. I didn’t.”

He smiled, the expression in his dark eyes registering disbelief. It made Jessica mad that he knew better, and madder to know she was so easy to read.

“So,” he said, drawing near to her, “was it good sex?”

Not as good as it could be. “I’ll thank you to not make fun of my sense of decency,” Jessica said. “Thank you for stopping and moving your cow out of the way. Now please tell me where I can get this tire fixed.”

“You certainly have issues, lady,” Zach said, catching her hand in his, “but I’m not afraid of issues. In fact, I look forward to helping you solve yours, Jessie.” He ran a thumb over her bottom lip. “Tell me your full name.”

“Jessica Tomball Farnsworth,” she whispered, wondering why she bothered to answer. “I don’t have as many issues as you do, by the way.” She backed away, knowing full well he was messing with her senses.

“Sure I do, City,” he said, moving closer. “Where I come from, a man’s not a man unless he’s got a full plate of issues. Sins.” He gave her a wink and slid a hand around her waist. “We’re born with issues, and we use them to lure women ‘cause they think they can save us from ourselves. Then we die with our issues, knowing we’ve enjoyed them every step of the way.”

“You’re crazy,” she whispered, unable to make her escape because of the way he was pressing her against the car.

“And you like it,” he said against her neck, shifting his hands under her Versace skirt.

“I think I do,” Jessica said, closing her eyes. *What the hell. I was never cut out for boredom.*

And Jessie T., boyfriend-dumper and responsibility-escaper dragged the bad boy into the back seat of her hot pink T-bird, embracing sins and issues and everything else that came with the sinfully hot package.

Chapter Two

Two hours later, Zach stared up at the sun in the Texas sky from the back seat of the T-bird, glad his ranch was off the beaten path and that he'd had enough privacy to enjoy this wonderful surprise gift from the city.

Who said you couldn't find a city girl worth wasting country on, anyway?

He examined the blanket he'd found in the back seat. The label read Saks Fifth Avenue. "So I'm guessing you're on the pill," he said idly, wondering if he could talk the beautiful stranger into staying at his ranch for about another day. Only his sister, Pepper, was ever around the ranch anymore, and she pretty much kept to herself. "Ow!"

He rubbed the spot on his cheek where City had slapped him. It had actually been a light tap, but it was enough to get his attention.

She stared at him, angry again, reminding him that her spirit was one of the many things he liked about her. "So are you?" he asked, thinking with some trepidation about Liberty and Duke and their unplanned pregnancy.

"You are not a gentleman!" Jessie exclaimed. He nodded, and said, "We already established that. Let's get to the answer."

Her cheeks pinked. "I use a method of control."

He glared. "Don't they discuss birth control where you're from?" He glanced at the blanket label again. "Saks Fifth Avenue?"

She ignored him.

Okay. She obviously didn't want to talk about it. A faint trickle of unease slithered through him.

"I have to go," she said abruptly. "Please get the hell out of my car."

He frowned. "Not until you tell me about your 'method.'"

"You should have asked before," she said. "No matter what my method is, if it's not any good, it's too late."

He digested that, realizing she was right. Had he lost his mind? His gaze ran over her tight, smooth skin. The luscious curves had bewitched him, and all of her attitude set off raging emotions inside him.

Duke must have felt just this way about Liberty.

He had never wanted to be like Duke, despite the fact that, to him, his sheriff brother was pretty much a hero in all ways. If not a hero, then a major example of what a good man should be.

But he'd never wanted to be out-of-his-mind wild over a woman, and he sure as hell had never wanted to get one pregnant out of wedlock.

That would spell commitment for certain, and he hated everything about the sound of that particular word.

"I've been seeing twins," he murmured, going for jackass and making it pretty well, he thought. That should run her off quicker than wildfire, which he needed her to do if he was going to escape this growing dilemma and the future his brain was imagining.

"I don't care," she said, laughing, "if you're dating triplets. Or quadruplets."

He scratched his chin, noticing she wasn't leaping out of the back seat. In fact, they felt rather companionable together, their legs stretched out along the soft leather. She fit him very well. "Got a sister?" he asked, trying to save himself.

She gave him a thorough eyeing. "Really working those issues, aren't you?"

She wasn't falling for it. Women always fell for his routine! Jessie got out of the car, fixed her skirt and hair and pulled a huge carpetbag-sized purse from the front seat. She rummaged around in it, fishing out a pair of red panties. "Close your eyes."

"I can't," he said. "Watching you is the most fun I've had lately."

She shrugged, reaching under her skirt to shimmy her lacy panties into place. He felt himself wanting her again. She had impossibly long legs and nothing he didn't want to see. She was an intriguing beauty, tempting his eyes. Silently, he handed her the panties he'd previously removed and tossed to the floor. She snatched them from him, stuffing them into the carpetbag.

The panties went into the carpetbag. He realized with a pang and a worrisome erection that she was used to traveling or undressing because most women didn't carry a change of underwear in their purse. "Don't suppose you're going to change your bra, too?"

She shook her head at his hopeful tone. "Hand me the one you took off."

It was soft and silky, like her. He wanted her where he could enjoy her for hours, without the top and skirt, which had been left on out of necessity. He'd been lucky to discard her bra and panties, actually, because he'd discovered she had a cute shy side despite her projected carefree attitude. "You're beautiful," he said, knowing she was that way without trying to be.

"It's my business," she said. "It's all a mirage."

There, he thought, that's an answer to scare the hell out of even the baddest, bootwearing hardass around.

Jessie was thinking through the birth control issue, more concerned than she was letting on. The truth was, she'd been fitted with a vaginal ring when she and her boyfriend had gotten serious enough to discuss marriage. But they hadn't had sex in the past couple of months, as he'd claimed to be working late—an excuse she was to learn was code for: *Your chief business rival and I aren't just discussing the latest spring palette after-hours.* So she hadn't been wearing the ring when she'd left the city and the man behind.

Babies had been the first thing on her agenda, following a wedding. But there was no reason to tell that to Zach. He seemed like the worrying type. Any other man would have simply let her drive off into the sunset. Then again, he had issues, as he'd calmly and proudly admitted. She decided to keep her desire for a baby a secret. "I've got to go, cowboy," she said.

"My name is Zach," he said, sounding a bit cross about it.

She nodded. "I know."

"No, you didn't," he said. "Jessie T., you're not a good liar. You forgot my name."

She looked at him.

"You're not even on birth control, are you?"

He *was* going to be difficult. "Are *you*?" she asked, stalling for time. "Maybe you were wearing a condom and I didn't notice." She would have noticed, definitely, because it had been skin-on-skin passion, nothing between her and him in the most wonderful connection a man and woman could share.

His jaw set. "Great. This is my worst nightmare."

She didn't usually have a temper but irritation crept into her. *More like raging than creeping.* "It's none of your affair."

"Well, now," he said, his voice a stony drawl, "that's where you're wrong, Miss Jessica. One thing about us Forresters is that we make everything our business. After you've been in Tulips for a while, you'll know this to be true." He snagged her car keys from the ignition. "Come on, city girl. No doubt you're going to make me crazy for the next month, but there's always a little hell to pay for a little pleasure."

She grabbed for the keys but he held them above her head. "You can't keep me here."

"I'm not keeping you," he said, scooping her up to deposit her into his truck bed. "Your car is out of commission."

"No, it's not," Jessie protested. She'd bitten off more than she could handle with him. Zach was nothing like her ex, a man easily led by his groin and whichever way the wind was blowing at the time: Blonde, brunette, redhead. "Look, you were a great fantasy, but—"

He stopped her in the act of crawling out of the truck bed. “If you’re going to be easy about this, you can ride in the front seat. If you’re going to be difficult, you ride in the back and I’ve got some throwing rope to make sure of it. But you leaving is not an option. It’s one of my issues, you see.”

He grinned at her. Jessie pressed her lips together. “I have a business convention I have to attend. It’s really important. We’re presenting holiday looks for the upcoming season. This being September, I’ve got to get the wares on the road.”

“I sympathize.” He nodded. “But you can clearly see that your car is leaking something.”

Jessie stared at the ground in horror. Something was leaking from her precious T-bird!

“I can’t have you running off around the world to Saks Fifth Avenue and the like if you’re carrying my child.”

“I’m not!”

He leaned against the truck, crossing his arms. “Let me share with you the problem. My brother fell in love with a woman, and they were supposed to get married. They were in the middle of getting married, in fact, but she got cold feet at the altar, and before we knew what was happening, Liberty went running off faster than a greased piglet in a pig race.”

“That has nothing to do with me,” Jessie said, trying to sound like she didn’t care. However, she could see where Zach would empathize with his brother.

“Well, it turned out Liberty was pregnant,” Zach continued, ignoring her, “though she didn’t tell Duke. She was afraid to, and then the little old ladies in our town, and the men, too—you’ll meet them all soon enough—well, the Tulips Saloon Gang got involved—”

“Gang?” Jessie whispered.

“Gang.” Zach nodded. “You don’t know anything about issues until you meet the Gang.”

She blinked, not wanting to get drawn into this sexy man’s loony life. “I’ll call you if I’m pregnant.”

“You wouldn’t,” Zach said. “And then I’d be like Duke almost was, with a son of mine wandering around out there, never knowing that his daddy was a caring man who wanted to play football with him and teach him to hunt and shoot beer cans. Budweiser beer cans only, which is how my great-horned beast out there got his name, Brahma Bud. I keep my life simple, as you’ll learn.”

“Oh, no,” Jessie murmured, the impact of her flyaway good sense dawning on her. “Where is the rewind button on my life?”

IT WASN’T HEROIC of him to do what he was doing to the flitty woman who’d blown into town, but it wouldn’t be fair if he had a son that never knew its father. Zach was quite satisfied that he’d made the best possible decision considering the circumstances.

His sister, Pepper, would tell him he should have kept his pants zipped, and he should have, but he didn’t regret making love to that little firecracker out there staring sadly at her car, which had been towed to the drive of the Triple F Ranch. He watched Jessie through the window, smiling when the family dog—who was supposed to be Duke’s dog but couldn’t be trained to one person—greeted Jessie with a big doggie smile and a wave of a golden plumed tail. Her name was Molly, or Jimbo if other members of the town of Tulips were asked.

Zach grinned. Jessie knew nothing about issues until she met the citizens of Tulips. It was time to introduce her, even though he’d be painted as the black villain of the piece—a part which he’d relish, much as Duke had.

Actually, his older brother had suffered under the good-hearted critiquing of the town’s elders. But Zach was prepared for it. He knew what he’d done—and he was prepared to pay the price.

He would take his critiquing in stride, because every time the elders tried to point out the error of his ways, he’d just think about Jessie’s partially nude body and smile like Molly-Jimbo with a new bone.

“OH, MY,” Pansy Trifle said when Zach walked through the heavy glass-and-wood doors of the Tulips Saloon.

Helen Granger stood, her hands on her hips. “This is Ladies Only Day, Zach.”

“I know,” he said, with a most regretful tone, to the room at large, “so I’ve brought you a lady.” He tipped his hat to all of them, and gave Jessie a gentle push. “Take good care of my friend from Saks Fifth Avenue.”

He left, a broad grin on his face. Very soon he would be in big trouble with the elders of the town, and he was going to enjoy being the cause of all the uproar.

In the meantime, he had a T-bird to “hide,” just in case Ms. Saks decided to take a fast hike, à la Duke’s wife, the cagey Ms. Liberty Wentworth.

History would not be repeating itself.

Chapter Three

Helen and Pansy stared at the newcomer with surprise, sympathy and curiosity. Nervously, Jessie said, "I'm not really from Saks."

The ladies in the room laughed.

"Sit down here," Ms. Pansy said, patting an antique chair. "Zach must want us to get to know you better or he wouldn't have brought you here."

"Which makes him even nuttier than we'd previously surmised," Helen said. "I'll get you a cup of tea while Pansy introduces you to everyone. Then we'll be more than happy to advise you on whatever problem that Forrester male is giving you."

Following some brief introductions, Jessica told her story. "Well, you see," Jessie said, after being introduced, "I hit his steer. Or maybe it was a bull. I'm not certain of the proper terminology."

Pansy looked at her. "Not Brahma Bud?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Oh, my," Helen said. "I do hope Bud's all right. Zach's had him since he was a child. Won't part with him."

Jessie blinked. "I didn't realize it was a pet."

"Well," Pansy said, "it was a gift from his parents. So it's a link with the past, you might say."

"I might have been a bit callous," Jessie said. "I might have called Bud a hunk of steak or something. I don't remember. I was very angry."

"Why were you angry, dear?" Pansy asked gently.

"I was in a hurry to get somewhere," Jessie said, "and the bull—do you call it a bull or a steer?"

"Not important," Helen said, dropping a lump of sugar into her teacup. "Continue, please."

Jessie sighed, realizing they didn't want to have to explain something to her that was plainly obvious to everyone in the room. "There are places I need to be. Bud stopped me. He wouldn't move. I thought maybe he was hurt or in shock, but I really barely tapped him. In fact, he did more damage to my car than I realized, because Zach said my car was leaking."

"Hmm." Pansy put some cookies on a plate for her. "We're so glad you've come to Tulips, dear."

"But we understand you want to be on your way." Helen smiled around at all the ladies in the gathering. "Are you staying with Pepper and Zach?"

"I don't want to," Jessie said. "Is there a hotel in town?"

"We'll have one in the future, I feel certain," Helen said. "Or at least a bed-and-breakfast."

Jessie shook her head. "My family isn't used to me being anything other than right on schedule."

They perked up. "Do tell us about your family," Pansy said.

"Well, my mother and father own a cosmetics company called Jessie's Girl Stuff. I have two brothers. They're lawyers," Jessie said.

"Lawyers," Pansy said, glancing at Helen.

Helen smiled at her. "Did you call them, dear?"

"I let them know where I was. And I told them I'd be on time for the convention in two days."

Jessie took a deep breath. "Zach says I can't leave, though."

"Until your car is fixed," Helen said.

"Until..." Jessie paused, not about to admit her plight.

"Oh, my," Pansy said, "I do believe our Zach is developing feelings for you, Jessie."

Jessie's eyes went wide. "Just the opposite. He's quite pigheaded."

"Aren't they all?" Helen said with a smile. "Do you like him?"

"No," Jessie said. "Bossy men are not my thing."

“We completely understand.” Pansy nodded. “So what we want you to do is call this number.” She scribbled a number onto a tulip-printed pad and handed it to Jessie. “We have a few men in our town, very few, mind you, but the ones we have are mostly useless. I mean, *useful*.”

“Yes,” Helen agreed. “Ask to speak to Bug Carmine. He’ll be more than happy to taxi you wherever you want to go. Where is this convention of yours, dear?”

“California,” Jessie said. “Do you think it will take that long to fix my car?”

“You could call roadside assistance,” Pansy said. “They’d probably be out here lickity-split and fix you right up.”

Jessie straightened. Of course they would! “You ladies are marvelous! I never thought about that! I don’t know why I didn’t, except that I never hit a bull before—”

“And Zach swept you off your feet,” Helen inserted.

“Yes, and that’s never happened before, either. I mean, how many people hit a poor sweet animal like Brahma Bud... But roadside assistance is the perfect answer! Shame on Zach for saying you all had issues,” Jessie said. “You’re clearly as smart and capable as anyone I’ve ever met.”

Helen sniffed, reaching for a cookie off the tray Pansy had set down. “Zach said *we* had issues?”

“Oh, yes,” Jessie said, nodding. “He said I didn’t even know the meaning of the word until I’d met ‘the Gang.’”

“Well.” Pansy smiled brightly. “Helen, dear, why don’t you hand sweet Jessie the phone so she can make her call? I’ll telephone Sheriff Duke while you’re doing that, and let him know his baby brother needs his brotherly supervision.”

Helen grinned and gave Jessie the old-fashioned, floral-painted phone.

“And if they can’t fix your car today,” Pansy said, “you’re welcome to stay at my house for as long as you like.” She and Helen shared a secretive and satisfied glance as Jessie dialed.

FAR FROM BEING SUPPORTIVE and helpful, Zach learned that the Gang wasn’t going to be as conniving about him and Jessie as they’d been about Liberty and Duke. Much to his chagrin, they’d ratted him out to his brother about Jessie’s presence at the ranch, earning him a lecture on propriety and a babysitter in the form of Pepper.

Pepper was the soul of responsibility. A hardworking student and now a much-lauded doctor, she was well respected not just in Tulips, but in the medical community. With Duke and Pepper on his case about his houseguest, Zach was certain he’d never feel the glory of Jessie’s skin again.

But what had he expected from the Gang? They never operated the way one suspected they might. Now he understood why Duke had been so miserable as the object of their machinations.

Secretly, he’d hoped that they would try to encourage some type of romance between he and Jessie. He’d been looking, in fact, for some matchmaking by the little old ladies, and perhaps a bolstering of his worth in Jessie’s eyes.

Something had gone terribly wrong. Jessie was now staying with Pansy, and Helen wouldn’t speak to him. Duke was breathing down his neck, and even Molly hesitated to allow him to pet her.

He was in the proverbial doghouse, and it was a very uncomfortable place to be.

But a man had to stand firm. When the roadside assistance fellow came out to the Triple F ranch, Zach told him the car had been repaired and that he could leave. It was lucky he’d thought to hide Jessie’s car in one of the outlying barns on the ranch.

“It’s hard to be the villain,” he told the chickens that were checking out the white-walled tires of Jessie’s T-bird. “Being dishonorable is not fun. But if I let that gal out of my sight, I could very well end up worse than Duke.”

He and Duke and Pepper had grown up in a traditional family. Liberty had been raised by parents who mainly ignored her, but luckily she’d lived nearby and had been befriended by Zach—who had always looked at her as a brother would—and by his parents. But her sad upbringing had hurt her all her life. He could never do that to a child of his own.

He sat on the bumper of Jessie's car. "I wish I could say I shouldn't have done it, but I liked being with her," he told Molly as she sat beside him, her golden fur soft and reassuring under his touch. "I liked being with Jessie more than I ever liked being with a woman in my life."

Molly barked at him.

"Yeah, it's crazy." He got off the bumper. "I just hope she's not as fertile as she looks, because as hard as it's been to keep her in Tulips, I'd likely never get her to the altar!"

JESSIE PUT her carpetbag away in Pansy's guest room, glad she always carried makeup and a change of clothes. She had a secret, one of many, only this one was a big one, and the cowboy had made her realize how much she didn't like hiding it.

She was afraid of settling down. She'd simply wanted a baby, and her ex-boyfriend had been the way to achieve that.

She'd come to the unhappy realization that she'd probably never been in love with him, which probably meant she was shallow and vain. Her family was successful; she shouldn't have needed to conjure up a relationship in order to validate her goals in life.

Maybe she was lacking a fundamental building block in her personality, like patience or strength of character. "Trust a relaxing jaunt through the country to give me more time to think and be hard on myself. Just what every second-thoughts bride needs."

She heard the doorbell ring as she put away her belongings. A second later, Pansy called, "Jessie!" up the stairwell.

Jessie walked down, surprised to see Zach sitting very properly in Pansy's living room. "Hi, Zach," she said, trying to ignore the excitement rushing through her.

Pansy sat down in a nearby chair and began to knit, a quiet chaperone. Jessie sat in a floral chair across from Zach.

Zach looked at her. "Settling in all right?"

Jessie nodded. "Yes, thank you. And I sent roadside assistance out to repair whatever was leaking on my car."

Zach shifted on the sofa. "Would you like to take a walk?"

Jessie shook her head. "I'm pretty tired. It's been a long day."

"Okay." Zach stood, nodding to Pansy. "See you all later."

He departed, surprising Jessie. She looked at Pansy as the door shut behind Zach.

"Oh," Pansy said. "I do think he likes you."

Jessie knew what was really on Zach's mind. "I don't think so. I just think he's very protective."

Pansy put away her knitting. "You know, it's been difficult for Zach. He's the middle child, and was often pushed to the side. Not quite the man of the house, and not the baby. Sometimes I thought he was never certain whether he wanted to follow in Duke's footsteps or be a role model for Pepper. He tried to do both and somewhere along the line, he became a bit arrogant and somewhat overly determined."

"I can see where women would be attracted to that trait."

"Yes," Pansy said with a smile, "but he's never bothered to ask any of them to take a walk."

Jessie shook her head. It didn't matter. She was leaving as soon as her car was fixed. There were enough stray matters in her life to occupy her time. "Thankfully my car might be repaired tomorrow. Good night, Pansy. Thank you for everything."

Pansy waved a hand as Jessie stood. "I'm enjoying having you here, Jessie. Plan on staying as long as you like."

Until the morning, Jessie thought. *And then I'm out of here.*

Before she was waylaid by the temptation of an attentive, opinionated cowboy who had "bad for you" written all over him.

JESSIE SLEPT WELL. In the morning she showered, ate breakfast with Pansy and Helen—scones and hot tea—packed her carpetbag and hitched a ride in Sheriff Duke Forrester's truck to the Triple F.

"If my brother gives you any more trouble," Duke said, "you just let me know. I'll give him a pounding he'll never forget. Or better yet, just tell Pepper. Zach hates it when Pepper gets on to him."

"That won't be necessary." Jessie smiled. "My car should be fixed by now, and I'll be out of everyone's hair."

"Well," Duke said, "if you ever want a place to visit, I know the ladies would love to have you back. They're always trying to entice people to settle here."

"Oh." Jessie looked out at the passing countryside. "It's pretty here, but—"

"Not your kind of place," Duke said kindly. "I understand completely."

"You do?"

"Sure. Liberty has a wedding shop in Dallas, as well as one here. I go into town with her from time to time. There's a lot to offer folks in the city. Here in Tulips, we live life at a snail's pace."

"The Gang doesn't seem very snail-like to me," Jessie said. "They seem rather lively."

He grinned. "Be careful. They'd just love to figure out a way to bring you into the fold. Wait until you meet Liberty. Together, they got me to the altar."

She heard the pride in his voice. "I rather like the single life."

"I did, too, for a while. But Liberty had other plans." He laughed. "Actually, that's a small-town big tale. It was hard to catch that little girl, and I did all the chasing."

Jessie smiled as they pulled into the Triple F. "I think I may have heard that from Helen and Pansy."

"You watch those two. If they decide Tulips would be better off with you on the census rolls, here you'll remain. All I do as sheriff is make certain everyone behaves."

Jessie got out of the truck. "Thanks for the ride, Sheriff."

"Sure." He glanced around. "Where's the pink Caddy I've heard so much about?"

"T-bird. Maybe the roadside assistance person moved it."

Zach walked out on the porch, waving. "Good morning."

"Where's her car?" Duke asked.

"I sent it over to Holt's to look at. The roadside repair guy was terrible. Didn't know his hat from his ankle."

"Holt's our town hairdresser," Duke said to Jessie. "It's in good hands now."

Jessie's eyes went wide. "I don't see how hair relates to automobiles."

"Oh, he can fix anything," Duke said easily. "Don't worry about a thing."

Jessie felt her teeth grinding. "Did Holt say how long it would take for him to fix it?"

"No," Zach said. "Come on in and have some breakfast. Pepper's cooking."

"Don't mind if I do," Duke said, striding toward the porch. Jessie hung back.

"Is there a problem?" Zach asked.

"Yes," Jessie said. "I can't seem to get my car back into my possession."

"It's Saturday," Zach said. "What's your hurry?"

Jessie took a deep breath. "I don't trust you. I want away from you, and this town. I feel like I've fallen into Peyton Place, or maybe even Brigadoon, and I want back into the twenty-first century—my life as I know it."

Zach nodded. "You can borrow my truck to get wherever it is you need to go."

Jessie's breath left her for an instant. "Really?"

"Of course." Zach frowned at her. "You're not a prisoner, Jessie. For Pete's sake!"

"I—" She narrowed her eyes.

He shook his head. "You're not being a drama queen, are you?"

Jessie put out her hand. "Keys."

A moment stretched long between them as he stared at her. Reaching into his pocket, he tugged his keys out and handed them to her.

Jessie looked at him another long moment, clutching the metal pieces of freedom.

“It’s over there,” he said, pointing. “Happy trails, Jessie.”

Chapter Four

Giving Jessie his truck was the fair, manly thing to do. After all, he was hiding her car. This way, he wasn't exactly kidnapping her, as Duke had claimed, threatening to put him in the jail until Jessie left town if he didn't behave. Zach was wisely keeping a bargaining chip. Something precious to her for which she would return. When she came back after the convention, perhaps there would be some light shed on the subject he was most worried about.

He looked at Jessie as she considered his offer, dismayed to realize he was envisioning her in a maternity dress. Liberty could whip Jessie up a beaut.

Shoving that thought from his mind, he shrugged. "The truck's got a full tank of gas. Hit the pedal."

"I don't know," Jessie said. "It seems unfair to take your truck after I hit your livelihood."

"Call me a gentleman," Zach said. "I don't want you in trouble with your boss."

Jessie glanced over at the truck. "My family owns the company. I'm the president of Jessie's Girl Stuff."

He couldn't help smiling. "I sensed you might be a bit of a princess. Tell me more."

"In case I'm the future mother of your child?"

"It's an intriguing thought. I'm not as put off by it as I probably should be, under the circumstances."

"And what are those?" Jessie asked.

"You're a highly excitable female," Zach said. "But I was looking for some excitement so I'm okay with that."

"Funny," she said, "you don't seem like the type to like a high-maintenance woman."

"True. There's a difference between high-maintenance and excitement. I love independence in my women."

"Excellent." Jessie jangled his keys at him and headed toward his truck. "Thanks for the wheels."

"No problem." He headed after her, getting into the passenger seat. "My wheels are your wheels. It's the least I could do for a lady who gave me an afternoon I'll never forget."

She barely glanced at him as she switched on the engine. "Wow. Listen to all that *vroom*."

"Yep," he said happily, putting his arms behind his head. "It's a lot of horses."

"And won't I just look sophisticated when the valet parks my truck at the convention?" She glanced at him. "You can get out now. I've turned on the amazing vehicle without incident."

"Oh, I'm not getting out." Zach grinned at her. "My stuff's all packed and in the truck bed. I like your style of traveling, so I tossed my change of clothes into a hefty bag."

"This hefty bag of mine," she said, holding up her carpetbag, "is a Merada Fine. It cost one thousand, nine hundred and fifty-four dollars. Please do not refer to it in the same breath with a plastic garbage sack, as convenient as one is at times."

"That much money and it doesn't even carry itself. Gosh, you'd think it could run by remote control or something. Or voice activation. 'Purse open,'" he said. "'Purse close.'"

"Very funny. My girlfriend makes these purses, so I'll thank you not to make fun of them. I'm supporting her efforts."

He touched her cheek. "Meradas are actually a respected breed line of horses in Texas. So it's interesting that you're carrying something that's a little less urban than you're used to."

"Coincidence. Nothing more."

He grinned at her stiffness. "We actually have the same sense of humor if you'd ever let yourself smile."

"I smile. Just not around annoying men."

He laughed. "I don't annoy you that badly. Do I?"

"Need you ask?" She backed down the driveway. "I'll take you with me, simply because you're such an excitement freak. This is going to be the most boring thing you've ever done in your life."

"Lots of women there, though." Zach pulled his hat over his face, preparing to snooze while Jessie drove. "As long as my eyeballs are busy and excited, that pretty much takes care of my brain's need for activity."

"It's nice of you to trust me to drive your truck."

"No trust involved. I'm right here, overseeing the whole adventure." Assuaging his conscience from the front seat of his truck was no difficult task, but she didn't know that. Although he tried to drift off, Zach could smell Jessie's fragrance, making it entirely too difficult to relax.

Possibly his senses were overstimulated because he'd been thinking of the upcoming holiday season, which Jessie had mentioned after their glorious afternoon together. He'd always loved winter holidays, most of all when he was a child.

He might have a child one day to decorate the house for, bake for and share stories with. A longing burst inside him that he'd never before recognized. "I never thought I'd want children," he said slowly, and Jessie nodded.

"You've alluded to that."

"If I had kids, though, I'd have a reason to hang candy canes. I like to decorate at the ranch." Zach frowned. "Duke tells me I'm being childish because I love Christmas."

"Didn't you say he's just had a baby? He'll probably beat you to the decorating this year."

Zach grinned, enjoying the thought of the tables turning on his big brother. "I'll be at his elbow every time he puts one raisin on a gingerbread man, every time he hangs an ornament, to tell him how childish he is."

"Probably one reminder of a person's mistakes is enough," Jessie said. "I sure wouldn't want anyone belaboring me over mine."

He raised a brow. "Story time."

"I'm busy driving."

He sent an assessing look her way. "Try one on me. I know nothing at all about you, except that you have a strong sense of adventure."

"Change has been my downfall. Really."

"Not from my point of view," Zach said sincerely, "unless you count T-bird sex as a pastime."

"I don't," she said, and he grinned.

"Maybe I'm the catalyst for change in your life. I'd count that as being a positive influence."

"Maybe just a pain in the ass," she said, a trace of irritation in her voice.

"Hmm." Zach thought about the sheets of plastic he'd dragged over her pretty T-bird to keep the chickens out of it and decided not to push his luck. No one ever knew what the future would bring. "So did you love him?"

"Who?"

"The ex-boyfriend who cheated on you."

She turned her head to look at him briefly. She'd put on big black sunglasses with gold *G*'s in the corners that made her look like a reclusive movie star, and she had on way too much red lipstick for kissing, although it did look porn-star sexy on her. When they got to know each other better, he was going to tell her that all these girly enticements she was using to subconsciously lure him were not necessary. He liked his women plain and natural.

"I did not," she said. "If I'd loved him, why would I be sitting in a Ford?"

He mulled that. "Perhaps you said Ford in a slightly disdainful tone."

She laughed.

He noticed irritation slipping into his comfort zone. "Fords are the kings of the road, I'll have you know."

There was no response to his allegation. No argument, no comment, *nada*. He rolled his eyes. “If you’re going to have my baby, you’re going to have to understand a few things.”

“I am not having your child,” Jessie said. “As much as I wanted a baby, I would not want to make one with you.”

Rubbing his chin, he said, “So you’re not going to claim your pregnancy is a result of wanting to catch me?”

“I don’t think so. And who says I’m pregnant?”

She’d become so saucy. *Snooty*, even.

“I wouldn’t even be talking to you right now if you hadn’t stolen my car,” she said. “Never mind claiming you as the father.”

“Aha! You admit it! You wouldn’t have told me if I’d given you a baby.”

“I would have told you,” Jessie said, “but it wouldn’t have mattered to me. I wasn’t trying to catch any old guy just to get over my broken heart.”

“I thought you said you weren’t in love with him.”

“Oh.” She glanced at him, her lovely eyes hidden by the dark glasses. “My ego was bruised like any normal woman’s would be.”

“That’s code to mean you did love him.” Zach thought about that. “So you slept with me on the rebound. Revenge lust.”

“Oh, hell no,” Jessie said, laughing. “I just—”

He waited, watching the smile slip from her face.

“Well, it’s one or the other,” he said. “Either you slept with me to subconsciously avenge your boyfriend’s treatment of you, or you are, in fact, attracted to me.”

“Maybe I was just having a bad-girl moment?”

He rubbed a light finger down her arm. “I don’t think so, Jessie T. You’re possibly a case, but I also think you’re a damn sexy woman who just needs the right man to unlock all your secrets. And I have to warn you—I’m pretty darn good at knowing just how a woman likes her lock picked.”

SEVERAL HOURS later it was time to stop for gas. After Zach had bragged about his prowess with women, Jessie turned on the radio and lost herself in her thoughts. Much of what he’d said bothered her—though she would never admit that she’d simply slept with him to avenge herself on her ex. The thought had crossed her mind, of course, but she didn’t have to do that to make herself feel better. The simple act of walking away from him had washed away any need for salving her hurt feelings.

The truth was, attraction had surged inside her fast and hot the second she realized Zach had every intention of seducing her. Her answer had been *yes, yes, yes*. The focus of her body had been entirely in the *here-now-more* with Zach.

Her desire for a baby with her ex had been a misplaced sense of emptiness she’d been trying to fill. She knew that and more about herself now. Thanks to the cowboy, she could move past all those feelings of confusion and concentrate on growing as a person and as a woman.

“I don’t need change as much as I used to now,” she said. “I don’t have to beautify everything.”

“Yeah, you do,” Zach replied, his voice muffled by his hat.

“I was always afraid of letting people down, so I learned to fake everything. I’m never faking again.”

“I have to worry about a woman who admits to being a fake. I’d almost worry about our sex life except I know for damn sure you weren’t faking anything then.”

He didn’t have to sound so proud. “You never know. A woman who’s had as much practice as I have at faking might be very good at it. Super-convincing.”

Grunting, he shoved his hat off his face. “Want me to drive? You’ve been driving for four hours solid.”

“I like driving this beat-up Chevy,” Jessie replied, happy to tweak him.

“Jessie, there are certain things I would never do in my life,” he began, his voice full of that pompous confidence she had begun to recognize and maybe even admire. “Drive a Chevy is one.”

“Really?” she asked, as if she hadn’t known he was going to get crazy over her remark.

“Second, I would never let a woman annoy me.” Zach took her black sunglasses from her face. “I’m damn tired of not being able to see your big baby blues.”

“Give me those.”

“Nope,” Zach said happily, sticking them inside her carpetbag. “Take you a week to find those now that they’re safe inside the loch.”

“The loch?”

“A deep, mysterious lake. This purse is symbolic of the loch in your life. You could hide a baby inside this bag, actually,” he said, holding it up with wonder, “and lots of other secrets, which is how you operate your life, I’m betting. You know what, I’ve had saddlebags smaller than this handbag.”

“You’re obsessed with my purse.”

“But the question is, is it a purse or a suitcase? For the woman who’s always prepared to run from the first sight of danger?”

She pursed her lips, fully aware he was probing her for information. “Zach, I’m a simple girl. You’re making this too hard.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-eight.”

“Just a baby.”

She conducted a mental eye roll or two to allow herself to stay calm. “How old are you, grandpa?”

“Twenty-eight.”

She laughed. “And Duke?”

“Thirty. Pepper’s twenty-seven. She’s the pistol of the family.”

“I liked meeting her. She seems very level-headed. And somehow sad.”

“Sad? Pepper’s not sad. Pepper’s the smartest one of the family.”

She had definitely picked up on some wistfulness in Pepper’s personality. “Zach, while we’re at the convention in Los Rios—”

“Which I’m looking forward to, by the way.”

“Maybe you could find something to do locally.”

“Nah. I know one of the convention speakers and I’m hoping for a front-row seat.”

She didn’t think that was such a good idea. “There aren’t as many women at the conventions as you think there are.”

“Oh.” He touched her hair. “I had a horse once with hair the color of yours. Very shiny.”

“I suppose that’s a compliment.”

“But you’ve got all this stiff stuff in your hair today, and your lashes suddenly look like spider legs,” he said, drawing near to inspect her. “And there’s a lot of red gloss on your lips.”

She frowned. “So?”

“So it bugs me. You look like you’re hiding the real you. Like you’re in costume or something. So is this convention for the grand poobahs of fakers? Because I thought you were giving up on that stuff.”

He was in for a big surprise. “Zach, you should call and check on my car.”

“I’ll do that when we get to the convention. I’m sure I’ll have time between seminars.”

She shook her head. “You’re not going to any seminars.”

“I’m not?”

“No,” she said, knowing she didn’t want Zach that much in her life. There needed to be a fine line between what she did and who she knew. Not every family was homespun like his, not every

community was apple-pie sweet. “Here’s where you and I part ways.” She parked the truck outside the hotel, handed him the key and grabbed her carpetbag. “Happy trails, Zach.”

Chapter Five

“Zach decided to accompany Jessie at her convention,” Pansy told Helen. “And Pepper just called to tell me that she abandoned him—left him high and dry in Los Rios.”

Helen cocked her head. They sat inside the Tulips Saloon, the spot of many a cozy meeting and many a scheme. It was a wonderful second home for the women of the town. They were proud of the tea shop they'd created. Once a lackluster cafeteria with few customers, they'd overridden Duke's objections to calling it a saloon and decided to make a gamble for the tourist trade. “I knew that girl had spunk. I knew she was right for our town the minute I laid eyes on her.”

Pansy dusted off the chairs with a tea towel. “She's a bit fancy.”

“Zach needs fancy. It will be good for him.” Helen smiled. “Those Forrester kids always liked whatever was completely opposite from their own personal experience.”

That had been true in Liberty and Duke's case. Duke was stubborn, and Liberty was... stubborn... Helen pursed her lips. “Or maybe they like their own mirror image.”

“Then that would make Jessie all wrong.” Pansy got a fresh tea towel and began polishing silver sleigh-shaped vases. She'd bought pretty red flowers to go in the vases for color and to spiff up the ambiance of the Saloon. “There's definitely something going on between those two that is different from Zach's usual pattern, and I suspect he's interested in her or he wouldn't have gone with her.”

“Yes,” Helen said thoughtfully. “But if she left him in Los Rios, what's he going to do now?”

“He's on his way home, according to Pepper. And not happy about it, either. She said he was all set to learn about the life of a princess.”

“It sounds like there's an edge to those words,” Helen said. “I found Jessie very down-to-earth.”

“Yes,” Pansy agreed. “But still, she's definitely not the type to settle in Tulips, Helen.”

Helen frowned, unwilling to concede that point and yet wondering if her good friend was right. She'd taken a shine to Jessie, she had to admit.

“Remember the goal is to grow Tulips,” Pansy said gently. “Duke says it has to be done organically. No bachelor cattle drives.”

“Oh, what does Duke know?” Helen had given up on the idea of the bachelor balls when Duke had decided to go along with Zach's idea of building a new elementary school. Zach had wanted to bulldoze the Tulips Saloon, and Duke had saved her precious tearoom from that fate. Zach had gotten his way about the elementary school—a very good idea but Helen only admitted that secretly—and in return, Helen had to give up her schemes for bringing men to Tulips.

But with so many single women in the town, it was hard to grow Tulips without males, and doing it organically might not be possible. Certainly not quick. Zach had dated most of the appropriate females around these parts and none of them had gotten him as far as Houston, much less Los Rios. “We have to work with what we have sometimes, Pansy.” She considered her words for a moment. “Do you remember the first rush of being in love?”

Pansy put down her tea towel in surprise. “I remember madness and delight and anticipation.”

Helen's cheeks pinked. “So do I. I also remember that the wonder of love was that it didn't have any rhyme or reason to it.”

“Yes,” Pansy said, “the emotions were simply there. They existed no matter how much I couldn't believe them or understand them.”

“Which would perhaps point to why a woman would leave a handsome man stranded in a strange town.”

“Not stranded,” Pansy said. “She left him his truck, after all.”

“True. We may not have gotten the whole story.”

“I'm worried about her car,” Pansy admitted. “Something seems fishy about Zach sending Jessie's car to Holt, our lovable hairdresser.”

“Holt is wonderful with mechanics. He loves cars! Particularly vintage and special cars. He’ll do a wonderful job for Jessie.”

“Yes,” Pansy said, sinking slowly into a Queen Anne antique chair with cherry blossom design. “Except that Holt never got the car.”

Helen blinked. “Holt doesn’t have Jessie’s T-bird?”

“No.” Pansy raised her chin. “I asked him what was wrong with Jessie’s car, and he said he didn’t have a pink T-bird, nor had he ever met a Jessie. Nor had Zach called him about fixing any kind of vehicle.”

“Oh, my,” Helen said. “This is not good.”

“I only gently suggest that we mind whom we claim is leaving whom high and dry.”

“Point taken. This is a tasty dilemma,” Helen said. “Poor Jessie.”

Pansy sighed. “I do believe so.”

“We’re going to need the boys for this one,” Helen said, and Pansy nodded.

“As inept as they are, they are the perfect ones to ferret out the male dynamic for us.”

“And Jessie’s car, to be sure,” Helen said. “We must always fortify the position of the female.” She reached for the phone. “I will call in the spies, such as they deem themselves.”

Pansy smiled. “I love living in Tulips.”

BUG CARMINE, self-annointed parade master of Tulips—if they could ever talk Duke into letting them have a parade—and Hiram, who lived in the cell Sheriff Duke presided over by choice, stared at the fancy pink car hidden in one of the Forrester’s barns.

“That’s some set of wheels,” Bug commented. “Mrs. Carmine would like to take a spin in that.”

“Looks like a sin-mobile to me,” Hiram said. “In my day, girls that drove something like that would have been the ones you wouldn’t take home to Mother.”

“Yeah.” Bug placed the cover carefully over it again. “Now that we’ve found it, we have to make a decision. Either we tell the ladies it’s here and they bust Zach, or we say we didn’t find it, and let matters really get hot in Tulips.”

“Can’t put ‘Here Lives A Car Thief’ on a town billboard.” Hiram shook his head. “Still, I like the idea of putting one over on the TSG. What crime has Zach committed anyway? It’s good that he likes a girl enough to steal her car.”

Bug sniffed. “In my day, we sent flowers as a token of our affection.”

“These are different times,” Hiram said, “as you should know from what the Tulips Saloon Gang regularly put us through.”

“There is that,” Bug agreed. “We can’t tell on Zach. Bringing the TSG down on his head—well, I couldn’t stand to see that happen to him.”

“Yeah, they’re still mad at him for his idea to bulldoze the saloon and make an elementary school out of it.” They walked out of the barn and closed the door. “As far as I’m concerned, I never saw a thing,” Hiram said.

“Nor me.” Bug shook his friend’s hand.

“My conscience is clear,” Hiram said with satisfaction as they walked away. “I do love keeping secrets from the gals, and tonight, I’ll sleep like a baby with my conscience for a blanket.”

TO ZACH’S SURPRISE, days passed without any word from Jessie. When the weeks slipped into December and he still hadn’t heard a word from her about her beloved car, he knew he had a big problem on his hands.

A tulip-pink convertible land yacht wasn’t easy to hide. It was only a matter of time before Duke or Pepper went into that outlying barn for something. Duke was busy with Liberty and the new baby, and Pepper was busy doing whatever she was doing, but time wouldn’t be on Zach’s side forever.

He couldn’t believe Jessie hadn’t returned for her car. He’d thought he was being so smart, so in control of the situation.

Of course, he should have known better when Jessie asked the convention security to have him blocked from the site under the guise of it being for women only, a trick she had eerily in common with Pansy and Helen and the other TSG members. He'd hung around until the convention was over but he'd never caught another glimpse of Jessie. The people at the checkout desk had been supremely unhelpful, but he'd finally bribed a young clerk into telling him that the entire mascara-and-lipstick crowd was long gone. The president, the clerk had told him in a whisper, had left by helicopter.

No wonder he hadn't seen Jessie escape. He'd only been patrolling the glass-and-brass hotel doors, not the rooftop.

Maybe she'd never return and he'd have a lifetime souvenir of the one golden afternoon they'd shared. He'd forever remember how he'd worried that she'd give him a child, and she'd given him a vehicle instead. Not to mention that it was a completely inappropriate ride for him to be seen driving, so she'd cornered him in a lose-lose situation that would do nothing except color his reputation pink or get him in deep brown with Duke.

"Okay, you win," he muttered under his breath. "Just come get your damn car before Duke finds it."

JESSIE LOVED spending the weeks leading up to the holidays on the road. Her job was glamorous and fun. She loved to travel. Meeting people and helping women to look their best was her favorite part of the job, especially at this time of the year. This was her moment to help ladies shine, like ornaments that stayed in storage all year and came out radiant for the holiday season.

Hopefully, what she taught them stayed with them the rest of the year, too. That hope of helping women was what she'd built her position on at her company, and was the driving factor behind its success today.

Hot pink was the color of her life.

Her parents had known that when they'd chosen her car, her promotion gift. No mere heiress's job, her father had said that her vision held the direction the company needed.

She looked at her best friend as they sat in the living room of her suite at the world-class hotel her parents owned. Fran Carter was also her secretary and together the two of them had cooked up this year's special holiday look. It had almost been glittering and fabulous enough to keep her mind off a certain cowboy, but Jessie hadn't forgotten him despite the miles she'd put between them.

It would be impossible to forget Zach.

"So, Jessie T.," Fran said, curling up on a coffee-colored suede sofa, "we know all about how to cry so your mascara won't run and your fakies won't fall off, and how to make things look a helluva lot prettier than they really are. But I don't know a makeup trick for what you need."

Jessie shook her head. "The thing is," Jessie said slowly, "I think I would have fallen for Zach no matter what. He was pretty smooth for a man who grew up far away from sophisticated surroundings."

Fran nodded. "You could call him."

"I really can't," Jessie said. "If I do, he'll think I'm just looking for my car."

"It *was* a helluva calling card you left him," Fran said. "Eventually, he'd understand that your call wasn't completely about your vehicle."

"I'd never met anyone as stubborn as Zach. I'm afraid I didn't exercise good judgment in leaving him behind. My feet seemed to take flight of their own accord." No man had ever made her feel that nervous before, and escape had seemed the logical and only action.

"You've always put your job first," Fran said. "Don't be so hard on yourself. So you had a fling. It's completely understandable." She giggled. "Although out of character, I'll admit."

Jessie looked out the window at the skyline of the city. It was beautiful in Dallas, and she loved living here. But... "This is not where I want to raise a child," she said quietly.

"I know," Fran said. "Which is the real reason he'll know you calling is not about the car."

"His worst nightmare," Jessie murmured. "He told me so more than once."

Fran nodded. "We all have nightmares eventually."

Jessie touched her stomach. His nightmare was actually her dream come true.
At least part of her dream.

Chapter Six

It was a cold December this year, with gray twilight skies leading into dark nights. Zach hung candy canes on the Christmas tree in the Forrester living room rather morosely, thinking that Duke's child was too young to appreciate the decorations, and nobody but him seemed to carry on the holiday spirit.

Only this year, his holiday spirit had been flagging. Even a visit from the ghost of Christmases past would have livened things up a bit for him.

The ghost he'd least expected to appear got out of a yellow taxi and turned toward the house, catching him gawking out the window at her. His breath completely left him as Jessie waved hello.

She's come to get her car, Zach thought, squashing the relief rushing through him that Jessie had returned to Tulips. The doorbell rang. Zach dashed a hand through his hair, wished he was clean-shaven and decided he didn't care what had brought her back. He just thanked his lucky Christmas stars he was going to get to lay eyes on her one more time.

She'd scared him by leaving his pink ransommobile so long without even a call to check up on it.

He jerked open the door.

She looked at him silently.

"Do I know you?" he asked, trying to be funny. So many emotions rushed through him that he lost his place in his be-cool script.

"In the biblical sense," Jessie said, strolling into his living room. "Neither of us knows each other in any other sense, of course."

He'd forgotten how his wit never disarmed her—she could come right back with her own zinger. "I'm surprised you could find your way back here without a trail of bread crumbs or something."

She pulled a checked cashmere scarf from her neck. "The taxi driver didn't have any trouble finding the Forrester ranch."

She wouldn't even admit that she knew exactly where he lived—er, where her car was. He narrowed his gaze on her. "Make yourself at home, I guess, since you're here."

"Thank you." Sitting gingerly across from the tree, she studied his efforts. "Just getting started?"

He'd been at this chore all afternoon. "Yes. I suppose your tree is up and looks like Mrs. Claus decorated it personally."

Jessie blinked. "I never did ask you how Brahma Bud was. I hope he didn't suffer any effects from hitting my car."

Zach crossed his arms, taking in the delicate bones of her face and the gentle lines of her features. "*You hit him*, as I recall. He was minding his own business, entirely unaware that females driving pink cars might be bad for his health."

"So he's fine."

Zach sighed. "Yes. Thank you for asking."

She nodded. "I was worried about him."

"So worried that you called. Say, did you know that some people actually leave a building by helicopter when they're avoiding someone?"

Jessie stood. "I've come at a bad time. If I could just have my car keys—"

"Certainly." Reaching into a cabinet in the living room, he pulled out the keys and handed them to her. "And now that you have what you want, let me show you to your car. I think you'll find that it's been kept in the very best possible condition."

"Zach—"

He turned. "The car is this way. I'll drive you to the barn. I'm sure your schedule doesn't allow you much time to sit and chat."

She looked at him for a long moment. “No. It doesn’t,” she finally said. “And I’d like to pay a visit to the ladies before it gets any later.”

He raised a brow, surprised. “Pansy and Helen?”

“Well, yes,” Jessie said. “I don’t expect to be coming this way again, and I’d like to say hello.”

Of course she wouldn’t come through Tulips again. His heart began a restless pounding as he considered his options, which appeared few and unfortunate. As in none. He couldn’t keep her here: he’d already tried that and she’d shown a remarkable ability to outwit him. He’d tried romance, but she hadn’t been exactly banging down his bedroom door to throw herself into his den of sexual pleasure again. *A normal woman would*, he told himself sourly, just to keep his pride from ebbing away. “Are you hungry?” he asked suddenly. The silence had stretched long, he was out of options and blurting anything, even the offer of a hamburger, was his brain’s desperate appeal to keep her with him another moment or two.

“I am,” she said solemnly. “Are you?”

If she was hungry, he was hungry. Whatever it took. “Ravenous,” he said. “I could eat a horse. And the barn.”

Jessie looked at him. “I seem to be eating more lately.”

Her eyes widened. He glanced down the length of her body, admiring her pretty red coat, her winter boots and pantsuit of some soft fabric which went well with her whiskey-colored hair. “You look great to me,” he said. “If you’re eating more, it’s certainly going in the right places.” Her breasts looked great, he thought. Her figure was curvaceous, perhaps a bit curvier than he remembered, but heck, at the time he hadn’t been paying as much attention to the form as the opportunity to...his gaze shot to hers. “Everybody seems to eat more during the holidays.”

She nodded slowly, her eyes holding his.

His heart began to beat hard in his chest, nearly stealing his breath, almost painfully choking it from him. “You wouldn’t be trying to tell me in your refined way that you’re...eating more because you’re eating for two, would you?” he asked, his whole body tensing as he watched her eyes.

Her gaze dropped for just an instant, but in that instant he knew that he had followed in his brother Duke’s footsteps. “I’ll be damned,” he murmured, trying to sort out how he felt. Delighted, devastated, shocked, scared—

“Actually, three,” she said quietly, her eyes moving back to catch his.

He blinked. “Three what?”

She shrugged. “I’m eating for three. Me, and the twins. Merry Christmas, Zach.”

JESSIE WATCHED as Zach sat heavily, his gaze locked on hers. Helplessness washed over her.

“So much for your method,” he said. “I could have said no, I could have worn a raincoat, but I fell for you like a starving man for food.”

She walked out the front door, keys in hand.

Catching her hand, he turned her toward him. “What’s your hurry? Looks like we’re going to be spending a lifetime together, City.”

“It’s so annoying when you call me that,” she snapped, wishing she felt more relieved now that he knew but only feeling guilt. “My name is Jessie.”

“And a wonderful name it is, gorgeous.” He kissed her on the lips, surprising her so much she didn’t pull away. “We’ll be naming the twins together.”

She hadn’t thought that far ahead. Names had not been high on her list of priorities—figuring out how to tell Zach had been first. “You could take one, and I’ll take the other.”

“Nah.” He gave her stomach a mischievous eyeing. “Two? How are they both going to fit in that little tiny tummy? Two of my big, strapping sons?” He put a hand on her still-flat stomach. “If they’re anything like Duke and me, they’re going to be fighting for space constantly.”

“This topic just doesn’t feel as light to me as it seems to be for you,” she said. “I’m still trying to make sense of it. Just the stress of having to tell you—”

The last two weeks of planning, worrying and stalling had finally worn her down. Tears burst out of nowhere, running down her face before she could compose herself.

“Uh-oh,” Zach said. “That’s the main difference between pregnant women and pregnant cows, I guess. Emotions.”

She wiped at her face quickly. “I could tell you were a sensitive male the first time I met you.”

He wiped her tears away with his thumbs. “You’re cute when you spring a leak.”

Jessie moved away from him. “Could you direct me to my car, please?”

“I could, but you’ll probably tell me a few more things you’re keeping from me. You’re kind of like a firecracker that way. If I wait long enough, information just explodes—”

“Zach,” she said, “are you in shock?”

“Yes.”

She sighed. “I thought so. I’ve been a bundle of nerves because I knew how mad you’d be.”

“Well, I am mad,” he said, “but I’m not going to be upset in front of the children.”

“The children?”

“Yes.” He put a protective hand on her stomach. “They need to know from day one that they’re loved, anticipated and cherished. Our family is very close, in our own oddly special way.”

She looked at him. “So the reason you’re acting so nonchalant is that you’re faking it for the children?”

“Faking it doesn’t sound right.” He touched her carefully constructed eyelashes. “From now on, I don’t want you wearing any more of this goo around me.”

“I make my living with this goo,” she said, and he nodded.

“I make my living with bulls and things, but I’m not going to make you look at them all the time. I prefer natural skin on my woman.”

“Zach, I am not your woman. I will never be your woman,” Jessie said. “I don’t even know you.”

“That’s going to be a problem,” Zach said, “since I am your prince charming. Your knight in shining armor.”

“I don’t need the platitudes of fairy tales,” she said hotly, making Zach laugh.

“Okay, we’re stuck with each other for life,” he said. “How’s that for relationship lingo? When we’re at the boys’ soccer matches, we’ll introduce each other as ‘this is the person I’m stuck with forever.’ People won’t talk, I’m sure. Not in Tulips.”

He wasn’t going to make her life easy. Racing ahead into the future, thoughts of Zach made her brain whirl. Ever since the thin blue line had shown up on her pregnancy test, and the super-shocking news of a double pregnancy had been confirmed by her doctor, Jessie had been holding her breath. Trying to think how to tell a man she barely knew that he was going to be a father. She hadn’t thought of baby names, nor soccer games, nor what the two of them would be to each other. She’d dreaded having to tell him, but since she knew his worst fear—that he’d be a father and his children would never know him—she wanted him to know as fast as she could tell him. Dealing with all the other consequences she’d put on the back burner.

He had the pot on the front burner, turned to full boil. Strangely, he didn’t seem to mind the heat. “I thought you’d be scary about this.”

“I’m going to be scary in a little while,” Zach said easily. “When I have to tell Pansy and Helen, I’ll probably be at my worst. They’re going to be so pleased.” He gave her a wry glance. “My brother the sheriff says he wants the town to grow organically, which is not quite what the Gang wants. They’re going to love the fact that they’re getting two little organic sprouts out of one Forrester. They’ll say it serves me right, and then smile into their fragile little teacups.”

“I don’t understand.”

He shook his head. “Just be prepared for the Gang to give you a very large baby shower.”

“I don’t want that,” Jessie said quickly. “Can’t we come to an agreement about this?”

A frown crossed his face. He stared down at her, his brows knit tightly together. “Agreement?”

She swallowed. “Um, a custody agreement?”

“No,” he said, his gaze like dark glass, “and never talk like that in front of the children again. Ever.”

ZACH WAS MORE SURPRISED than he let on to Jessie about his impending fatherhood. But he wasn't surprised this was happening. The moment he'd seen her, he'd known she would change his life—and she had.

They didn't even know each other, and what he did know about her signaled a bumpy road ahead. She was flighty. He was methodical. She was spoiled. He was hardworking.

Those differences were just the beginning. He looked at her, imagining her with a big, round belly, and wanted to rub his hands with glee. Twins! It was a Christmas miracle as far as he was concerned, and he wanted this new phase in their relationship to start well. He wasn't saying one thing to upset her. “Were you planning on telling Helen and Pansy? Is that why you really wanted to go into town?”

“I...don't know.” She put her keys into her purse and sat back down. “I know I was planning on telling you. That's all I knew.”

“So you're moving out here with me,” he said, leaning against a wall, quickly trying to devise a plan. “Or I'm moving somewhere with you.”

“No,” Jessie said. “We're not moving anywhere, at least not together.”

He frowned at her. “Look. We're not throwing away what we did as just an afternoon of freebie sex. We need to become closer.”

She appeared to shrink into her coat. “I don't understand you. I know that this is your worst fear come true.”

“Yeah.” He scratched under his hat. “Funny how it doesn't seem that bad now that it's happened. If that was my life's biggest fear, maybe I never had anything to be really afraid of.”

She smiled. “You're not going to say that I tried to trap you?”

“Did you?”

“No!”

He laughed. “Oh, come on. Leave a guy with a little ego.”

She stood. “I'm not interested in your ego. I would never cling to a man, or trap him, or—”

“Jessie,” he said softly, reaching for her hand to calm her down, “when I met you, you were hot-footing it away from a boyfriend or ex-fiancé or husband or something. You're clearly not the kind of woman who lets men influence her life. I know you're a big shot in your company and that you're more likely to wear pants than panty hose. I get it, okay? Don't keep worrying that I think you're some thimble-brained woman who can't take care of herself.”

“Thimble-brained?”

“Those things Pansy and Helen are always using to sew with and stuff.”

She nodded. “Nice analogy.”

He gave her a wry look. “I know you're not ready to walk down the aisle with me. You can relax. The electric fence you've got up around you is shooting sparks at me.”

She sighed. “I don't mean to be so uneasy.”

“Well, don't get too comfortable, either,” Zach said, grinning. “I don't want to be taken for granted now that you've gotten what you wanted from me.”

“Zach!”

He crossed his boots and stared at her. “You did say you had planned to get pregnant as soon as possible after the wedding.”

“Yes, but my fiancé was not a stranger.” She gave him a haughty look. “Wanting children is not unusual inside a marriage.”

He shrugged. “I should hire myself out for stud. I have bulls that don't perform so successfully.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m leaving to tell Pansy and Helen. I need female advice. Yours isn’t worth a damn.”

“That’s what I hear,” he said cheerfully. “It comes from being middle child.”

“Whatever,” she said.

“I’ll drive you if you promise not to steal my truck.”

“You have no worries,” she said, and he nodded.

“Good. We can break the news together. First we have to tell Duke, of course. Pepper we can tell by phone because we hardly see her anymore.”

Jessie backed up a step. “You can tell your brother by yourself.”

He grinned, liking that she was feeling a little bit nervous. It made him feel big and strong and protective. “Duke won’t throw you in jail.”

She stiffened. “Of course not! What charges would he have?”

“You were trespassing,” he reminded her.

“I was lost,” she snapped.

“You did assault my livelihood with a deadly weapon. Poor Brahma Bud.”

She sniffed. “Any other charges?”

“You did steal my heart,” he said, trying to be light but realizing the moment he said it that he’d made a serious error. Jessie’s eyes went dark.

“I stole nothing worth keeping, then,” she said. “Consider it returned.”

“Whew, prickly,” he said. “Did you know you have a habit of being prickly when you’re nervous?”

She stared up at him, her gaze very serious. “Did you know you have a habit of trying to be funny when you’re nervous? It doesn’t go over very well.”

“Why would I be nervous?”

“Impending fatherhood, a woman you only met once, your worst fears realized, telling your brother—” She paused. “I can’t decide which of those nerves of yours is most rattled.”

“You may have a point.” He rubbed his chin. “I don’t know how to act. Mainly, I don’t want you to go away before I get to know you better. That’s my biggest worry now.”

He meant it, even if sounded silly. How could he do the right thing for her, and for his children, unless he knew who Jessie Farnsworth really was?

“These kids of mine are going to matter to me a lot,” he said gruffly. “I know you’ve got a busy life, but...marry me, Jessie.”

Chapter Seven

An offer of marriage from Zach was the last thing Jessica had expected from him. Her heart took a dizzying leap. *If only it were that easy.*

"I know you're not the marrying kind," he said, "but we could probably work out a satisfactory arrangement."

She blinked. "Arrangement?"

"Yeah. I don't know what. But something we could both live with."

The front door opened, and they moved away from each other. Duke walked in, sleet spilling off his hat. "Howdy," he said to Zach. "Well, hello, Jessie."

"Hi, Duke," she said, sending a worried glance Zach's way. Her composure had deserted her with the marriage proposal. Surely he hadn't been serious!

Yet a secret part of her wondered what marriage to Zach might be like.

"Hope I'm not interrupting anything," Duke said. "Liberty says she needs some bolts of plastic covering she stored in one of the barns. I'm not sure which one. Hellish weather to search four barns but at least you made it in before the storm, Jessie. I heard the roads were freezing up just east and north of Tulips. It's on its way here."

Zach frowned. "Plastic covering?"

"Yeah. There should be several rolls of it. Big enough to cover the carpet in a wedding chapel."

"I never saw bolts of plastic," Zach said.

"You don't go into all the barns regularly," Duke said. "Jessie, you look well. Are you in for a couple of days?"

She shook her head. "I wasn't planning on it."

Duke looked from Jessie to Zach. "Well, good to see you all the same. I'm off to root around out there."

"No!" Zach crammed a hat on his head and pulled his keys from his pocket. "I'll look. You stay here and keep Jessie company."

Duke looked bemused. "I don't think I should do that, Zach. I believe she came to see you."

Zach nodded. "That's true. So I'll just head off now and do that looking around for you. I'll call you if I find any of the plastic. In the meantime, grab some soup off the stove and try to warm up."

Duke looked at him. "Hell, Zach, you wouldn't have even known I was at the ranch if I hadn't walked in. Just pretend like you don't know I'm on the property and go on doing what you were doing." Duke turned to leave. "You're acting nuttier than a Christmas fruitcake, which, by the way, the ladies whipped up for us. Full of pecans and things. Be sure to stop by my office and have a bite, Jessie. The Gang can cook for certain, and this is the time of year when they really get their aprons on. Our neighboring-town baker, Valentine, has challenged them to a poppyseed cake bake-off, and that's a holiday snack I look forward to."

Zach slid out the door while his brother was completing his polite goodbye to her. Jessie looked at Zach's retreating back, surprised. "He definitely doesn't want you to get chilled," she told Duke.

"He is one strange apple that fell off our family tree. If I didn't know better, I'd think there was something in one of the barns he didn't want me to see."

"Oh," Jessie said. "I thought strange was his normal behavior."

"I can see why you'd think that." Duke sighed. "Come on. I can't leave you here alone, though my brother has no manners. You can sit in my nice warm truck while we search. Who would want to get married the first week in December, anyway?" he grumbled, holding Jessie's elbow as she walked so she wouldn't slip.

Jessie shook her head. "Liberty's brave to handle gowns and wedding details. I'd be too worried to have brides as my clientele."

They got in Duke's truck. "Zach says you do makeup for conventions of women. That sounds just as challenging as brides. Women in search of beauty would terrify me."

Jessie smiled. "Female dreams aren't scary. Really, they're not. Females want what males want."

"I've only been married a couple of months and haven't figured that out yet," Duke said with a chuckle. "What the hell?" Stopping the truck, he shone the brights into the barn, which Zach had obviously reached at a breakneck speed.

Jessie squinted into the darkness. "Looks like a whole lot of plastic wrap covering something big." She got out of the truck and followed Duke.

Zach was busily tucking the plastic onto a large roll, while diligently keeping his back to whatever object he was removing the plastic from.

"What the hell?" Duke asked. "You didn't use Liberty's wedding aisle-covering stuff, did you, Zach?"

"Quite by accident," Zach said. "You two go on back to the house and get warm. I'll be done in a jif and bring this plastic with me."

"Yeah, but what the hell you used it for is what I want to know," Duke said, approaching Zach. But Jessie already knew.

"My car!" she said. "You jerk, you never got it repaired." Anger flooded her. "Which means it was never broken in the first place."

"Well," Zach said, and he would have said more, but Jessie turned away so she wouldn't slap the excuse right out of his mouth before he could tell her any more lies.

She got into Duke's truck without saying a word. Duke also got in, leaving the plastic wrap behind, and silently started the engine. Unable to stop herself, Jessie peeked at Zach. He stood forlornly in front of her car, which was still half-covered with wrap. Sleet began pelting the roof of the truck and bounced off the barn roof.

"Storm's coming in," Duke said gently. "I'm sure not making excuses for my brother, but you don't want to drive that pretty car in this weather, anyway. It's not good for a convertible."

She was too mad—and too hurt—to speak.

Duke sighed. "I'll drive you into Pansy's. One of the old gals would just love to put you up for the night. Or longer. They'll pamper you thoroughly."

She nodded. He turned the truck around, leaving Zach.

"I'd like to say something good about my kid brother—"

"You should arrest that car thief, Sheriff." The words came out a whole lot more bitter than she wanted them to sound.

"I never considered that," Duke said. "You have a point. But you don't really want him locked up, do you?"

She sighed. "He'd just get on your nerves while you tried to work."

"Are you sure you don't know my brother very well?"

Well enough to be having children with him. "Better than I'd like to, at this point."

"When the weather clears and it's safe for you to drive out from the ranch, I'll make certain Zach gets your car to you, in complete working order."

"Thank you."

"I have to be honest, I'm a bit surprised by my brother's behavior. Though I'm trying not to rush to judgment, I'd like to apologize on behalf of the Forrester family for my brother's prank. I really am surprised by him."

Duke would be more surprised if he knew he was going to be an uncle.

He pulled into a driveway. "But these three houses are friendly territory. Miss Pansy's, Miss Helen's and then Liberty's house, which she's also converted into a wedding shop. We still stay here when we need to be closer to town, though. When bad weather comes in, I like being near my office. I can walk from here."

The houses were small and quaint, certainly not like anything Jessie had ever lived in. “Are you sure I won’t be putting anyone out?”

“The ladies will be delighted to have company. I promise.” He waved to them as they came out on their respective porches, and Jessie smiled, delighted to see the ladies again. Duke came around to her door just as Zach’s truck pulled up behind them in the driveway. He got out, slamming his door.

“I can take over from here, Duke,” Zach said.

“I don’t think so,” Duke said with a scowl. “You have a lot of explaining to do, and I don’t know that you’re operating honestly where this woman is concerned.”

“I’m trying to marry her,” Zach said.

“That might have nothing to do with honesty on your part,” Duke snapped, but Jessie’s eyes widened. Pansy clasped her hands together, and Helen’s mouth puckered.

“That’s no proposal,” Helen said, coming forward to shoo Jessie toward her house. “Pansy, be careful coming down those steps. Come on over and I’ll make us some tea. It’s so good to see you again, Jessie. We wondered when you’d return.”

“Yes,” Pansy said, giving her a hug. “When is the baby due?”

Duke stared at her, surreptitiously shooting a glance at her midsection, which was concealed by her red wool coat. “Baby?”

“How did you know?” Jessie asked Pansy.

“You glow, my dear. You simply glow. And you’ve put on a teensy bit of very flattering weight.”

Duke put his hands on his hips. “Is that why you stole her car?”

Helen gasped. “Stole her car?”

“Yes. It’s hidden in one of our barns.”

Pansy gave Zach’s arm a light slap. “Shame on you, Zach. Your parents would be so disappointed.”

Zach sighed. “You people are not helping.”

“I bet those rascals found the car and never told us,” Helen said to Pansy. “I’m going to give them what-for when I see them.”

Pansy nodded. “Jessie, we sent out a search team to check on your vehicle. But they failed us.” She gave a haughty sniff at Zach. “You can’t hijack a lady when you want to get to know her better, even if she’s having your child.”

“Children,” Zach said.

“Children?” Duke repeated, glowering at his brother.

“We’re having twins,” Jessie said.

Duke grinned. “Way to go, Bro! Nice shooting!”

The women groaned. “Come on, Pansy,” Helen said. “We’ve had enough excitement for the night, and Jessie needs her rest.”

Pansy wiped the delighted grin from her face so she could level a stern look at Zach. “And no climbing through windows or any other shenanigans to talk to Jessie. She’ll talk to you when we’re good and ready. You just go cool your heels, Zach.”

Jessie was fine with that. She was stunned to find that Zach had lied to her. “Thank you for the ride, Duke,” she said, allowing Pansy and Helen to lead her away.

“Hey! How about my marriage proposal?” Zach asked.

“We never heard one,” Helen called over her shoulder as they walked away. “We heard a stubborn man trying to get his way with little effort, though.”

“Thank you,” Jessie said as the door closed behind them. It was nice to be out of the cold, and even better to be inside the welcoming doors of Helen’s cozy house. “The only bright spot in this is that when Liberty finds out Zach used her precious wedding floor covering to protect my car, she’s going to be annoyed. I don’t know that it can be used now for the purposes for which it was intended.”

“It’ll be good for Zach to have a bunch of females peeved with him,” Pansy said, taking Jessie’s coat. “Hopefully, it’ll smarten him up.”

“That’s for certain.” Helen set the kettle on the stove. “He’s been quite spoiled since we have so few males in town. So few reasonably intelligent males.”

Pansy giggled. “So much for our spies. They’re either terrible at their job, or conspiring against us.”

Jessie looked at the women. “Why would your friends not tell you if they knew my car was perfectly fine?”

“To be on the boys’ side,” Helen said simply. “This town has always been about the battle of the sexes. And we girls always win.”

Pansy giggled as the three of them sat at the table together. A pretty lamp with a cut-out shade sent warm light around the kitchen. Jessie relaxed, feeling like she was home for the very first time in her life.

Chapter Eight

Zach cooled his heels for as long as he could stand it—approximately ten hours—and despite the bad weather, drove over to Helen's. He just had to see Jessie. Okay, she'd shocked the hell out of him. He hadn't reacted appropriately—heaven only knew he hadn't done *anything* appropriately.

But there was a lot of history in his life that forced him to seek appropriate action where Jessie and his kids were concerned. He'd had a major Christmas present tossed at him, and he was determined to learn how to keep it.

Fortunately for him, he was a Forrester, and so far, the Forrester family was one-for-one on figuring out when to keep their hands on their pregnant significant other.

Pepper would be too smart to let herself get ahead of the romance, he thought sourly. Younger sisters shouldn't be so calm, cool and collected about everything—only the men in the family seemed to have a hard time with relationships.

"It should be the other way around," he muttered, thinking about last night's impromptu proposal which had brought him no credit whatsoever with Jessie, Duke or the Gang, either, for that matter. As much as they adored hearing about proposals, they'd barely paid his any attention.

They hadn't taken him seriously—which seemed to be a theme in his life. He stared at Helen's house, wondering how to approach the puzzle his world had become. Should he try romance?

"Little late for that." Jessie wouldn't take him seriously on the romance issue. He had to be very careful with his pursuit because she possessed a natural-born wanderer's foot. She could take off any time, in any method of transportation, and it might be months before he laid eyes on her again.

Perhaps help was required in this matter. He pulled out his phone and dialed Holt, investor and civic-minded counterpart to the Gang. Holt sided with the ladies, but he also sided with the men sometimes, and was guaranteed to give a rational and unbiased opinion.

"Holt," he said when he heard a brisk hello on the other end of the line.

"Yes, Zach," Holt said. "I already know why you're calling. I heard your little lady is back in town wanting her car, and that you told her I was supposedly fixing it. I don't like being in the middle if I don't know what's going on."

Great. Life wasn't good when the only hairdresser in town was in a tizzy with him. "Sorry about that. It seemed like a good excuse at the time."

"It didn't work, though, did it?"

"No," Zach said, sighing.

"So now she's returned, and she wants her car, and you want some visitation. That's what I hear through the grapevine," Holt said.

"Grapevine's right," Zach replied. "I want custody of my kids if Jessie won't marry me."

Holt sighed. "The only way you can achieve that is through the courts, Zach."

"I was thinking flowers, maybe some time alone together—"

"You called for my opinion," Holt said. "Becoming a father with a woman whom you've greatly aggravated is not a position of equanimity, you know."

He wasn't sure what equanimity was, but it didn't sound like he was in a good place with Jessie. "But if you met her—"

"I did." Holt sniffed. "Not that you brought her by. Helen invited me to come meet the newest Tulips citizen."

Zach frowned. "I doubt you'll ever be able to call Jessie a citizen of Tulips."

"At the rate you're going, no."

Everybody is a critic. Zach said, "Do you have any advice, or are you just going to ride the Zach's-A-Louse bandwagon?"

“Legal documentation. And remember she has two legal eagle brothers. The deck may be pretty well stacked in her favor.”

“Legal eagle brothers?” Zach listened to the dial tone in his ear. “That was so helpful.”

Drumming his fingers on the steering wheel, he looked at the three small, two-story houses that so delicately hid the strength residing within them. Jessie did fit in with that group of strong women, he realized. He had been attracted to her strength from the moment he’d met her. She wasn’t the kind of woman who flirted. She didn’t put on airs around a man. With Jessie, he’d learned that what he saw was pretty much what he got, straightforward and honest.

That was some small comfort, but he couldn’t help mulling the rebound factor. She’d been in a vulnerable time in her life when they’d met.

He conceded that he might have come across as a bit ham-handed and perhaps even a bit horny. Those might be reasons she hadn’t taken his marriage proposal seriously.

“Like I just jump on every cute girl I meet.” He stared at Helen’s house through slivers of sleet bouncing off his windshield. He owed it to his children—and he and Jessie—to present himself and his plan one more time, even if he had to do it in Miss Helen’s living room.

He got out of the truck and went to the door. On the door hung a piece of paper that read, “At Liberty’s.” He went to the middle house and rang the doorbell. Duke answered, shaking his head at his brother. “Next door,” he said, while Molly-Jimbo barked a welcome at Zach. Duke closed the door. Zach headed to the final house, finding the front door open and about ten women standing in the entryway of Miss Pansy’s.

“Did I miss a party?” he asked, wondering how he could have missed seeing the parked cars or commotion or something.

The ladies went quiet. In front of the fireplace sat Jessie. At her feet were small gifts of welcome, ranging from knitted baby booties to decorated cloth baby diapers. There was even a stack of recipe cards.

Pansy came over to give him a hug. “We’re having a very tiny, most last-minute welcoming party. Holt’s been by as well.”

“I heard,” Zach said, not feeling too happy that he was left out of the fun.

“Well, it’s a wonderful day for hot tea and cookies,” Pansy said. “And who knows when we might get another chance to introduce Jessie to some of the girls? Thankfully your brother didn’t mind rounding everybody up in his truck and bringing them over. It couldn’t have been more fun if it was a sleighing party! Duke even wore a Santa hat.”

Jessie watched him, her eyes wide and somewhat worried. Since some of the “girls” were between sixty and eighty years of age, Zach realized his audience was one of romantic souls.

He decided to play to that audience. “Hi, Jessie.”

“Hi.” She barely glanced at him.

Whew. Frosty as the cold air outside. “Hope you’ll forgive me about the car,” he said. “I got carried away.”

A murmur went around the room.

“You certainly did,” Jessie said.

“Though I kept your car in excellent shape,” he said.

“Yes,” Liberty said. “You owe me for plastic—”

“I certainly do,” Zach said quickly, before the subject could move from his intentions to his sins. “Jessie, I know I asked you to marry me too quickly—”

The murmur went around the room again, this time with more excitement. Jessie watched him, her gaze suspicious.

“But I want you to know I’m willing to wait,” Zach continued, “a long time, if I have to, to get your ‘yes.’”

The ladies turned to look at Jessie, whose cheeks had gone strawberry-pink.

“Thank you,” Jessie replied, “but my answer must remain no. You lied to me, Zach Forrester, and I’d never be able to trust you. Plus, it was a silly scheme, if you ask me. I should send you a bill for all the travel inconvenience you’ve caused me.”

This wasn’t going to be easy. “I’d pay that bill and any other,” Zach said. “You could have come to get your car anytime. Why didn’t you?”

The audience turned to look at her again. Jessie shifted on her chair. “I didn’t want to see you again.”

The room went so silent a teacup could have cracked and no one would have noticed.

“By the time Thanksgiving passed, I realized I was expecting,” she said, lifting her chin. “I decided this was something I needed to do myself. Of course, at the time, I thought something was terribly wrong with my car and you were honestly trying to get it repaired. I had no idea you’d simply hijacked it.”

The ladies leveled frowns on him.

Miss Helen stood. “Well, I must say, perhaps this isn’t the time or place for this discussion,” she said gently. “But all the same, Jessie, I must speak on behalf of Zach.”

Zach blinked. Was one of the town’s most sturdy pillars going to put in a good word for him?

“Zach has ever been the more impulsive Forrester,” Helen said, with Pansy nodding in agreement. “And yet, he has a heart of gold so that one must love him in spite of his foibles.”

Jessie looked surprised to hear that, as was Zach himself. *Go on. Now we’re getting somewhere*, he thought gratefully. He wanted to be loved in spite of whatever that thing was she said he had.

“His brother spent a great deal of time trying to derail our best plans,” Helen said, “but Liberty’s tamed him now so there’s very little chance of that.”

The ladies laughed. Jessie shifted again, not meeting Zach’s eyes.

“Pepper is her own woman. Very independent, much more so than her brothers.”

“Hey,” Zach said, “can Duke and I vote on that?”

“It’s true and you know it,” Pansy said. “If you’d but admit it. She went off and got a medical degree. She is trying to grow the town with the clinic she wants to start.”

“Well,” Helen said, “Duke’s idea of growing the town is to just hope and pray the sky rains interested newcomers who want to settle a fair piece from city life.”

“He’s becoming more broad-minded,” Liberty said.

“Only because you have a shop in the city as well as here,” Helen said. “He’s learned to admit that there must be something that draws people to a place. We had no railroad and we’re no port city. Big industrial farms have changed the livelihoods for many of us. We missed some opportunities to show that our light could shine brightly,” Helen said. “But along comes Zach, and he disagrees with his brother, and has a big idea.”

Zach nodded, liking the way Helen was making him look smart and important, all very necessary to be the man he thought Jessie might want. She began packing the welcome gifts into a sack, looking at him askance.

“I’m starting to see a theme here.”

“What?” Zach asked.

“Good ideas, wrong follow-through,” she said.

“Possibly,” he said, “though I really believe my ideas are just bigger in scope than other people are willing to comprehend at the moment.”

She pursed her lips at him, a gesture he very much appreciated. Made him want to kiss those red cherry-puckers again—this time for hours. No more quickies for him! Next time he got his hands on Jessie—

“It’s better than Duke’s idea,” Helen told Jessie. “He just wants us to grow the town organically. Like every person here of child-bearing age could either adopt or become pregnant with the amount of children we’d need to grow this town. I’m so sick of the word organic I could scream.”

“What would you do differently?” Jessie asked, and Zach was amazed that she was so interested.

“We suggested matchmaking balls and dances and all kinds of things, but Duke was being selfish and didn’t want other men around Liberty,” Pansy said.

Liberty laughed. “I brought my business here, and that definitely brings customers to the saloon. Then we try to keep people by showing them the beautiful countryside and down-home warmth we offer.”

Jessie looked at Zach. “Twins will definitely help, but it’s no population explosion.”

Was she suggesting more children? “No, it’s not,” Zach said, his mind working rapidly. “I’m willing to work on a population explosion with you.”

The ladies giggled, but Jessie sent a frown his way. “You have all been very kind to me,” she said, and the ladies smiled. “I’m sure you appreciate why I will probably not live here full-time with my children—”

“What?” Zach exclaimed, and the ladies began a nervous rustling. That pronouncement had to be worse than anything Duke had ever heard from Liberty! Maybe Holt was right. Although legalities were certainly something to be avoided...He’d much rather romance Jessie into seeing matters his way.

Jessie ignored his excitement. “Maybe my family’s company could have the next convention here.”

The ladies looked at her, their faces wreathed in hopeful delight.

“No,” Zach said. “I don’t like makeup and cosmetics and face creams. Natural is the only way to go. But thank you for trying to help.” He sat down heavily. “Our problem isn’t women, we have plenty of those. There are few eligible bachelors, so the women have to look outside the town. Eventually, they move.” He looked at Jessie. “Bet you thought I’d say yes just to keep you here.”

She raised her chin. “I do not plan the conventions. I oversee them and give lectures.”

“You’re being hasty, Zach,” Helen said. “Remember, we’re all about commerce here, and commerce is commerce, even if it comes out of a bottle.”

Zach blinked. It would never work. “This town is about women,” he said slowly. “We need to showcase our women.”

Pansy and Helen smiled, and the other ladies looked at him with appreciation.

“We have more to offer here than anywhere.” He looked at Jessie. “You could do it. You could fix them up and make them beautiful, and we could be the most beautiful town in Texas, women-wise.”

“They are beautiful,” Jessie said. “Every woman here is unique and I’ve enjoyed meeting them.”

“But most men, unlike myself, like the package. They like the bows on the package, too, the red lips and the fancy hair.”

Jessie shook her head. “Zach, you don’t understand.”

“Tell me.”

She got up. “I’m awfully tired all of a sudden, ladies. Thank you so much for your lovely gifts.”

Somehow, he’d lost her attention. “I’ll help you carry them to Helen’s. The sidewalk is probably getting more slick, and I don’t want you to fall. Now for the rest of you,” he said, “is Duke coming back, or can I play taxi for you ladies?”

“You just take care of Jessie,” Pansy said. “I’ll call Duke to finish his driving duties. That means I get to watch the baby.” Grinning, she went to the phone.

“Good night,” Jessie said, hugging everyone in the room as she left. “Thank you so much for everything.” Beside her, Zach carried out the gifts that had so warmed her heart. He’d completely surprised her by showing up, and then by basically offering himself in front of the ladies. She’d learned a lot about him that she hadn’t known, too.

But they were too different, they had different goals, and he'd lied to her. That reminded her very much of her ex, and she'd made a vow to herself that, if a man lied to her once, there were no second chances. She couldn't afford to make that mistake again.

She'd trusted Zach, and learned that he, too, told convenient fibs. She couldn't cut him any slack just because he'd lied to keep her in Tulips. "I've proven that I'd stay here willingly if I could," she said as they went through Helen's front door.

"Sensible of you," he said. "We're good people here."

She set her things down and took off her coat. "The jury is still out on you."

"Are you mad?"

She gave him a quizzical look. "What would you be, if our circumstances were reversed?"

"Hey, you hit my prize longhorn, and I didn't hold a grudge."

"Because the longhorn was still standing," Jessie said. "And we had sex."

He frowned. "We didn't have sex. We created children."

"I don't think you can be particularly sentimental about sex in the backseat of a car."

His frown grew deeper. "I damn sure can. I am very sentimental about that car! I've had it in storage for more than twelve weeks, a monument to the best sex I ever had!"

She blinked. "Really?"

"Well, hell yeah," Zach said. "Why? Didn't you think so?"

She tied her long hair up into a ponytail and pulled off her shoes. "I never did that in a car before, so I have no frame of reference."

"But you'd do it again? Wouldn't you?"

She glanced up at him. "With you?"

"You're sure as hell not ever making love to anyone else, Jessica T. Farnsworth," he said, "so don't waste your time considering your options."

She straightened. "That did not sound like a marriage proposal. It sounded like an order."

He nodded. "You didn't accept the proposal, so I have to declare limitations some other way."

"It's not going to work." Jessie moved into the kitchen, looking for Helen's teapot. "Marriage would make both of us crazy."

"We'd get to know each other better," Zach said, "and that's my whole goal."

"That's it?" She took down two teacups from the cabinet. "Shouldn't Miss Helen be here by now? You should check on her. It's very dangerous to be walking on the wet cement."

"See," he said, "you're starting to care about us. You're starting to take on Tulips' ways."

She shrugged. "I do care about Miss Helen and Miss Pansy. And some of the other ladies I've met."

He cleared his throat.

"Liberty, for example," she said. "And I'm pretty sure I'd like Pepper if I got to know her better."

He helped her put out cookies. "So, about this get to know us better thing," he said. "It probably works just as well for me as my sister."

"Maybe," she said, "but your sister isn't trying to tie me down."

Stubborn. But she had a point. "What if I didn't try to tie you down? What if I merely tied myself to you?"

She looked at him suspiciously. "I know you didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"I don't have Duke's handcuffs, if that's what you're worried about." He sat in the chair she pointed to. "How about if I move into wherever it is that you live?"

She shook her head at him. "Your ranch is here. You would not enjoy my lifestyle. It's all travel, and you're a homebody."

He sensed an angle and perhaps an advantage. "So you can't take twins on the road with you."

"I can."

“Well, at first, maybe. But later on, they’ll need stability. They can’t get any better stability than here in Tulips.” He took a slow sip of the hot tea, thinking how much he liked sitting here with Jessie, just the two of them talking about their future and their goals.

He’d get her to see his way eventually.

She looked at him. He sensed a struggle.

“Kids need schools and balance and ties to heritage,” he said softly. He gazed at her, his fingers reaching out to cover hers on the table. “The girl who has everything ought to know that.”

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