

A close-up portrait of a man wearing a light-colored cowboy hat and a dark, button-down shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a blurred, warm-toned landscape, possibly a sunset or sunrise over a field.

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LINDA LAEL  
MILLER

PART  
OF THE *Bargain*

Mills & Boon M&B

Linda Lael

**Part of the Bargain**

«HarperCollins»

## **Lael L. M.**

Part of the Bargain / L. M. Lael — «HarperCollins», — (Mills & Boon M&B)

Home Sweet Home? Libby Kincaid returned to the ranch where she grew up to heal the wounds left by a broken marriage and the death of her beloved stepson. But instead of the solace she craved, she found Jess Barlowe—sexy, alluring... and mad as hell. For years Jess had been her constant opponent, and now malicious rumors tarnishing her reputation only seemed to enrage him further. But soon these adversarial sparks ignited into a fire of passion, and Jess wouldn't stop until he made her his bride. Unfortunately, Libby knew all too well that being married to a man was no guarantee of his trust...or his love. "Miller tugs at the heartstrings as few authors can...." —Publishers Weekly

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# **Part of the Bargain**

New York Times Bestselling Author

## **Linda Lael Miller**



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In loving and grateful memory of Laura Mast.

## About the Author

The daughter of a town marshal, Linda Lael Miller is a New York Times and USA TODAY bestselling author of more than one hundred historical and contemporary novels, most of which reflect her love of the West. Raised in Northport, Washington, the self-confessed barn goddess now lives in Spokane, Washington. Linda hit a career high in 2011 when all three of her Creed Cowboys books—A Creed in Stone Creek, Creed’s Honor and The Creed Legacy—debuted at #1 on the New York Times bestseller list.

Linda has come a long way since leaving Washington to experience the world. “But growing up in that time and place has served me well,” she allows. And I’m happy to be back home.” Dedicated to helping others, Linda personally finances her Linda Lael Miller Scholarships for Women, which she awards to those seeking to improve their lot in life through education. More information about Linda and her novels is available at [www.LindaLaelMiller.com](http://www.LindaLaelMiller.com). She also loves to hear from readers by mail at P.O. Box 19461, Spokane, WA 99219.

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## Chapter 1

The landing gear made an unsettling ka-thump sound as it snapped back into place under the small private airplane. Libby Kincaid swallowed her misgivings and tried not to look at the stony, impassive face of the pilot. If he didn't say anything, she wouldn't have to say anything either, and they might get through the short flight to the Circle Bar B ranch without engaging in one of their world-class shouting matches.

It was a pity, Libby thought, that at the ages of thirty-one and thirty-three, respectively, she and Jess still could not communicate on an adult level.

Pondering this, Libby looked down at the ground below and was dizzied by its passing as they swept over the small airport at Kalispell, Montana, and banked eastward, toward the Flathead River. Trees so green that they had a blue cast carpeted the majestic mountains rimming the valley.

Womanhood being what it is, Libby couldn't resist watching Jess Barlowe surreptitiously out of the corner of her eye. He was like a lean, powerful mountain lion waiting to pounce, even though he kept his attention strictly on the controls and the thin air traffic sharing the big Montana sky that spring morning. His eyes were hidden behind a pair of mirrored sunglasses, but Libby knew that they would be dark with the animosity that had marked their relationship for years.

She looked away again, trying to concentrate on the river, which coursed beneath them like a dusty-jade ribbon woven into the fabric of a giant tapestry. Behind those mirrored glasses, Libby knew Jess's eyes were the exact same shade of green as that untamed waterway below.

"So," he said suddenly, gruffly, "New York wasn't all the two-hour TV movies make it out to be."

Libby sighed, closed her eyes in a bid for patience and then opened them again. She wasn't going to miss one bit of that fabulous view—not when her heart had been hungering for it for several bittersweet years.

Besides, Jess had been to New York dozens of times on corporation business. Who did he think he was fooling?

"New York was all right," she said, in the most inflammatory tone she could manage. Except that Jonathan died, chided a tiny, ruthless voice in her mind. Except for that nasty divorce from Aaron. "Nothing to write home about," she added aloud, realizing her blunder too late.

"So your dad noticed," drawled Jess in an undertone that would have been savage if it hadn't been so carefully modulated. "Every day, when the mail came, he fell on it like it was manna from heaven. He never stopped hoping—I'll give him that."

"Dad knows I hate to write letters," she retorted defensively. But Jess had made his mark, all the same— Libby felt real pain, picturing her father flipping eagerly through the mail and trying to hide his disappointment when there was nothing from his only daughter.

"Funny—that's not what Stace tells me."

Libby bridled at this remark, but she kept her composure. Jess was trying to trap her into making some foolish statement about his older brother, no doubt, one that he could twist out of shape and hold over her head. She raised her chin and choked back the indignant diatribe aching in her throat.

The mirrored sunglasses glinted in the sun as Jess turned to look at her. His powerful shoulders were taut beneath the blue cotton fabric of his workshirt, and his jawline was formidably hard.

"Leave Cathy and Stace alone, Libby," he warned with blunt savagery. "They've had a lot of problems lately, and if you do anything to make the situation worse, I'll see that you regret it. Do I make myself clear?"

Libby would have done almost anything to escape his scrutiny just then, short of thrusting open the door of that small four-passenger Cessna and jumping out, but her choices were undeniably limited. Trembling just a little, she turned away and fixed her attention on the ground again.

Dear heaven, did Jess really think that she would interfere in Cathy's marriage—or any other, for that matter? Cathy was her cousin—they'd been raised like sisters!

With a sigh, Libby faced the fact that there was every chance that Jess and a lot of other people would believe she had been involved with Stacey Barlowe. There had, after all, been that exchange of correspondence, and Stace had even visited her a few times, in the thick of her traumatic divorce, though in actuality he had been in the city on business.

"Libby?" prodded Jess sharply, when the silence grew too long to suit him.

"I'm not planning to vamp your brother!" she snapped. "Could we just drop this, please?"

To her relief and surprise, Jess turned his concentration on piloting the plane. His suntanned jaw worked with suppressed annoyance, but he didn't speak again.

The timbered land below began to give way to occasional patches of prairie—cattle country. Soon they would be landing on the small airstrip serving the prosperous 150,000-acre Circle Bar B, owned by Jess's father and overseen, for the most part, by Libby's.

Libby had grown up on the Circle Bar B, just as Jess had, and her mother, like his, was buried there. Even though she couldn't call the ranch home in the legal sense of the word, it was still home to her, and she had every right to go there—especially now, when she needed its beauty and peace and practical routines so desperately.

The airplane began to descend, jolting Libby out of her reflective state. Beside her, Jess guided the craft skillfully toward the paved landing strip stretched out before them.

The landing gear came down with a sharp snap, and Libby drew in her breath in preparation. The wheels of the plane screeched and grabbed as they made contact with the asphalt, and then the Cessna was rolling smoothly along the ground.

When it came to a full stop, Libby wrenched at her seat belt, anxious to put as much distance as possible between herself and Jess Barlowe. But his hand closed over her left wrist in a steel-hard grasp. "Remember, Lib—these people aren't the sophisticated if-it-feels-good-do-it types you're used to. No games."

Games. Games? Hot color surged into Libby's face and pounded there in rhythm with the furious beat of her heart. "Let go of me, you bastard!" she breathed.

If anything, Jess's grip tightened. "I'll be watching you," he warned, and then he flung Libby's wrist from his hand and turned away to push open the door on his side and leap nimbly to the ground.

Libby was still tugging impotently at the handle on her own door when her father strode over, climbed deftly onto the wing and opened it for her. She felt such a surge of love and relief at the sight of him that she cried out softly and flung herself into his arms, nearly sending both of them tumbling to the hard ground.

Ken Kincaid hadn't changed in the years since Libby had seen him last—he was still the same handsome, rangy cowboy that she remembered so well, though his hair, while as thick as ever, was iron-gray now, and the limp he'd acquired in a long-ago rodeo accident was more pronounced.

Once they were clear of the plane, he held his daughter at arm's length, laughed gruffly, and then pulled her close again. Over his shoulder she saw Jess drag her suitcases and portable drawing board out of the Cessna's luggage compartment and fling them unceremoniously into the back of a mud-speckled truck.

Nothing if not perceptive, Ken Kincaid turned slightly, assessed Senator Cleave Barlowe's second son, and grinned. There was mischief in his bright blue eyes when he faced Libby again. "Rough trip?"

Libby's throat tightened unaccountably, and she wished she could explain how rough. She was still stung by Jess's insulting opinion of her morality, but how could she tell her father that? "You know that it's always rough going where Jess and I are concerned," she said.

Her father's brows lifted speculatively as Jess got behind the wheel of the truck and sped away without so much as a curt nod or a halfhearted so-long. "You two'd better watch out," he mused. "If you ever stop butting heads, you might find out you like each other."

"Now, that," replied Libby with dispatch, "is a horrid thought if I've ever heard one. Tell me, Dad—how have you been?"

He draped one wiry arm over her shoulders and guided her in the direction of a late-model pickup truck. The door on the driver's side was emblazoned with the words CIRCLE BAR B BRANCH, and Yosemite Sam glared from both the mud flaps shielding the rear tires. "Never mind how I've been, dumplin'. How've you been?"

Libby felt some of the tension drain from her as her father opened the door on the passenger side of the truck and helped her inside. She longed to shed her expensive tailored linen suit for jeans and a T-shirt, and—oh, heaven—her sneakers would be a welcome change from the high heels she was wearing. "I'll be okay," she said in tones that were a bit too energetically cheerful.

Ken climbed behind the wheel and tossed one searching, worried look in his daughter's direction. "Cathy's waiting over at the house, to help you settle in and all that. I was hoping we could talk...."

Libby reached out and patted her father's work-worn hand, resting now on the gearshift knob. "We can talk tonight. Anyway, we've got lots of time."

Ken started the truck's powerful engine, but his wise blue eyes had not strayed from his daughter's face. "You'll stay here awhile, then?" he asked hopefully.

Libby nodded, but she suddenly found that she had to look away. "As long as you'll let me, Dad."

The truck was moving now, jolting and rattling over the rough ranch roads with a pleasantly familiar vigor. "I expected you before this," he said. "Lib..."

She turned an imploring look on him. "Later, Dad—okay? Could we please talk about the heavy stuff later?"

Ken swept off his old cowboy hat and ran a practiced arm across his forehead. "Later it is, dumplin'." Graciously he changed the subject. "Been reading your comic strip in the funny papers, and it seems like every kid in town's wearing one of those T-shirts you designed."

Libby smiled; her career as a syndicated cartoonist was certainly safe conversational ground. And it had all started right here, on this ranch, when she'd sent away the coupon printed on a matchbook and begun taking art lessons by mail. After that, she'd won a scholarship to a prestigious college, graduated, and made her mark, not in portraits or commercial design, as some of her friends had, but in cartooning. Her character, Liberated Lizzie, a cave-girl with modern ideas, had created something of a sensation and was now featured not only in the Sunday newspapers but also on T-shirts, greeting cards, coffee mugs and calendars. There was a deal pending with a poster company, and Libby's bank balance was fat with the advance payment for a projected book.

She would have to work hard to fulfill her obligations—there was the weekly cartoon strip to do, of course, and the panels for the book had to be sketched in. She hoped that between these tasks and the endless allure of the Circle Bar B, she might be able to turn her thoughts from Jonathan and the mess she'd made of her personal life.

"Career-wise, I'm doing fine," Libby said aloud, as much to herself as to her father. "I don't suppose I could use the sunporch for a studio?"

Ken laughed. "Cathy's been working for a month to get it ready, and I had some of the boys put in a skylight. All you've got to do is set up your gear."

Impulsively Libby leaned over and kissed her father's beard-stubbed cheek. "I love you!"

"Good," he retorted. "A husband you can dump—a daddy you're pretty well stuck with."

The word "husband" jarred Libby a little, bringing an unwelcome image of Aaron into her mind as it did, and she didn't speak again until the house came into sight.

Originally the main ranch house, the structure set aside for the general foreman was an enormous, drafty place with plenty of Victorian scrollwork, gabled windows and porches. It overlooked a sizable spring-fed pond and boasted its own sheltering copse of evergreens and cottonwood trees.

The truck lurched a little as Ken brought it to a stop in the gravel driveway, and through the windshield Libby could see glimmering patches of the silver-blue sparkle that was the pond. She longed to hurry there now, kick off her shoes on the grassy bank and ruin her stockings wading in the cold, clear water.

But her father was getting out of the truck, and Cathy Barlow, Libby's cousin and cherished friend, was dashing down the driveway, her pretty face alight with greeting.

Libby laughed and stood waiting beside the pickup truck, her arms out wide.

After an energetic hug had been exchanged, Cathy drew back in Libby's arms and lifted a graceful hand to sign the words: "I've missed you so much!"

"And I've missed you," Libby signed back, though she spoke the words aloud, too.

Cathy's green eyes sparkled. "You haven't forgotten how to sign!" she enthused, bringing both hands into play now. She had been deaf since childhood, but she communicated so skillfully that Libby often forgot that they weren't conversing verbally. "Have you been practicing?"

She had. Signing had been a game for her and Jonathan to play during the long, difficult hours she'd spent at his hospital bedside. Libby nodded and tears of love and pride gathered in her dark blue eyes as she surveyed her cousin—physically, she and Cathy bore no resemblance to each other at all.

Cathy was petite, her eyes wide, mischievous emeralds, her hair a glistening profusion of copper and chestnut and gold that reached almost to her waist. Libby was of medium height, and her silver-blond hair fell just short of her shoulders.

"I'll be back later," Ken said quietly, signing the words as he spoke so that Cathy could understand, too. "You two have plenty to say to each other, it looks like."

Cathy nodded and smiled, but there was something sad trembling behind the joy in her green eyes, something that made Libby want to scurry back to the truck and beg to be driven back to the airstrip. From there she could fly to Kalispell and catch a connecting flight to Denver and then New York....

Good Lord—surely Jess hadn't been so heartless as to share his ridiculous suspicions with Cathy!

The interior of the house was cool and airy, and Libby followed along behind Cathy, her thoughts and feelings in an incomprehensible tangle. She was glad to be home, no doubt about it. She'd yearned for the quiet sanity of this place almost from the moment of leaving it.

On the other hand, she wasn't certain that she'd been wise to come back. Jess obviously intended to make her feel less than welcome, and although she had certainly never been intimately involved with Stacey Barlowe, Cathy's husband, sometimes her feelings toward him weren't all that clearly defined.

Unlike his younger brother, Stace was a warm, outgoing person, and through the shattering events of the past year and a half, he had been a tender and steadfast friend. Adrift in waters of confusion and grief, Libby had told Stacey things that she had never breathed to another living soul, and it was true that, as Jess had so bitterly pointed out, she had written to the man when she couldn't bring herself to contact her own father.

But she wasn't in love with Stace, Libby told herself firmly. She had always looked up to him, that was all—like an older brother. Maybe she'd become a little too dependent on him in the bargain, but that didn't mean she cared for him in a romantic way, did it?

She sighed, and Cathy turned to look at her pensively, almost as though she had heard the sound. That was impossible, of course, but Cathy was as perceptive as anyone Libby had ever known, and she often felt sounds.

"Glad to be home?" the deaf woman inquired, gesturing gently.

Libby didn't miss the tremor in her cousin's hands, but she forced a weary smile to her face and nodded in answer to the question.

Suddenly Cathy's eyes were sparkling again, and she caught Libby's hand in her own and tugged her through an archway and into the glassed-in sunporch that overlooked the pond.

Libby drew in a swift, delighted breath. There was indeed a skylight in the roof—a big one. A drawing table had been set up in the best light the room offered, along with a lamp for night work, and there were flowering plants hanging from the exposed beams in the ceiling. The old wicker furniture that had been stored in the attic for as long as Libby could remember had been painted a dazzling white and bedecked with gay floral-print cushions. Small rugs in complementary shades of pink and green had been scattered about randomly, and there was even a shelving unit built into the wall behind the art table.

“Wow!” cried Libby, overwhelmed, her arms spread out wide in a gesture of wonder. “Cathy, you missed your calling! You should have been an interior decorator.”

Though Libby hadn't signed the words, her cousin had read them from her lips. Cathy's green eyes shifted quickly from Libby's face, and she lowered her head. “Instead of what?” she motioned sadly. “Instead of Stacey's wife?”

Libby felt as though she'd been slapped, but she recovered quickly enough to catch one hand under Cathy's chin and force her head up. “Exactly what do you mean by that?” she demanded, and she was never certain afterward whether she had signed the words, shouted them, or simply thought them.

Cathy shrugged in a miserable attempt at nonchalance, and one tear slid down her cheek. “He went to see you in New York,” she challenged, her hands moving quickly now, almost angrily. “You wrote to him.”

“Cathy, it wasn't what you think—”

“Wasn't it?”

Libby was furious and wounded, and she stomped one foot in frustration. “Of course it wasn't! Do you really think I would do a thing like that? Do you think Stacey would? He loves you!” And so does Jess, she lamented in silence, without knowing why that should matter.

Stubbornly Cathy averted her eyes again and shoved her hands into the pockets of her lightweight cotton jacket—a sure signal that as far as she was concerned, the conversation was over.

In desperation, Libby reached out and caught her cousin's shoulders in her hands, only to be swiftly rebuffed by an eloquent shrug. She watched, stricken to silence, as Cathy turned and hurried out of the sunporch-turned-studio and into the kitchen beyond. Just a moment later the back door slammed with a finality that made Libby ache through and through.

She ducked her head and bit her lower lip to keep the tears back. That, too, was something she had learned during Jonathan's final confinement in a children's hospital.

Just then, Jess Barlowe filled the studio doorway. Libby was aware of him in all her strained senses.

He set down her suitcases and drawing board with an unsympathetic thump. “I see you're spreading joy and good cheer as usual,” he drawled in acid tones. “What, pray tell, was that all about?”

Libby was infuriated, and she glared at him, her hands resting on her trim rounded hips. “As if you didn't know, you heartless bastard! How could you be so mean...so thoughtless...”

The fiery green eyes raked Libby's travel-rumpled form with scorn. Ignoring her aborted question, he offered one of his own. “Did you think your affair with my brother was a secret, princess?”

Libby was fairly choking on her rage and her pain. “What affair, dammit?” she shouted. “We didn't have an affair!”

“That isn't what Stacey says,” replied Jess with impervious savagery.

Libby felt the high color that had been pounding in her face seep away. “What?”

“Stace is wildly in love with you, to hear him tell it. You need him and he needs you, and to hell with minor stumbling blocks like his wife!”

Libby’s knees weakened and she groped blindly for the stool at her art table and then sank onto it. “My God...”

Jess’s jawline was tight with brutal annoyance. “Spare me the theatrics, princess— I know why you came back here. Dammit, don’t you have a soul?”

Libby’s throat worked painfully, but her mind simply refused to form words for her to utter.

Jess crossed the room like a mountain panther, terrifying in his grace and prowess, and caught both her wrists in a furious, inescapable grasp. With his other hand he captured Libby’s chin.

“Listen to me, you predatory little witch, and listen well,” he hissed, his jade eyes hard, his flesh pale beneath his deep rancher’s tan. “Cathy is good and decent and she loves my brother, though I can’t for the life of me think why she condescends to do so. And I’ll be damned if I’ll stand by and watch you and Stacey turn her inside out! Do you understand me?”

Tears of helpless fury and outraged honor burned like fire in Libby’s eyes, but she could neither speak nor move. She could only stare into the frightening face looming only inches from her own. It was a devil’s face.

When Jess’s tightening grasp on her chin made it clear that he would have an answer of some sort, no matter what, Libby managed a small, frantic nod.

Apparently satisfied, Jess released her with such suddenness that she nearly lost her balance and slipped off the stool.

Then he whirled away from her, his broad back taut, one powerful hand running through his obsidian hair in a typical gesture of frustration. “Damn you for ever coming back here,” he said in a voice no less vicious for its softness.

“No problem,” Libby said with great effort. “I’ll leave.”

Jess turned toward her again, this time with an ominous leisure, and his eyes scalded Libby’s face, the hollow of her throat, the firm roundness of her high breasts. “It’s too late,” he said.

Still dazed, Libby sank back against the edge of the drawing table, sighed and covered her eyes with one hand. “Okay,” she began with hard-won, shaky reason, “why is that?”

Jess had stalked to the windows; his back was a barrier between them again, and he was looking out at the pond. Libby longed to sprout claws and tear him to quivering shreds.

“Stacey has the bit in his teeth,” he said at length, his voice low, speculative. “Wherever you went, he’d follow.”

Since Libby didn’t believe that Stacey had declared himself to be in love with her, she didn’t believe that there was any danger of his following her away from the Circle Bar B, either. “You’re crazy,” she said.

Jess faced her quickly, some scathing retort brewing in his eyes, but whatever he had meant to say was lost as Ken strode into the room and demanded, “What the hell’s going on in here? I just found Cathy running up the road in tears!”

“Ask your daughter!” Jess bit out. “Thanks to her, Cathy has just gotten started shedding tears!”

Libby could bear no more; she was like a wild creature goaded to madness, and she flung herself bodily at Jess Barlowe, just as she had in her childhood, fists flying. She would have attacked him gladly if her father hadn’t caught hold of her around the waist and forcibly restrained her.

Jess raked her with one last contemptuous look and moved calmly in the direction of the door. “You ought to tame that little spitfire, Ken,” he commented in passing. “One of these days she’s going to hurt somebody.”

Libby trembled in her father’s hold, stung by his double meaning, and gave one senseless shriek of fury. This brought a mocking chuckle from a disappearing Jess and caused Ken to turn her firmly to face him.

“Good Lord, Libby, what’s the matter with you?”

Libby drew a deep, steadying breath and tried to quiet the raging ten-year-old within her, the child that Jess had always been able to infuriate. “I hate Jess Barlow,” she said flatly. “I hate him.”

“Why?” Ken broke in, and he didn’t look angry anymore. Just honestly puzzled.

“If you knew what he’s been saying about me—”

“If it’s the same as what Stacey’s been mouthing off about, I reckon I do.”

Libby stepped back, stunned. “What?”

Ken Kincaid sighed, and suddenly all his fifty-two years showed clearly in his face. “Stacey and Cathy have been having trouble the last year or so. Now he’s telling everybody who’ll listen that it’s over between him and Cathy and he wants you.”

“I don’t believe it! I—”

“I wanted to warn you, Lib, but you’d been through so much, between losing the boy and then falling out with your husband after that. I thought you needed to be home, but I knew you wouldn’t come near the place if you had any idea what was going on.”

Libby’s chin trembled, and she searched her father’s honest, weathered face anxiously. “I...I haven’t been fooling around with C-Cathy’s husband, Dad.”

He smiled gently. “I know that, Lib—knew it all along. Just never mind Jess and all the rest of them—if you don’t run away, this thing’ll blow over.”

Libby swallowed, thinking of Cathy and the pain she had to be feeling. The betrayal. “I can’t stay here if Cathy is going to be hurt.”

Ken touched her cheek with a work-worn finger. “Cathy doesn’t really believe the rumors, Libby—think about it. Why would she work so hard to fix a studio up for you if she did? Why would she be waiting here to see you again?”

“But she was crying just now, Dad! And she as much as accused me of carrying on with her husband!”

“She’s been hurt by what’s been said, and Stacey’s been acting like a spoiled kid. Honey, Cathy’s just testing the waters, trying to find out where you stand. You can’t leave her now, because except for Stace, there’s nobody she needs more.”

Despite the fact that all her instincts warned her to put the Circle Bar B behind her as soon as humanly possible, Libby saw the sense in her father’s words. As incredible as it seemed, Cathy would need her—if for nothing else than to lay those wretched rumors to rest once and for all.

“These things Stacey’s been saying—surely he didn’t unload them on Cathy?”

Ken sighed. “I don’t think he’d be that low, Libby. But you know how it is with Cathy, how she always knows the score.”

Libby shook her head distractedly. “Somebody told her, Dad—and I think I know who it was.”

There was disbelief in Ken’s discerning blue eyes, and in his voice, too. “Jess? Now, wait a minute...”

Jess.

Libby couldn’t remember a time when she had gotten along well with him, but she’d been sure that he cared deeply for Cathy. Hadn’t he been the one to insist that Stace and Libby learn signing, as he had, so that everyone could talk to the frightened, confused little girl who couldn’t hear? Hadn’t he gifted Cathy with cherished bullfrogs and clumsily made valentines and even taken her to the high-school prom?

How could Jess, of all people, be the one to hurt Cathy, when he knew as well as anyone how badly she’d been hurt by her handicap and the rejection of her own parents? How?

Libby had no answer for any of these questions. She knew only that she had separate scores to settle with both the Barlowe brothers.

And settle them she would.

## Chapter 2

Libby sat at the end of the rickety swimming dock, bare feet dangling, shoulders slumped, her gaze fixed on the shimmering waters of the pond. The lines of her long, slender legs were accentuated, rather than disguised, by the old blue jeans she wore. A white eyelet suntop sheltered shapely breasts and a trim stomach and left the rest of her upper body bare.

Jess Barlowe studied her in silence, feeling things that were at wide variance with his personal opinion of the woman. He was certain that he hated Libby, but something inside him wanted, nonetheless, to touch her, to comfort her, to know the scent and texture of her skin.

A reluctant grin tilted one corner of his mouth. One tug at the top of that white eyelet and...

Jess caught his skittering thoughts, marshaled them back into stern order. As innocent and vulnerable as Libby Kincaid looked at the moment, she was a viper, willing to betray her own cousin to get what she wanted.

Jess imagined Libby naked, her glorious breasts free and welcoming. But the man in his mental scenario was not himself—it was Stacey. The thought lay sour in Jess's mind.

“Did you come to apologize, by any chance?”

The question so startled Jess that he flinched; he had not noticed that Libby had turned around and seen him, so caught up had he been in the vision of her giving herself to his brother.

He scowled, as much to recover his wits as to oppose her. It was and always had been his nature to oppose Libby Kincaid, the way electricity opposes water, and it annoyed him that, for all his travels and his education, he didn't know why.

“Why would I want to do that?” he shot back, more ruffled by her presence than he ever would have admitted.

“Maybe because you were a complete ass,” she replied in tones as sunny as the big sky stretched out above them.

Jess lifted his hands to his hips and stood fast against whatever it was that was pulling him toward her. I want to make love to you, he thought, and the truth of that ground in his spirit as well as in his loins.

There was pain in Libby's navy blue eyes, as well as a cautious mischief. “Well?” she prodded.

Jess found that while he could keep himself from going to her, he could not turn away. Maybe her net reached farther than he'd thought. Maybe, like Stacey and that idiot in New York, he was already caught in it.

“I'm not here to apologize,” he said coldly.

“Then why?” she asked with chiming sweetness.

He wondered if she knew what that shoulderless blouse of hers was doing to him. Damn. He hadn't been this tongue-tied since the night of his fifteenth birthday, when Ginny Hillerman had announced that she would show him hers if he would show her his.

Libby's eyes were laughing at him. “Jess?”

“Is your dad here?” he threw out in gruff desperation.

One shapely, gossamer eyebrow arched. “You know perfectly well that he isn't. If Dad were home, his pickup truck would be parked in the driveway.”

Against his will, Jess grinned. His taut shoulders rose in a shrug. The shadows of cottonwood leaves moved on the old wooden dock, forming a mystical path—a path that led to Libby Kincaid.

She patted the sun-warmed wood beside her. “Come and sit down.”

Before Jess could stop himself, he was striding along that small wharf, sinking down to sit beside Libby and dangle his booted feet over the sparkling water. He was never entirely certain what sorcery made him ask what he did.

“What happened to your marriage, Libby?”

The pain he had glimpsed before leapt in her eyes and then faded away again, subdued. “Are you trying to start another fight?”

Jess shook his head. “No,” he answered quietly, “I really want to know.”

She looked away from him, gnawing at her lower lip with her front teeth. All around them were ranch sounds—birds conferring in the trees, leaves rustling in the wind, the clear pond water lapping at the mossy pilings of the dock. But no sound came from Libby.

On an impulse, Jess touched her mouth with the tip of one index finger. Water and electricity—the analogy came back to him with a numbing jolt.

“Stop that,” he barked, to cover his reactions.

Libby ceased chewing at her lip and stared at him with wide eyes. Again he saw the shadow of that nameless, shifting ache inside her. “Stop what?” she wanted to know.

Stop making me want to hold you, he thought. Stop making me want to tuck your hair back behind your ears and tell you that everything will be all right. “Stop biting your lip!” he snapped aloud.

“I’m sorry!” Libby snapped back, her eyes shooting indigo sparks.

Jess sighed and again spoke involuntarily. “Why did you leave your husband, Libby?”

The question jarred them both: Libby paled a little and tried to scramble to her feet; Jess caught her elbow in one hand and pulled her down again.

“Was it because of Stacey?”

She was livid. “No!”

“Someone else?”

Tears sprang up in Libby’s dark lashes and made them spiky. She wrenched free of his hand but made no move to rise again and run away. “Sure!” she gasped. “If it feels good, do it—that’s my motto! By God, I live by those words!”

“Shut up,” Jess said in a gentle voice.

Incredibly, she fell against him, wept into the shoulder of his blue cotton workshirt. And it was not a delicate, calculating sort of weeping—it was a noisy grief.

Jess drew her close and held her, broken on the shoals of what she was feeling even though he did not know its name. “I’m sorry,” he said hoarsely.

Libby trembled beneath his arm and wailed like a wounded calf. The sound solidified into a word usually reserved for stubborn horses and income-tax audits.

Jess laughed and, for a reason he would never understand, kissed her forehead. “I love it when you flatter me,” he teased.

Miraculously, Libby laughed, too. But when she tilted her head back to look up at him, and he saw the tear streaks on her beautiful, defiant face, something within him, something that had always been disjointed, was wrenched painfully back into place.

He bent his head and touched his lips to hers, gently, in question. She stiffened, but then, at the cautious bidding of his tongue, her lips parted slightly and her body relaxed against his.

Jess pressed Libby backward until she lay prone on the shifting dock, the kiss unbroken. As she responded to that kiss, it seemed that the sparkling water-light of the pond danced around them both in huge, shimmering chips, that they were floating inside some cosmic prism.

His hand went to the full roundness of her left breast. Beneath his palm and the thin layer of white eyelet, he felt the nipple grow taut in that singular invitation to passion.

Through the back of his shirt, Jess was warmed by the heat of the spring sun and the tender weight of Libby’s hands. He left her mouth to trail soft kisses over her chin, along the sweet, scented lines of her neck.

All the while, he expected her to stiffen again, to thrust him away with her hands and some indignant—and no doubt colorful—outburst. Instead, she was pliant and yielding beneath him.

Enthralled, he dared more and drew downward on the uppermost ruffle of her suntop. Still she did not protest.

Libby arched her back and a low, whimpering sound came from her throat as Jess bared her to the soft spring breeze and the fire of his gaze.

Her breasts were heavy golden-white globes, and their pale rose crests stiffened as Jess perused them. When he offered a whisper-soft kiss to one, Libby moaned and the other peak pouted prettily at his choice. He went to it, soothed it to fury with his tongue.

Libby gave a soft, lusty cry, shuddered and caught her hands in his hair, drawing him closer. He needed more of her and positioned his body accordingly, careful not to let his full weight come to bear. Then, for a few dizzying moments, he took suckle at the straining fount of her breast.

Recovering himself partially, Jess pulled her hands from his hair, gripped them at the wrists, pressed them down above her head in gentle restraint.

Her succulent breasts bore his assessment proudly, rising and falling with the meter of her breathing.

Jess forced himself to meet Libby's eyes. "This is me," he reminded her gruffly. "Jess."

"I know," she whispered, making no move to free her imprisoned hands.

Jess lowered his head, tormented one delectable nipple by drawing at it with his lips. "This is real, Libby," he said, circling the morsel with just the tip of his tongue now. "It's important that you realize that."

"I do...oh, God... Jess, Jess."

Reluctantly he left the feast to search her face with disbelieving eyes. "Don't you want me to stop?"

A delicate shade of rose sifted over her high cheekbones. Her hands still stretched above her, her eyes closed, she shook her head.

Jess went back to the breasts that so bewitched him, nipped at their peaks with gentle teeth. "Do you...know how many...times I've wanted...to do this?"

The answer was a soft, strangled cry.

He limited himself to one nipple, worked its surrendering peak into a sweet fervor with his lips and his tongue. "So...many...times. My God, Libby...you're so beautiful..."

Her words were as halting as his had been. "What's happening to us? We h-hate each other."

Jess laughed and began kissing his way softly down over her rib cage, her smooth, firm stomach. The snap on her jeans gave way easily—and was echoed by the sound of car doors slamming in the area of the house.

Instantly the spell was broken. Color surged into Libby's face and she bolted upright, nearly thrusting Jess off the end of the dock in her efforts to wrench on the discarded suntop and close the fastening of her jeans.

"Broad daylight..." she muttered distractedly, talking more to herself than to Jess.

"Lib!" yelled a jovial masculine voice, approaching fast. "Libby?"

Stacey. The voice belonged to Stacey.

Sudden fierce anger surged, white-hot, through Jess's aching, bedazzled system. Standing up, not caring that his thwarted passion still strained against his jeans, visible to anyone who might take the trouble to look, he glared down at Libby and rasped, "I guess reinforcements have arrived."

She gave a primitive, protesting little cry and shot to her feet, her ink-blue eyes flashing with anger and hurt. Before Jess could brace himself, her hands came to his chest like small battering rams and pushed him easily off the end of the dock.

The jolting cold of that spring-fed pond was welcome balm to Jess's passion-heated flesh, if not his pride. When he surfaced and grasped the end of the dock in both hands, he knew there would be no physical evidence that he and Libby had been doing anything other than fighting.

Libby ached with embarrassment as Stacey and Senator Barlowe made their way down over the slight hillside that separated the backyard from the pond.

The older man cast one mischievously baleful look at his younger son, who was lifting himself indignantly onto the dock, and chuckled, “I see things are the same as always,” he said.

Libby managed a shaky smile. Not quite, she thought, her body remembering the delicious dance Jess’s hard frame had choreographed for it. “Hello, Senator,” she said, rising on tiptoe to kiss his cheek.

“Welcome home,” he replied with gruff affection. Then his wise eyes shifted past her to rest again on Jess. “It’s a little cold yet for a swim, isn’t it, son?”

Jess’s hair hung in dripping ebony strands around his face, and his eyes were jade-green flares, avoiding his father to scald Libby’s lips, her throat, her still-pulsing breasts. “We’ll finish our... discussion later,” he said.

Libby’s blood boiled up over her stomach and her breasts to glow in her face. “I wouldn’t count on that!”

“I would,” Jess replied with a smile that was at once tender and evil. And then, without so much as a word to his father and brother, he walked away.

“What the hell did he mean by that?” barked Stacey, red in the face.

The look Libby gave the boyishly handsome, caramel-eyed man beside her was hardly friendly. “You’ve got some tall explaining to do, Stacey Barlowe,” she said.

The senator, a tall, attractive man with hair as gray as Ken’s, cleared his throat in the way of those who have practiced diplomacy long and well. “I believe I’ll go up to the house and see if Ken’s got any beer on hand,” he said. A moment later he was off, following Jess’s soggy path.

Libby straightened her shoulders and calmly slapped Stacey across the face. “How dare you?” she raged, her words strangled in her effort to modulate them.

Stacey reddened again, ran one hand through his fashionably cut wheat-colored hair. He turned, as if to follow his father. “I could use a beer myself,” he said in distracted, evasive tones.

“Oh, no you don’t!” Libby cried, grasping his arm and holding on. The rich leather of his jacket was smooth under her hand. “Don’t you dare walk away from me, Stacey—not until you explain why you’ve been lying about me!”

“I haven’t been lying!” he protested, his hands on his hips now, his expensively clad body blocking the base of the dock as he faced her.

“You have! You’ve been telling everyone that I... That we...”

“That we’ve been doing what you and my brother were doing a few minutes ago?”

If Stacey had shoved Libby into the water, she couldn’t have been more shocked. A furious retort rose to the back of her throat but would go no further.

Stacey’s tarnished-gold eyes flashed. “Jess was making love to you, wasn’t he?”

“What if he was?” managed Libby after a painful struggle with her vocal cords. “It certainly wouldn’t be any of your business, would it?”

“Yes, it would. I love you, Libby.”

“You love Cathy!”

Stacey shook his head. “No. Not anymore.”

“Don’t say that,” Libby pleaded, suddenly deflated. “Oh, Stacey, don’t. Don’t do this....”

His hands came to her shoulders, fierce and strong. The topaz fever in his eyes made Libby wonder if he was sane. “I love you, Libby Kincaid,” he vowed softly but ferociously, “and I mean to have you.”

Libby retreated a step, stunned, shaking her head. The reality of this situation was so different from what she had imagined it would be. In her thoughts, Stacey had laughed when she confronted him, ruffled her hair in that familiar brotherly way of old, and said that it was all a mistake. That he loved Cathy, wanted Cathy, and couldn’t anyone around here take a joke?

But here he was declaring himself in a way that was unsettlingly serious.

Libby took another step backward. “Stacey, I need to be here, where my dad is. Where things are familiar and comfortable. Please...don’t force me to leave.”

Stacey smiled. “There is no point in leaving, Lib. If you do, I’ll be right behind you.”

She shivered. “You’ve lost your mind!”

But Stacey looked entirely sane as he shook his handsome head and wedged his hands into the pockets of his jacket. “Just my heart,” he said. “Corny, isn’t it?”

“It’s worse than corny. Stacey, you’re unbalanced or something. You’re fantasizing. There was never anything between us—”

“No?” The word was crooned.

“No! You need help.”

His face had all the innocence of an altar boy’s. “If I’m insane, darlin’, it’s something you could cure.”

Libby resisted an urge to slap him again. She wanted to race into the house, but he was still barring her way, so that she could not leave the dock without brushing against him. “Stay away from me, Stacey,” she said as he advanced toward her. “I mean it—stay away from me!”

“I can’t, Libby.”

The sincerity in his voice was chilling; for the first time in all the years she’d known Stacey Barlowe, Libby was afraid of him. Discretion kept her from screaming, but just barely.

Stacey paled, as though he’d read her thoughts. “Don’t look at me like that, Libby— I wouldn’t hurt you under any circumstances. And I’m not crazy.”

She lifted her chin. “Let me by, Stacey. I want to go into the house.”

He tilted his head back, sighed, met her eyes again. “I’ve frightened you, and I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do that.”

Libby couldn’t speak. Despite his rational, settling words, she was sick with the knowledge that he meant to pursue her.

“You must know,” he said softly, “how good it could be for us. You needed me in New York, Libby, and now I need you.”

The third voice, from the base of the hillside, was to Libby as a life preserver to a drowning person. “Let her pass, Stacey.”

Libby looked up quickly to see Jess, unlikely rescuer that he was. His hair was towel-rumpled and his jeans clung to muscular thighs—thighs that only minutes ago had pressed against her own in a demand as old as time. His manner was calm as he buttoned a shirt, probably borrowed from Ken, over his broad chest.

Stacey shrugged affably and walked past his brother without a word of argument.

Watching him go, Libby went weak with relief. A lump rose in her throat as she forced herself to meet Jess’s gaze. “You were right,” she muttered miserably. “You were right.”

Jess was watching her much the way a mountain cat would watch a cornered rabbit. For the briefest moment there was a look of tenderness in the green eyes, but then his expression turned hard and a muscle flexed in his jaw. “I trust the welcome-home party has been scheduled for later—after Cathy has been tucked into her bed, for instance?”

Libby gaped at him, appalled. Had he interceded only to torment her himself?

Jess’s eyes were contemptuous as they swept over her. “What’s the matter, Lib? Couldn’t you bring yourself to tell your married lover that the welcoming had already been taken care of?”

Rage went through Libby’s body like an electric current surging into a wire. “You don’t seriously think that I would... That I was—”

“You even managed to be alone with him. Tell me, Lib—how did you get rid of my father?”

“G-get rid...” Libby stopped, tears of shock and mortification aching in her throat and burning behind her eyes. She drew a deep, audible breath, trying to assemble herself, to think clearly.

But the whole world seemed to be tilting and swirling like some out-of-control carnival ride. When Libby closed her eyes against the sensation, she swayed dangerously and would probably have fallen if Jess hadn't reached her in a few strides and caught her shoulders in his hands.

"Libby..." he said, and there was anger in the sound, but there was a hollow quality, too—one that Libby couldn't find a name for.

Her knees were trembling. Too much, it was all too much. Jonathan's death, the ugly divorce, the trouble that Stacey had caused with his misplaced affections—all of those things weighed on her, but none were so crushing as the blatant contempt of this man. It was apparent to Libby now that the lovemaking they had almost shared, so new and beautiful to her, had been some sort of cruel joke to Jess.

"How could you?" she choked out. "Oh, Jess, how could you?"

His face was grim, seeming to float in a shimmering mist. Instead of answering, Jess lifted Libby into his arms and carried her up the little hill toward the house.

She didn't remember reaching the back door.

"What the devil happened on that dock today, Jess?" Cleave Barlowe demanded, hands grasping the edge of his desk.

His younger son stood at the mahogany bar, his shoulders stiff, his attention carefully fixed on the glass of straight Scotch he meant to consume. "Why don't you ask Stacey?"

"Goddammit, I'm asking you!" barked Cleave. "Ken's mad as hell, and I don't blame him—that girl of his was shattered!"

Girl. The word caught in Jess's beleaguered mind. He remembered the way Libby had responded to him, meeting his passion with her own, welcoming the greed he'd shown at her breasts. Had it not been for the arrival of his father and brother, he would have possessed her completely within minutes. "She's no 'girl,'" he said, still aching to bury himself in the depths of her.

The senator swore roundly. "What did you say to her, Jess?" he pressed, once the spate of unpoliticianly profanity had passed.

Jess lowered his head. He'd meant the things he'd said to Libby, and he couldn't, in all honesty, have taken them back. But he knew some of what she'd been through in New York, her trysts with Stacey notwithstanding, and he was ashamed of the way he'd goaded her. She had come home to heal—the look in her eyes had told him that much—and instead of respecting that, he had made things more difficult for her.

Never one to be thwarted by silence, no matter how eloquent, Senator Barlowe persisted. "Dammit, Jess, I might expect this kind of thing from Stacey, but I thought you had more sense! You were harassing Libby about these blasted rumors your brother has been spreading, weren't you?"

Jess sighed, set aside the drink he had yet to take a sip from, and faced his angry father. "Yes," he said.

"Why?"

Stubbornly, Jess refused to answer. He took an interest in the imposing oak desk where his father sat, the heavy draperies that kept out the sun, the carved ivory of the fireplace.

"All right, mulehead," Cleave muttered furiously, "don't talk! Don't explain! And don't go near Ken Kincaid's daughter again, damn you. That man's the best foreman I've ever had and if he gets riled and quits because of you, Jess, you and I are going to come to time!"

Jess almost smiled, though he didn't quite dare. Not too many years before the phrase "come to time," when used by his father, had presaged a session in the woodshed. He wondered what it meant now that he was thirty-three years old, a member of the Montana State Bar Association, and a full partner in the family corporation. "I care about Cathy," he said evenly. "What was I supposed to do—stand by and watch Libby and Stacey grind her up into emotional hamburger?"

Cleave gave a heavy sigh and sank into the richly upholstered swivel chair behind his desk. "I love Cathy, too," he said at length, "but Stacey's behind this whole mess, not Libby. Dammit, that

woman has been through hell from what Ken says—she was married to a man who slept in every bed but his own, and she had to watch her nine-year-old stepson die by inches. Now she comes home looking for a little peace, and what does she get? Trouble!”

Jess lowered his head, turned away—ostensibly to take up his glass of Scotch. He’d known about the bad marriage— Ken had cussed the day Aaron Strand was born often enough—but he hadn’t heard about the little boy. My God, he hadn’t known about the boy.

“Maybe Strand couldn’t sleep in his own bed,” he said, urged on by some ugliness that had surfaced inside him since Libby’s return. “Maybe Stacey was already in it.”

“Enough!” boomed the senator in a voice that had made presidents tremble in their shoes. “I like Libby and I’m not going to listen to any more of this, either from you or from your brother! Do I make myself clear?”

“Abundantly clear,” replied Jess, realizing that the Scotch was in his hand now and feeling honor-bound to take at least one gulp of the stuff. The taste was reminiscent of scorched rubber, but since the liquor seemed to quiet the raging demons in his mind, he finished the drink and poured another.

He fully intended to get drunk. It was something he hadn’t done since high school, but it suddenly seemed appealing. Maybe he would stop hardening every time he thought of Libby, stop craving her.

Too, after the things he’d said to her that afternoon by the pond, he didn’t want to remain sober any longer than necessary. “What did you mean,” he ventured, after downing his fourth drink, “when you said Libby had to watch her stepson die?”

Papers rustled at the big desk behind him. “Stacey says the child had leukemia.”

Jess poured another drink and closed his eyes. Oh, Libby, he thought, I’m sorry. My God, I’m sorry. “I guess Stacey would know,” he said aloud, with bitterness.

There was a short, thunderous silence. Jess expected his father to explode into one of his famous tirades, was genuinely surprised when the man sighed instead. Still, his words dropped on Jess’s mind like a bomb.

“The firewater isn’t going to change the fact that you love Libby Kincaid, Jess,” he said reasonably. “Making her life and your own miserable isn’t going to change it, either.”

Love Libby Kincaid? Impossible. The strange needs possessing him now were rooted in his libido, not his heart. Once he’d had her—and have her he would, or go crazy—her hold on him would be broken. “I’ve never loved a woman in my life,” he said.

“Fool. You’ve loved one woman—Libby—since you were seven years old. Exactly seven years old, in fact.”

Jess turned, studying his father quizzically. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Your seventh birthday,” recalled Cleave, his eyes far away. “Your mother and I gave you a pony. First time you saw Libby Kincaid, you were out of that saddle and helping her into it.”

The memory burst, full-blown, into Jess’s mind. A pinto pony. The new foreman arriving. The little girl with dark blue eyes and hair the color of winter moonlight.

He’d spent the whole afternoon squiring Libby around the yard, content to walk while she rode.

“What do you suppose Ken would say if I went over there and asked to see his daughter?” Jess asked.

“I imagine he’d shoot you, after today.”

“I imagine he would. But I think I’ll risk it.”

“You’ve made enough trouble for one day,” argued Cleave, taking obvious note of his son’s inebriated state. “Libby needs time, Jess. She needs to be close to Ken. If you’re smart, you’ll leave her alone until she has a chance to get her emotional bearings again.”

Jess didn't want his father to be right, not in this instance, anyway, but he knew that he was. Much as he wanted to go to Libby and try to make things right, the fact was that he was the last person in the world she needed or wanted to see.

“Better?”

Libby smiled at Ken as she came into the kitchen, freshly showered and wrapped in the cozy, familiar chenille robe she'd found in the back of her closet. “Lots better,” she answered softly.

Her father was standing at the kitchen stove stirring something in the blackened cast-iron skillet.

Libby scuffled to the table and sat down. It was good to be home, so good. Why hadn't she come sooner? “Whatever you're cooking there smells good,” she said.

Ken beamed. In his jeans and his western shirt, he looked out of place at that stove. He should, Libby decided fancifully, have been crouching at some campfire on the range, stirring beans in a blue enamel pot. “This here's my world-famous red-devil sauce,” he grinned, “for which I am known and respected.”

Libby laughed, and tears of homecoming filled her eyes. She went to her father and hugged him, needing to be a little girl again, just for a moment.

## Chapter 3

Libby nearly choked on her first taste of Ken's taco sauce. "Did you say you were known and respected for this stuff, or known and feared?"

Ken chuckled roguishly at her tear-polished eyes and flaming face. "My calling it 'red devil' should have been a clue, dumplin'."

Libby muttered an exclamation and perversely took another bite from her bulging taco. "From now on," she said, chewing, "I'll do the cooking around this spread."

Her father laughed again and tapped one temple with a calloused index finger, his pale blue eyes twinkling.

"You deliberately tricked me!" cried Libby.

He grinned and shrugged. "Code of the West, sweetheart. Grouse about the chow, and presto—you're the cook!"

"Actually," ventured Libby with cultivated innocence, "this sauce isn't too bad."

"Too late," laughed Ken. "You already broke the code."

Libby lowered her taco to her plate and lifted both hands in a gesture of concession. "All right, all right—but have a little pity on me, will you? I've been living among dudes!"

"That's no excuse."

Libby shrugged and took up her taco again. "I tried. Have you been doing your own cooking and cleaning all this time?"

Ken shook his head and sat back in his chair, his thumbs hooked behind his belt buckle. "Nope. The Barlowes' housekeeper sends her crew down here once in a while."

"What about the food?"

"I eat with the boys most of the time, over at the cook shack." He rose, went to fill two mugs from the coffeepot on the stove. When he turned around again, his face was serious. "Libby, what happened today? What upset you like that?"

Libby averted her eyes. "I don't know," she lied lamely.

"Dammit, you do know. You fainted, Libby. When Jess carried you in here, I—"

"I know," Libby broke in gently. "You were scared. I'm sorry."

Carefully, as though he feared he might drop them, Ken set the cups of steaming coffee on the table. "What happened?" he persisted as he sat down in his chair again.

Libby swallowed hard, but the lump that had risen in her throat wouldn't go down. Knowing that this conversation couldn't be avoided forever, she managed to reply, "It's complicated. Basically, it comes down to the fact that Stacey's been telling those lies."

"And?"

"And Jess believes him. He said...he said some things to me and...well, it must have created some kind of emotional overload. I just gave out."

Ken turned his mug idly between his thumb and index finger, causing the liquid to spill over and make a coffee stain on the tablecloth. "Tell me about Jonathan, Libby," he said in a low, gentle voice.

The tears that sprang into Libby's eyes were not related to the tang of her father's red-devil taco sauce. "He died," she choked miserably.

"I know that. You called me the night it happened, remember? I guess what I'm really asking you is why you didn't want me to fly back there and help you sort things out."

Libby lowered her head. Jonathan hadn't been her son, he'd been Aaron's, by a previous marriage. But the loss of the child was a raw void within her, even though months had passed. "I didn't want you to get a firsthand look at my marriage," she admitted with great difficulty—and the shame she couldn't seem to shake.

"Why not, Libby?"

The sound Libby made might have been either a laugh or a sob. “Because it was terrible,” she answered.

“From the first?”

She forced herself to meet her father’s steady gaze, knew that he had guessed a lot about her marriage from her rare phone calls and even rarer letters. “Almost,” she replied sadly.

“Tell me.”

Libby didn’t want to think about Aaron, let alone talk about him to this man who wouldn’t understand so many things. “He had...he had lovers.”

Ken didn’t seem surprised. Had he guessed that, too? “Go on.”

“I can’t!”

“Yes, you can. If it’s too much for you right now, I won’t press you. But the sooner you talk this out, Libby, the better off you’re going to be.”

She realized that her hands were clenched in her lap and tried to relax them. There was still a white mark on her finger where Aaron’s ostentatious wedding ring had been. “He didn’t care,” she mourned in a soft, distracted whisper. “He honestly didn’t care....”

“About you?”

“About Jonathan. Dad, he didn’t care about his own son!”

“How so, sweetheart?”

Libby dashed away tears with the back of one hand. “Th-things were bad between Aaron and me b-before we found out that Jonathan was sick. After the doctors told us, it was a lot worse.”

“I don’t follow you, Libby.”

“Dad, Aaron wouldn’t have anything to do with Jonathan from the moment we knew he was dying. He wasn’t there for any of the tests and he never once came to visit at the hospital. Dad, that little boy cried for his father, and Aaron wouldn’t come to him!”

“Did you talk to Aaron?”

Remembered frustration made Libby’s cheeks pound with color. “I pleaded with him, Dad. All he’d say was, ‘I can’t handle this.’”

“It would be a hell of a thing to deal with, Lib. Maybe you’re being too hard on the man.”

“Too hard? Too hard? Jonathan was terrified, Dad, and he was in pain—constant pain. All he asked was that his own father be strong for him!”

“What about the boy’s mother? Did she come to the hospital?”

“Ellen died when Jonathan was a baby.”

Ken sighed, framing a question he was obviously reluctant to ask. “Did you ever love Aaron Strand, Libby?”

Libby remembered the early infatuation, the excitement that had never deepened into real love and had quickly been quelled by the realities of marriage to a man who was fundamentally self-centered. She tried, but she couldn’t even recall her ex-husband’s face clearly—all she could see in her mind was a pair of jade-green eyes, dark hair. Jess. “No,” she finally said. “I thought I did when I married him, though.”

Ken stood up suddenly, took the coffeepot from its back burner on the stove, refilled both their cups. “I don’t like asking you this, but—”

“No, Dad,” Libby broke in firmly, anticipating the question all too well, “I don’t love Stacey!”

“You’re sure about that?”

The truth was that Libby hadn’t been sure, not entirely. But that ill-advised episode with Jess at the end of the swimming dock had brought everything into clear perspective. Just remembering how willingly she had submitted to him made her throb with embarrassment. “I’m sure,” she said.

Ken’s strong hand came across the table to close over hers. “You’re home now,” he reminded her, “and things are going to get better, Libby. I promise you that.”

Libby sniffled inelegantly. “Know something, cowboy? I love you very much.”

“Bet you say that to all your fathers,” Ken quipped. “You planning to work on your comic strip tomorrow?”

The change of subject was welcome. “I’m six or eight weeks ahead of schedule on that, so I’m not worried about my deadline. I think I’ll go riding, if I can get Cathy to go with me.”

“I was looking forward to watching you work. What’s your process?”

Libby smiled, feeling sheltered by the love of this strong and steady man facing her. She explained how her cartoons came into being, thinking it was good to talk about work, to think about work.

Disdainful as he had been about her career, it was the one thing Aaron had not been able to spoil for her.

Nobody’s fool, Ken drew her out on the subject as much as he could, and she found herself chattering on and on about cartooning and even her secret hope to branch out into portraits one day.

They talked, father and daughter, far into the night.

“You deserve this,” Jess Barlowe said to his reflection in the bathroom mirror. A first-class hangover pounded in his head and roiled in his stomach, and his face looked drawn, as though he’d been hibernating like one of the bears that sometimes troubled the range stock.

Grimly he began to shave, and as he wielded his disposable razor, he wondered if Libby was awake yet. Should he stop at Ken’s and talk to her before going on to the main house to spend a day with the corporation accountants?

Jess wanted to go to Libby, to tell her that he was sorry for baiting her, to try to get their complex relationship—if it was a relationship—onto some kind of sane ground. However, all his instincts told him that his father had been right the day before: Libby needed time.

His thoughts strayed to Libby’s stepson. What would it be like to sit by a hospital bed, day after day, watching a child suffer and not being able to help?

Jess shuddered. It was hard to imagine the horror of something like that. At least Libby had had her husband to share the nightmare.

He frowned as he nicked his chin with the razor, blotted the small wound with tissue paper. If Libby had had her husband during that impossible time, why had she needed Stacey?

Stacey. Now, there was someone he could talk to. Granted, Jess had not been on the best of terms with his older brother of late, but the man had a firsthand knowledge of what was happening inside Libby Kincaid, and that was reason enough to approach him.

Feeling better for having a plan, Jess finished his ablutions and got dressed. Normally he spent his days on the range with Ken and the ranch hands, but today, because of his meeting with the accountants, he forwent his customary blue jeans and cotton workshirt for a tailored three-piece suit. He was still struggling with his tie as he made his way down the broad redwood steps that led from the loftlike second floor of his house to the living room.

Here there was a massive fireplace of white limestone, taking up the whole of one wall. The floors were polished oak and boasted a number of brightly colored Indian rugs. Two easy chairs and a deep sofa faced the hearth, and Jess’s cluttered desk looked out over the ranchland and the glacial mountains beyond.

Striding toward the front door, in exasperation he gave up his efforts to get the tie right. He was glad he didn’t have Stacey’s job; not for him the dull task of overseeing the family’s nationwide chain of steak-house franchises.

He smiled. Stacey liked playing the dude, doing television commercials, traveling all over the country.

And taking Libby Kincaid to bed.

Jess stalked across the front lawn to the carport and climbed behind the wheel of the truck he’d driven since law school. One of these times, he was going to have to get another car—something with a little flash, like Stacey’s Ferrari.

Stacey, Stacey. He hadn't even seen his brother yet, and already he was sick of him.

The truck's engine made a grinding sound and then huffed to life. Jess patted the dusty dashboard affectionately and grinned. A car was a car was a car, he reflected as he backed the notorious wreck out of his driveway. The function of a car was to transport people, not impress them.

Five minutes later, Jess's truck chortled to an asthmatic stop beside his brother's ice-blue Ferrari. He looked up at the modernistic two-story house that had been the senator's wedding gift to Stacey and Cathy and wondered if Libby would be impressed by the place.

He scowled as he made his way up the curving white-stone walk. What the hell did he care if Libby was impressed?

Irritated, he jabbed one finger at the special doorbell that would turn on a series of blinking lights inside the house. The system had been his own idea, meant to make life easier for Cathy.

His sister-in-law came to the door and smiled at him somewhat wanly, speaking with her hands. "Good morning."

Jess nodded, smiled. The haunted look in the depths of Cathy's eyes made him angry all over again. "Is Stacey here?" he signed, stepping into the house.

Cathy caught his hand in her own and led him through the cavernous living room and the formal dining room beyond. Stacey was in the kitchen, looking more at home in a three-piece suit than Jess ever had.

"You," Stacey said tonelessly, setting down the English muffin he'd been slathering with honey.

Cathy offered coffee and left the room when it was politely declined. Distractedly Jess reflected on the fact that her life had to be boring as hell, centering on Stacey the way it did.

"I want to talk to you," Jess said, scraping back a chrome-and-plastic chair to sit down at the table.

Stacey arched one eyebrow. "I hope it's quick— I'm leaving for the airport in a few minutes. I've got some business to take care of in Kansas City."

Jess was impatient. "What kind of man is Libby's ex-husband?" he asked.

Stacey took up his coffee. "Why do you want to know?"

"I just do. Do I have to have him checked out, or are you going to tell me?"

"He's a bastard," said Stacey, not quite meeting his brother's eyes.

"Rich?"

"Oh, yes. His family is old-money."

"What does he do?"

"Do?"

"Yeah. Does he work, or does he just stand around being rich?"

"He runs the family advertising agency; I think he has a lot of control over their other financial interests, too."

Jess sensed that Stacey was hedging, wondered why. "Any bad habits?"

Stacey was gazing at the toaster now, in a fixed way, as though he expected something alarming to pop out of it. "The man has his share of vices."

Annoyed now, Jess got up, helped himself to the cup of coffee he had refused earlier, sat down again. "Pulling porcupine quills out of a dog's nose would be easier than getting answers out of you. When you say he has vices, do you mean women?"

Stacey swallowed, looked away. "To put it mildly," he said.

Jess settled back in his chair. "What the hell do you mean by that?"

"I mean that he not only liked to run around with other women, he liked to flaunt the fact. The worse he could make Libby feel about herself, the happier he was."

"Jesus," Jess breathed. "What else?" he pressed, sensing, from Stacey's expression, that there was more.

"He was impotent with Libby."

“Why did she stay? Why in God’s name did she stay?” Jess mused distractedly, as much to himself as to his brother.

A cautious but smug light flickered in Stacey’s topaz eyes. “She had me,” he said evenly. “Besides, Jonathan was sick by that time and she felt she had to stay in the marriage for his sake.”

The spacious sun-filled kitchen seemed to buckle and shift around Jess. “Why didn’t she tell Ken, at least?”

“What would have been the point in that, Jess? He couldn’t have made the boy well again or transformed Aaron Strand into a devoted husband.”

The things Libby must have endured—the shame, the loneliness, the humiliation and grief, washed over Jess in a dismal, crushing wave. No wonder she had reached out to Stacey the way she had. No wonder. “Thanks,” he said gruffly, standing up to leave.

“Jess?”

He paused in the kitchen doorway, his hands clasping the woodwork, his shoulders aching with tension. “What?”

“Don’t worry about Libby. I’ll take care of her.”

Jess felt a despairing sort of anger course through him. “What about Cathy?” he asked, without turning around. “Who is going to take care of her?”

“You’ve always—”

Jess whirled suddenly, staring at his brother, almost hating him. “I’ve always what?”

“Cared for her.” Stacey shrugged, looking only mildly unsettled. “Protected her...”

“Are you suggesting that I sweep up the pieces after you shatter her?” demanded Jess in a dangerous rasp.

Stacey only shrugged again.

Because he feared that he would do his brother lasting harm if he stayed another moment, Jess stormed out of the house. Cathy, dressed in old jeans, boots and a cotton blouse, was waiting beside the truck. The pallor in her face told Jess that she knew much more about the state of her marriage than he would have hoped.

Her hands trembled a little as she spoke with them. “I’m scared, Jess.”

He drew her into his arms, held her. “I know, baby,” he said, even though he knew she couldn’t hear him or see his lips. “I know.”

Libby opened her eyes, yawned and stretched. The smells of sunshine and fresh air swept into her bedroom through the open window, ruffling pink eyelet curtains and reminding her that she was home again. She tossed back the covers on the bed and got up, sleepily making her way into the bathroom and starting the water for a shower.

As she took off her short cotton nightshirt, she looked down at herself and remembered the raging sensations Jess Barlowe had ignited in her the day before. She had been stupid and self-indulgent to let that happen, but after several years of celibacy, she supposed it was natural that her passions had been stirred so easily—especially by a man like Jess.

As Libby showered, she felt renewed. Aaron’s flagrant infidelities had been painful for her, and they had seriously damaged her self-esteem in the bargain.

Now, even though she had made a fool of herself by being wanton with a man who could barely tolerate her, many of Libby’s doubts about herself as a woman had been eased, if not routed. She was not as useless and undesirable as Aaron had made her feel. She had caused Jess Barlowe to want her, hadn’t she?

Big deal, she told the image in her mirror as she brushed her teeth. How do you know Jess wasn’t out to prove that his original opinion of you was on target?

Deflated by this very real possibility, Libby combed her hair, applied the customary lip gloss and light touch of mascara and went back to her room to dress. From her suitcases she selected a short-sleeved turquoise pullover shirt and a pair of trim jeans. Remembering her intention to find

Cathy and persuade her to go riding, she ferreted through her closet until she found the worn boots she'd left behind before moving to New York, pulling them on over a pair of thick socks.

Looking down at those disreputable old boots, Libby imagined the scorn they would engender in Aaron's jet-set crowd and laughed. Problems or no problems, Jess or no Jess, it was good to be home.

Not surprisingly, the kitchen was empty. Ken had probably left the house before dawn, but there was coffee on the stove and fruit in the refrigerator, so Libby helped herself to a pear and sat down to eat.

The telephone rang just as she was finishing her second cup of coffee, and Libby answered cheerfully, thinking that the caller would be Ken or the housekeeper at the main house, relaying some message for Cathy.

She was back at the table, the receiver pressed to her ear, before Aaron spoke.

"When are you coming home?"

"Home?" echoed Libby stupidly, off-balance, unable to believe that he'd actually asked such a question. "I am home, Aaron."

"Enough," he replied. "You've made your point, exhibited your righteous indignation. Now you've got to get back here because I need you."

Libby wanted to hang up, but it seemed a very long way from her chair to the wall, where the rest of the telephone was. "Aaron, we are divorced," she reminded him calmly, "and I am never coming back."

"You have to," he answered, without missing a beat. "It's crucial."

"Why? What happened to all your... friends?"

Aaron sighed. "You remember Betty, don't you? Miss November? Well, Betty and I had a small disagreement, as it happens, and she went to my family. I am, shall we say, exposed as something less than an ideal spouse."

"In any case, my grandmother believes that a man who cannot run his family—she was in Paris when we divorced, darling—cannot run a company, either. I have six months to bring you back into the fold and start an heir, or the whole shooting match goes to my cousin."

Libby was too stunned to speak or even move; she simply stood in the middle of her father's kitchen, trying to absorb what Aaron was saying.

"That," Aaron went on blithely, "is where you come in, sweetheart. You come back, we smile a lot and make a baby, my grandmother's ruffled feathers are smoothed. It's as simple as that."

Sickness boiled into Libby's throat. "I don't believe this!" she whispered.

"You don't believe what, darling? That I can make a baby? May I point out that I sired Jonathan, of whom you were so cloyingly fond?"

Libby swallowed. "Get Miss November pregnant," she managed to suggest. And then she added distractedly, more to herself than Aaron, "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Don't tell me that I've been beaten to the proverbial draw," Aaron remarked in that brutally smooth, caustic way of his. "Did the steak-house king already do the deed?"

"You are disgusting!"

"Yes, but very practical. If I don't hand my grandmother an heir, whether it's mine or the issue of that softheaded cowboy, I stand to lose millions of dollars."

Libby managed to stand up. A few steps, just a few, and she could hang up the telephone, shut out Aaron's voice and his ugly suggestions. "Do you really think that I would turn any child of mine over to someone like you?"

"There is a child, then," he retorted smoothly.

"No!" Five steps to the wall, six at most.

"Be reasonable, sweetness. We're discussing an empire here. If you don't come back and attend to your wifely duties, I'll have to visit that godforsaken ranch and try to persuade you."

"I am not your wife!" screamed Libby. One step. One step and a reach.

“Dear heart, I don’t find the idea any more appealing than you do, but there isn’t any other way, is there? My grandmother likes you—sees you as sturdy peasant stock—and she wants the baby to be yours.”

At last. The wall was close and Libby slammed the receiver into place. Then, dazed, she stumbled back to her chair and fell into it, lowering her head to her arms. She cried hard, for herself, for Jonathan.

“Libby?”

It was the last voice she would have wanted to hear, except for Aaron’s. “Go away, Stacey!” she hissed.

Instead of complying, Stacey laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. “What happened, Libby?” he asked softly. “Who was that on the phone?”

Fresh horror washed over Libby at the things Aaron had requested, mixed with anger and revulsion. God, how self-centered and insensitive that man was! And what gall he had, suggesting that she return to that disaster of a marriage, like some unquestioning brood mare, to produce a baby on order!

She gave a shuddering cry and motioned Stacey away with a frantic motion of her arm.

He only drew her up out of the chair and turned her so that he could hold her. She hadn’t the strength to resist the intimacy and, in her half-hysterical state, he seemed to be the old Stacey, the strong big brother.

Stacey’s hand came to the back of her head, tangling in her freshly washed hair, pressing her to his shoulder. “Tell me what happened,” he urged, just as he had when Libby was a child with a skinned knee or a bee sting.

From habit, she allowed herself to be comforted. For so long there had been no one to confide in except Stacey, and it seemed natural to lean on him now. “Aaron... Aaron called. He wanted me to have his... his baby!”

Before Stacey could respond to that, the door separating the kitchen from the living room swung open. Instinctively Libby drew back from the man who held her.

Jess towered in the doorway, pale, his gaze scorching Libby’s flushed, tear-streaked face. “You know,” he began in a voice that was no less terrible for being soft, “I almost believed you. I almost had myself convinced that you were above anything this shabby.”

“Wait—you don’t understand...”

Jess smiled a slow, vicious smile—a smile that took in his startled brother as well as Libby. “Don’t I? Oh, princess, I wish I didn’t.” The searing jade gaze sliced menacingly to Stacey’s face. “And it seems I’m going to be an uncle. Tell me, brother—what does that make Cathy?”

To Libby’s horror, Stacey said nothing to refute what was obviously a gross misunderstanding. He simply pulled her back into his arms, and her struggle was virtually imperceptible because of his strength.

“Let me go!” she pleaded, frantic.

Stacey released her, but only grudgingly. “I’ve got a plane to catch,” he said.

Libby was incredulous. “Tell him! Tell Jess that he’s wrong,” she cried, reaching out for Stacey’s arm, trying to detain him.

But Stacey simply pulled free and left by the back door.

There was a long, pulsing silence, during which both Libby and Jess seemed to be frozen. He was the first to thaw.

“I know you were hurt, Libby,” he said. “Badly hurt. But that didn’t give you the right to do something like this to Cathy.”

It infuriated Libby that this man’s good opinion was so important to her, but it was, and there was no changing that. “Jess, I didn’t do anything to Cathy. Please listen to me.”

He folded his strong arms and rested against the door jamb with an ease that Libby knew was totally feigned. “I’m listening,” he said, and the words had a flippant note.

Libby ignored fresh anger. “I am not expecting Stacey’s baby, and this wasn’t a romantic tryst. I don’t even know why he came here. I was on the phone with Aaron and he—”

A muscle in Jess’s neck corded, relaxed again. “I hope you’re not going to tell me that your former husband made you pregnant, Libby. That seems unlikely.”

Frustration pounded in Libby’s temples and tightened the already constricted muscles in her throat. “I am not pregnant!” she choked out. “And if you are going to eavesdrop, Jess Barlowe, you could at least pay attention! Aaron wanted me to come back to New York and have his baby so that he would have an heir to present to his grandmother!”

“You didn’t agree to that?”

“Of course I didn’t agree! What kind of monster do you think I am?”

Jess shrugged with a nonchalance that was belied by the leaping green fire in his eyes. “I don’t know, princess, but rest assured— I intend to find out.”

“I have a better idea!” Libby flared. “Why don’t you just leave me the hell alone?”

“In theory that’s brilliant,” he fired back, “but there is one problem— I want you.”

Involuntarily Libby remembered the kisses and caresses exchanged by the pond the day before, relived them. Hot color poured into her face. “Am I supposed to be honored?”

“No,” Jess replied flatly, “you’re supposed to be kept so busy that you won’t have time to screw up Cathy’s life any more than you already have.”

If Libby could have moved, she would have rushed across that room and slapped Jess Barlowe senseless. Since she couldn’t get her muscles to respond to the orders of her mind, she was forced to watch in stricken silence as he gave her a smoldering assessment with his eyes, executed a half salute and left the house.

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