

Shattered Image

By

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters are a product of the imagination of the author and any resemblance to any real person, either living or dead, is purely coincidental. Most towns, farms, and business locations are also fiction.

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Blurb: *As a child, she was called 'Betsy'. In college, she became 'Liz' and 'Elizabeth' as a woman of independent means—or so she portrayed herself to others. The image of the child often taunted as 'the convict's daughter' to the woman known as 'the ice queen' was shattered in the realization that no matter what the name, what the image, underneath it all everyone was not who others believed them to be. Especially not those she loved the most.*

Author Acknowledgements

I first wrote *Shattered Image* when my now thirty-eight-year-old son was a baby. I've always liked the story but had no luck selling it back before my autobiography (Dino, Godzilla and the Pigs) was published. After Dino, I wrote non-fiction for a while and I rewrote Sweet Pea and the original versions that became the Birds in Peril Series, and for various reasons, I never went back to Shattered Image until somewhere around 1999. Then, I thought to rewrite the story and update it. I edited it and put it back in the drawer where it stayed until recently. On June 15, 2020, I began again, determined to at least get it into my computer so it would be easier to edit.

I have decided not to update the story, but instead, to revise it with the background, dates and customs as it was originally written. In my country life, this was before computers and cell phones and everything internet entered our world. So that may seem odd to some....just bear in mind the story takes place in the 1980s, thirty-some years ago....

The story was inspired by the wondering thought, "What happens to a criminal's family after he is arrested or killed? How does the family deal with knowing—or not knowing—what that criminal did? This story is but one version of what could happen. It is entirely fiction. I don't know of any criminals in my family, past or present. While the setting of the story is Missouri farm country which is very familiar to me, the characters are figments of my imagination. Any possible connection to people, towns, or places is accidental.

Prologue

1986

The elevator made its usual ratcheting sound as it slowly climbed to the penthouse office on the eleventh floor. The absence of sound other than the elevator was unnerving, giving the overwhelming sensation something was wrong....

Several shots rang out just as Elizabeth stepped from the elevator.

At the far end of the corridor, Marc stood poised with a revolver in one hand while he peered through the open door of the adjoining office.

Elizabeth approached so quickly he could not prevent her from seeing the bodies sprawled across the plush carpet of the ornately furnished penthouse office.

"What is going on?" she demanded.

"Relax. It's all right." Marc's voice was gruff as he grabbed her arm to prevent her from entering the office. He shoved his revolver into a holster concealed beneath his denim jacket. "What are you doing here?"

"I have to...." Upon recognizing the older man lying on the floor she attempted to wrench her arm free and dash into the office.

"Don't," he warned sternly. "Stay out here. Does anyone know you're here?"

"Of course not!" she gasped indignantly. "You know how Neville was about keeping our relationship confidential."

"Right," Marc grunted querulously as he stepped into the office to examine each of the bodies.

Ignoring his command, Elizabeth entered behind him and knelt beside the body of the older man. She couldn't conceal an escaping sob of sorrow.

Marc glared at her, shaking his head in a way that could be either disgust or distress. His eyes never left her face as he rose and pressed a 'wire' concealed beneath his shirt. His voice was calm as he spoke into the hidden receiver.

"Send the crew around. Drastin's dead. He...uh..." At that point, Marc's voice broke causing him to heave a great breath before he spoke again. "He iced Chuck..."

Just then a security guard, with pistol at the ready, rushed down the hall. "I heard shots!" he exclaimed. His accusing gaze turned to Elizabeth.

Marc hastily intervened. "She just happened along a moment ago, Fred. Drastin's dead. Chuck, there, was an undercover agent. So am I."

Fred, the security guard, reluctantly focused his attention on Marc. "I'll have to see proof of that."

"You'll get it soon as Captain Morgan gets here," Marc assured him.

Fred appeared satisfied for the moment. He had worked with Marc in Mall Security long enough to believe him to be a man of his word. He released the

grip on his pistol, replacing it in the holster slung low on his hip. His gaze returned to Elizabeth.

"Mind tellin' me what you're doin' here this time of night?" he asked.

"I had some per...personal business with Nev...Mr. Drastin," she stammered. The room tilted, swaying all around her.

Had Marc just said he was an undercover cop?

"That sounds ominous, ma'am," Fred commented. Then his expression changed as he recognized her. "You work here, don't you?"

"Yes," Elizabeth managed to reply. Her voice shook as much as her body. "I m...manage the *Plaza Gallery of Art*."

"How did you get up here? This floor is private."

"I...I have a key to the elevator that opens onto the rear parking lot where Nev...Mr. Drastin parks his car..." Her gaze wandered to her hand lying protectively upon the shoulder of the dead, Neville Drastin, her employer and confidant. A shiver ran up her spine and she self-consciously removed her hand, curling it against her stomach as she struggled to stand.

Marc reached out to help her to her feet, but it was obvious he, too, wanted an explanation for her presence in Neville Drastin's private office this late at night.

"I was working late. Catching up on some paperwork and I...I received a phone call. I...I...h...hoped Nev...Mr. Drastin was still here so I could speak to him about it."

"What kind of phone call?" Fred inquired, more skeptically than ever.

"Marc?" Elizabeth's voice shook. Her legs trembled so had it not been for his arm wrapped securely around her waist, supporting her, she might have fallen. Her face contorted and she began to sob. "I...I tried to call you...but you weren't home and I came up here because I needed...needed..."

He gathered her closer still, murmuring, "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I would much rather have been home."

"The call was from Aunt Lilli. She called my apartment first, but when I didn't answer, called my office phone on the chance I was working late. Gramps had another stroke. They don't expect him to live through the night. I...I have to go home...Marc...I..." Sobs overcame her then.

Marc pressed Elizabeth's head to his shoulder as he faced Fred. "I'm getting her out of here. Tell Captain Morgan we're in the security office."

"Yeah...sure..." Fred grunted sympathetically enough. The set of his mouth told them he was not convinced.

CHAPTER ONE

Weeks had passed since anyone traveled the mile-long lane leading to the small farmhouse in the valley. At first glance, passersby were awed by the supreme peace and tranquility of their surroundings. Second glance brought dismay at the rundown condition of the house, the barn, outbuildings, and immediate grounds.

Elizabeth steered her Volkswagen Rabbit slowly along the driveway, carefully dodging weeds that grew taller than the hood, concealing giant potholes deep enough to drag the axle.

To the left, a brace of twenty-foot cedars provided invitation to venture into a cool looking woods. To the right lay ninety-seven acres of cleared pastureland and fields. This year's corn crop stood waiting to be harvested. At the edge of a shallow creek separating the barn and the main house, she braked long enough to study the fallen clapboards and sagging barn roof.

This was her childhood home. Several years had passed since she was last here. None-the-less, she was shocked by the state of ruin that had befallen everything. Oh, how she had once detested this place, wishing such ruin would cause her grandfather and aunt to move away. They had moved, eventually; but not for reasons she anticipated. And lately, she'd begun to 'miss home', this 'home'.

She pushed the car's gear into drive and slowly drove across the creek, answering the beckoning call of the house. After she parked near the yard gate, she sat studying her surroundings once again.

Both the yard and nearby garden were choked with weeds. The white picket fence had become rotting wood. Wood vines gutted the two-story brick house and paint peeled from the dark green windowsills and shutters.

What would she accomplish by moving back here? Was it the right idea? Was she running away as Marc accused her of doing?

The deaths of her grandfather and her employer (Neville Drastin) the same night sent her world into such an upheaval she was not certain she would ever recover.

At Captain Morgan's command, because the Captain did not trust her word or her motive for having gone to Drastin's office that evening, Marc accompanied her to her grandfather's funeral. He stayed with her for several days which caused him to miss the funeral of his partner, Chuck Willows. He never complained, but she knew he resented that. Even as an undercover cop, his absence was a subject of speculation among his fellow officers.

Their once warm and loving relationship grew apprehensive and uncertain. She couldn't sleep. He tried to soothe her when the nightmares began but...

Shaking herself out of unwanted thoughts, Elizabeth emerged from her car. She was a tall, slender woman in her early thirties. Her naturally curly auburn hair fell freely several inches below her shoulders. Her faded, snug-fitting jeans drew attention to her long, shapely legs while a short-sleeved loose blue sweatshirt disguised her slender waist and high, round breasts.

The long-practiced family habit of entering the house from the screened porch on the southeast side of the house caused her to select the key to that door and slowly tread over the weed-covered sidewalk in that direction.

The downspout from the gutter had fallen away and the hinges on the screened door were so rusted it no longer closed properly. Still, the presence of the old-fashioned pump over the cistern just inside the door calmly reassured her, giving her the courage to investigate further.

As she entered the kitchen, the wood-burning stove was the first object to draw her attention. It was a monstrous black object placed to heat both the kitchen and the living room when the fireplace was not in use. Her grandmother's oak cupboards still stood between two large windows along the north wall. The old wringer washing machine and stainless steel tubs still claimed their place beside an antique porcelain sink. Opposite the sink stood an ancient gas cook stove and almost as ancient Frigidaire refrigerator.

The center of the fourteen-foot by fourteen-foot room was dominated by a large oblong oak table painted white to match the cupboards. The paint on both was so old it no longer contrasted to the once bright yellow walls. The once shiny green linoleum was equally faded with glimpses of unfinished wood flooring peeping through numerous cracks.

Until that moment, Elizabeth had not realized the cupboards and table were far too large to be moved to her aunt's apartment in Carsonville.

The living room showed less signs of wear because heavy shades covered the large bay windows facing north and west, barring any sunlight from entering the room.

A large antique sleigh bed with red velvet cushions and a matching overstuffed armchair were all that remained of the furnishings that once filled this room. Her grandmother's lace draperies still framed the darkened windows.

Elizabeth crossed over to raise one of the shades and, much to her delight, the afternoon September sun filtered in to awaken the pattern on the rose wool carpet covering the center of the floor. Silken threads on the padded window seat began to glitter with life.

Her gaze wandered to the large fireplace on the north wall, and she remembered the cozy warmth it provided during cold, blustery Missouri winters. The wall above the mantle looked barren without the wedding portrait of her grandparents that hung there for nearly fifty years. An empty nail and faint marking where the ivory paint had not faded was all that remained.

She crossed the hall located in the center of the house into the master bedroom and was not surprised to find the gigantic four-poster double bed still there. It, too, was far too large for her aunt's apartment; yet, it seemed somehow diminutive in this otherwise empty room. The only other objects were the oil heat stove and the rag rug her grandmother braided before Elizabeth was born.

Each of the two bedrooms upstairs had one window jutting between the north and south eaves. Both rooms were empty.

In the upstairs hall, a dormer window jutted over the front stoop. An attic ran the width of the house along the southeast side over the kitchen and rear screened porch.

Upstairs, there were no heavy shades to bar sunlight from the rooms. Elizabeth was drawn to view a deep wood facing north and fertile fields facing east and south. The fields, rented to a neighboring farmer, showed a substantial stand of corn yet to be harvested. To the west, the same neighbor's feeder cattle grazed in the pasture along the mile-long lane to the county road.

Rather than empty and barren, as she first thought, Elizabeth realized the farm was resting, waiting, peacefully and calmly. It was the exact kind of refuge she needed in her life at this point.

She skipped down the stair trailing her hand along the carved wooden banister as she went.

Yes! She made the right decision to 'come home'!

CHAPTER TWO

"But that old house gets so cold in winter!" Lillian Bannerman protested.

From her perch on the high stool in one corner of Lillian's compact kitchen Elizabeth calmly attempted to reassure her aunt. "Both heat stoves seem to be in fair condition. There is even oil in the tank for the bedroom stove."

"You need wood for the other one. And someone has to clean the chimney flue before anyone attempts to light a fire in that fireplace!" Lillian returned as shrilly as before.

Well, she knew this would not be an easy task. Elizabeth took a deep breath before patiently suggesting, "I can buy wood and hire someone to clean the flue."

Eyeing her suspiciously, Lillian demanded, "Just where did you get so much money?"

Suppressing a grimace of anger, steeling herself to remain calm, Elizabeth explained, "I told you I've saved enough money to get me through a whole year if I'm careful. Come spring, I'll look into working somewhere."

"There are so many things you have to worry about now!"

Elizabeth heaved a sigh of annoyance, but Lillian was too far gone on her tangent to notice.

"Surely you remember how awful that driveway gets when it snows! You don't have a tractor to clear it even if you still remember how to drive one! I'll just worry myself sick thinking about you out there all alone!"

"Then you will just have to come to visit every day," Elizabeth snapped sarcastically and immediately wished she had not.

"Don't you get smart with me, young lady!" Lillian shook a slender finger beneath Elizabeth's nose. "I do not understand what put such a notion into your head! Why, this is crazier than when you decided you could make a million dollars drawing pictures! Ten years and look where *THAT* got you! Right back where you should have stayed in the first place."

"Aunt Lillian!" Giving up all effort to control her temper, Elizabeth began to shout louder than her aunt. "In the first place, I *did not* draw pictures! I *sold* them! I made a good living managing *The Gallery of Art*. All I want now is a few months of peace and quiet seclusion. Can't you even allow me that?"

"Why do you want that?" Confusion abruptly erased Lillian's anger.

Elizabeth glanced away unable to face the loving concern written on her aunt's face.

"I can't talk about it, yet," she said, "I will. I promise. I just need to gather myself, if I can. Help me, Auntie. Please."

"Has it got anything to do with the way that executive director of that shopping mall died?"

The concern in Lillian's voice caused Elizabeth to answer as truthfully as possible.

"Some. It was such a shock. But...there's more..." She paused a moment wondering just how much she dared reveal. "I need somewhere to begin all over again. The farm is the only place I have to go back to. It is my home."

Now Lillian's eyes widened with astonishment. "You said you hated that farm!"

"Ten years ago I couldn't wait to escape it. I did hate it because I felt trapped there. But, I've grown up some. I'm not nursing a whim, Auntie. Honest. I've planned everything carefully. The past couple of days while you were working, I began to clean the house."

Lillian burst into laughter. Elizabeth had always loved the sound of her aunt's laughter. It was a tinkling lilt that belied the woman's prudish appearance. So far as Elizabeth knew, Lillian had never cut the hair she kept in a twisted bun at the nape of her neck. She was tall and thin, with no breasts visible through the thick blouses she wore. Long skirts, or wide-legged pants, always covered her legs and dark stockings adorned her feet. When she laughed, little crinkle lines formed around her twinkling eyes. Her thin lips curled to reveal straight white, perfect teeth. After a moment, she placed a hand on either hip, throwing her head back as she accused.

"You knew you would convince me all along, didn't you?"

Elizabeth laughed too, unaware that the sound of her laughter was identical to Lillian's.

"Oh...h, all right then," Lillian declared in the midst of a deep sigh. "I have been reluctant to put the farm up for sale. Renting the crop and pasture land provides a small bit of income. Perhaps it's better if someone lives there. What will you do for furniture? And, what about that horrible gas cook stove? That thing always scared me to death! The refrigerator has seen better days too."

"During the winter months I'll probably have to worry more about food freezing than spoiling. I have a microwave and there's enough furniture left in the house to suit me for now. I like those old antiques. They remind me of Gramps and Granny."

Elizabeth stated her plans matter-of-factly, as if she'd known she would be required to answer them.

Lillian studied her niece for a thoughtful moment. Betsy always had a level head. Or, she did before she moved to Chicago with... Now was not the time to think of *him*...or of a situation she had never been able to control. Nothing awful had come from that arrangement...except that her beloved Betsy had moved out of her life for more than a decade. Ehh...It didn't matter anymore. *He* was gone and Betsy had come home where she belonged. Plans must be made to keep her here.

Pressing a forefinger against her lips, Lillian began to speak her thoughts out loud.

"You can have Pop's dresser back. It goes with the four-poster bed and really is too large for this apartment. I imagine Ted Cooper would clean the chimney and do any needed repairs on the house...like gutters...you know. He

probably knows someone who can sell you wood too...if he doesn't have any to sell..."

"Ted Cooper? You mean Agnes and Elijah's son? I thought he was making a career out of the Army?" Elizabeth's astonishment was obvious.

"He thought so too." Lillian smiled at Elizabeth's sudden interest. She and Agnes had once imagined a match between Elizabeth and Ted. Perhaps that was not a lost dream either. She explained, "When Elijah was killed in that accident the other year, Ted came home to take over the farm. Elijah was already renting our farm, then, and Ted continued to do so. He kept an eye on the place so Pop wouldn't get so upset about having to move into town. I think I'll just give Aggie a ring right now...."

The following Saturday morning Elizabeth and Lillian journeyed the five miles north of Carsonville to the farm on Old Crick Road, the county road named for the dried creek bed it once followed.

Lillian jabbered away about everything they passed while Elizabeth remained quiet. She was apprehensive about meeting Ted Cooper again. She had wondered who was renting the farm and was glad it was someone she knew. However, the most she remembered about Ted Cooper was his reputation for chasing women.

Lillian was impressed by the amount of work Elizabeth had already accomplished on the farmhouse and yard in such a short time. She'd cleared the yard of brush and litter. She even nailed several pieces of the once white picket fence back into place. She tightened the hinges on the screen door and scrubbed the kitchen walls and floor spotless.

Elizabeth explained that she wanted to wash the walls in the living room as well, but thought she should wait until the chimney was swept. She planned to paint the bedroom, hall, and bathroom a lighter shade of blue, she thought.

Lillian agreed to all of Elizabeth's plans. She didn't try to hide her amusement when she asked, "Betsy, dear, have you considered essential things like electricity and water?"

Elizabeth remained undaunted. The electricity was to be restored in a couple of days, but obtaining water was a problem.

The janitor of the apartment complex where Lillian lived had loaned her several five-gallon containers to carry water to and from the farm in the trunk of her Volkswagen Rabbit. Unfortunately, she couldn't continue to carry water that way if she was living there. Most of the gutters and downspouts leading to the cistern were in such useless condition, if the cistern held any water at all, it was certain to be contaminated.

The two women stood on the screen porch discussing the problem when a tall, muscular shadow fell across the doorsill.

The silhouette so distinctly resembled Marc Grenwald, Elizabeth gasped in fright, certain he had already come after her.

"Hullo, Ted," Lillian cheerfully greeted the brawny figure descending upon them. "Do you remember my niece, Betsy?"

Elizabeth nearly choked at her folly. Marc and Ted were both dark-haired, blue-eyed giants standing well over six feet tall, but that is where all resemblance stopped. Marc's hands possessed long, slender fingers, not thick beefy appendages as Ted's. Marc moved with a sinewy masculine grace while Ted approached most things with brute strength. Marc rarely raised his voice above a smooth pleasant drawl. Ted generally bellowed. Both men were raised on large farms, but Marc appeared well educated and at ease in any situation. Even having traveled the world as a member of the United States Armed Forces, Ted remained every bit the backwoodsman. If given problems in similar circumstances, it was uncertain which man would emerge the victor; but, Elizabeth believed to compare them was asinine.

Ted sent her a toothy grin as he drawled, "Well, Bet...sy! You've... uh... filled out some since I last saw you."

In one way, Elizabeth was flattered that he noticed. As a child, she was a long-legged spindly creature with stringy fly-in-every-direction hair. She had gained some weight in recent years; and having her hair trimmed regularly, helped to cut down the fringe effect. Her complexion was healthy and rosy enough she rarely wore make-up. She was tall enough that the current leggy fashions suited her; but she still felt the most comfortable in jeans, sweatshirts, and sneakers as she was dressed that morning. The '*You can take the girl out of the country but not the country out of the girl*,' effect suited her well.

However, Ted's gaze roving up and down the length of her body in *that* way was not flattering. She returned his scrutiny with an annoyed glare until his ruddy complexion turned a shade deeper, and a sheepish grin twitched one corner of his mouth.

"So...you decided the big city wasn't for you after all..." he commented.

"Something like that," she replied.

Lillian, oblivious to the sparks flying between them, inquired, "What should we do about the cistern?"

"It'll have to be cleaned before you use it," Ted replied as he crossed the porch and easily lifted the cover of the cistern from its metal casing. He lay face down to peer over the rim into the dark murky interior below and after a moment stood, grunting as he replaced the cistern top. "Yeah...well...I think the best would be to just seal off the cistern and run water by a pipe from that well down by the barn."

"What about the gutters?" Elizabeth asked.

Ted peered at her like she was insane.

"I mean..." she stuttered and started again. "They drain into the cistern so how do you seal them off?"

"The gutters have to be replaced."

"And left to fill the cistern?"

Ted's eyebrows rose, revealing his surprise that Elizabeth was intelligent enough to realize what kind of problem this could cause to the cistern and house foundations in rainy years. He placed a hand on either hip and peered around as if in thought. "We'll have to set them to drain away from the yard," he decided and then he grinned. "You sure got my work cut out for me."

"I haven't hired you yet," Elizabeth retorted.

"Your aunt has," Ted returned easily, adding in reply to her indignant glare, "What's a matter? You think I'm gonna charge somethin' you can't pay?"

Elizabeth whirled and angrily stomped into the kitchen.

CHAPTER THREE

Nightmarish mists repeatedly released Elizabeth only to recapture and draw her into their hellish depths. She grew conscious enough to feel the damp air and to recognize the steady patter on the windowpanes as rain. She drew the covers more securely around herself and once again shrank into the clutches of a dream that was much more memory than nightmare.

"You killed him! Murderer! Murderer!"

The hysterical voice vibrating from wall to wall did not sound like her own.

Sheer terror drove Elizabeth to consciousness again. Outside, the wind had risen to a threatening gale. Raindrops became hail. She shivered with chill and sought the warmth of the feather mattress covering the gigantic four-poster bed. Unconsciousness hurtled her back into the throes of her recurring nightmare.

The first time the nightmare occurred, Marc was with her. She awoke screaming. Perspiration caused her to shiver with chill.

He cradled her in his arms, crooning, "Relax, honey. It was only a nightmare."

After her screams dissolved into dry, gulping sobs, he asked, "Want to talk about it?"

"I relived it all," she explained in a voice that still trembled as did her body. "But...the dream...it was so grotesque. Blood was everywhere and voices bounced off the walls. It was much more horrible than when it happened."

"I know." He pressed a soft kiss against her temple. "It's not unusual to relive bad experiences in your sleep. I have."

"You have?" Gasping in surprise, she pulled away from him. "When?"

"After the first time I shot and killed a man," he stated so matter-of-factly Elizabeth drew even further from his grasp. She was still having difficulty believing the man she loved was an undercover cop. Now, he was telling her he'd killed people?

"It was in the line of duty," he explained. "I was a rookie street cop. One night my partner and I intercepted a liquor store robbery in progress. The robber turned a gun on us. I got the lucky shot, but it shook me up plenty. I'm surprised this hasn't happened to you before."

"I haven't slept well since it happened," she confessed.

"You've been through hell, babe. There're bound to be repercussions."

"You mean...like...while ago?"

"I suppose." He reached to stroke her hair. One corner of his mouth curled, not in amusement.

'*While ago*,' they made love for the first time in several weeks. Elizabeth responded like a block of wood.

"I love you, Marc," she whispered.

"I love you," he replied almost harshly, as if he was annoyed that she questioned it. He waited a moment, and then, sighed as if relenting. "Do you want me to stay all night or should I go back to my place now that we're awake?"

"Please stay," she pleaded, reaching out both arms to him.

Neither spoke again as they cuddled in the darkness and eventually drifted off to sleep. The nightmare didn't recur that night.

As the incredible facts concerning Neville Drastin's secret life became headline news, his face appeared in nearly every newspaper and on every television and radio station in the nation. Yet, no one at *The Plaza* turned a sympathetic ear. Some refused to believe the news. Many eyed Elizabeth suspiciously, wondering how she connected to his criminal activities.

What upset Elizabeth the most was the fact that no one, not brother, sister, even distant cousin stepped forward to provide Neville Drastin with a decent funeral. He was buried in a pauper's lot in the city cemetery. For all his money, no will was discovered in any of his personal effects. Elizabeth wondered if, perhaps, he felt no one cared enough to be a recipient of his vast fortune. Vast it was—no matter how much was illegally obtained.

"He was my friend!" she wailed the evening Marc informed her Drastin had been buried without any kind of religious service. "Why couldn't I at least have a memorial for him?"

"Who would attend it?" Marc snapped sarcastically.

When she flinched in horror, his voice softened. "Elizabeth Anne, don't you realize people are staying away out of fear of being connected to him? If you do anything for him now, even arrange a memorial because of his position at the Plaza, you will only draw attention to yourself? Don't you understand the reason Drastin kept your relationship so secret is because he was protecting you? He didn't want anyone to know any more about you than you knew about him!"

"It isn't right," she persisted.

"So have prayers said for his soul in some monastery," Marc muttered dispassionately.

"You're so cold," she accused.

That wasn't true. Marc repeatedly thought of her needs before his own. Like when Captain Morgan insisted she remain in the city under surveillance.

"Aw, c'mon!" Marc roared disrespectfully at his elder supervisor. "She just got word that her grandfather is dying. That's why she came to Drastin's office tonight. To tell him. You have to let her go home to Missouri long enough to see her grandfather!"

Capt. Morgan rubbed one hand over his chin as he considered.

"All right," he agreed. Then he poked a warning finger at Marc. "You escort her! I'm holding you personally responsible to see that she attends the inquest. You leave a phone number and the address of where you will be staying, and report to me at least once every day."

That meant that Marc would not be able to attend the memorial service for his partner and fellow officer, Chuck Willows (the man Drastin shot and killed).

Joseph Bannerman had already died by the time Capt. Morgan gave Marc his orders, but she wouldn't know that until the next day. She had not visited her grandfather in more than a year. The fact that she was not to speak to him again in this life haunted her for some time, as did the burden she placed on Marc.

None-the-less, Marc remained by her side, escorting her to Missouri and staying until she returned to Chicago. He never spoke one word of objection.

Lillian was immediately smitten with Marc. Over and over, she commented how thoughtful and attentive he was. Elizabeth sometimes wondered if Lillian had any idea how her incurable romantic nature caused Elizabeth to suffer.

The inquest into Drastin's death was not the ordeal Elizabeth feared it would be. Several people from the Plaza were subpoenaed for questioning. None, it appeared, had any knowledge of Drastin's criminal life.

Elizabeth was both astounded and appalled that she felt so close to a man she hardly knew. She did not understand how one person could have led two totally different lives as he did. Because she had enjoyed such a special relationship with him, realizing he had protected her while he lived, knowing he could not protect her now, caused her to begin to fear his criminal connections would include her in some way. That fear soon became an obsession.

Drastin's death thrust The Plaza into one upheaval after another. The Board of Directors could not decide who should follow in Drastin's head position. None, it appeared, had been groomed to take over—as if the man believed he would live forever. Perhaps, he did. There were certainly no signs he had prepared for his death.

The stores, franchised as individual businesses, were able to remain open while speculation and gossip kept everyone humming.

Many times, Elizabeth happened upon conversation hastily dropped in her presence. No one took her into their confidence. Some stopped speaking to her altogether. And Sally Lungstrom, Elizabeth's assistant, proved herself to be the menace Elizabeth had always suspected her to be. As Sally ruthlessly began to undermine Elizabeth's position as supervisor of *The Plaza Gallery of Art*, Elizabeth was forced to acknowledge the kinds of rumors that had circulated the mall about Drastin and herself. She realized she had never encountered those rumors because of Drastin's overpowering influence...or her relationship with Marc. Now, Neville Drastin was dead and Marc had returned to his regular detective duties. There was no one to protect her.

Elizabeth bolted upright in the darkness. A cold sweat poured from her body.

The only sound to be heard was the steady patter of rain on the windowpanes. The luminous dial on the alarm clock on the dresser said '3:00 A.M.'

Knowing sleep would be impossible now, she got out of bed. Wrapping herself warmly in an old ankle-length blue terry robe and furry slippers, she wandered to the bathroom, and then to the living room.

Three weeks had passed since Ted began repairs on the old farmhouse. This was her first night sleeping there. Perhaps that was why the dream occurred again. She hadn't had it since she left Chicago.

She turned on a lamp and picked up her sketchpad and pencil before making herself comfortable before the dying embers of the fire. The room was warm and cozy and she began to sketch as her mind wandered.

Rainstorms never frightened her. The steady patter of rain against the windowpanes soothed her; and, as if by a will of its own, the pencil in her hand began making strokes on the large pad. Her mind wandered far back into the early days of her childhood.

Her parents were killed in an automobile accident when she was three years old. The circumstances surrounding their deaths were rather questionable and left much to the imagination. Shortly before her birth, her father was arrested for embezzling a large sum of money from the business firm where he was employed. He was convicted and had already spent two years of his sentence in prison when the accident occurred. Supposedly, her mother was helping him escape.

Elizabeth's grandmother, Martha Bannerman, also died before Elizabeth was of an age to remember her very well. So she was raised by her grandfather, Joseph Bannerman, and his surviving daughter, Lillian.

Elizabeth remembered her grandfather to be a tall, hardworking man who was both stern and gentle and to whom years of backbreaking labor etched countless lines into his sunburned face. He impressed the rules of right and wrong with an iron hand; yet, he always had a kind ear for a little girl's troubles and needs.

Lillian's personality was a great deal like Joseph's. Elizabeth sometimes thought Lillian 'addle-witted'; but, in truth, she admired the things Lillian accomplished in her lifetime.

Lillian began to work in a local factory when she was twenty-three (the year Elizabeth began elementary school). After obtaining her GED through a correspondence course she managed to rise from machine operator to the forelady's position she now held.

Despite her old-maid demeanor, Lillian was a pretty woman. At the age of forty-eight, her skin remained so supple and rosy she appeared much closer in age to thirty. Her eyes often twinkled behind wire-rimmed glasses. Her smile was quick and easy.

Elizabeth was never offended when people commented how much she resembled her Aunt Lillian. She hoped she would age as gracefully.

Throughout her school years, Elizabeth endured the cruel taunts of classmates who labeled her 'the convict's daughter'. Both Lillian and Joseph, living in their own secluded world, appeared oblivious to Elizabeth's struggles. They didn't seem concerned that she had few friends, if any, and spent most of her time studying or reading. Themselves unconcerned with fashion trends, or what teenage girls wore during these days of short skirts and block heels, they paid little attention to Elizabeth's discomfort in long skirts, long sleeves, and high neck blouses and socks to her knees. In fact, it was a miracle they allowed

Elizabeth to wear jeans at all. Neither understood why she thought of herself as a teenage outcast, so determined to leave the farm as soon as she turned eighteen.

Elizabeth entered college with the largest scholarship given in the history of the local 'Rebecca's and Oddfellows'. She graduated Magna cum Laude four years later with a major in business administration and a minor in art. She was immediately hired as assistant manager in the *Plaza Gallery of Art* and five years later took over as manager when her predecessor retired.

Elizabeth paused to study the likenesses she had drawn of her grandfather and her aunt. She chuckled at herself, realizing where her thoughts had traveled. After a deep sigh, she allowed those thoughts to continue on.

Her relationship with Neville Drastin was never sexual. She had sometimes wondered why. The man was certainly attractive enough. At least thirty years her senior, he was tall and well built. Muscular, but lean, with thick, dark, wavy hair and silver 'wings' etched against his temples. His wide-set brown eyes possessed a golden light suggesting he was as all-seeing and all-knowing as many people feared him to be. His hawk-like nose and wide, narrow lips were usually drawn into an expression suggesting the same.

He appeared drawn to Elizabeth from the day she began employment at the *Gallery*, one of several stores within the mall that he owned stock in. As not only majority stockholder, he was also executive director of *The Plaza*, and influenced her advance into supervisor position. He gave her expensive, elegant gifts, but nothing inappropriate enough to cause her suspicion—books about art, a couple small works by well-known artists. One year for Christmas, he gave her a stereo system along with a small collection of records and tapes she now cherished. He often brought her flowers.

They dined together at least once a week, but always in obscure places where no one was likely to recognize them. He sometimes came to her apartment for quiet, intimate, privately catered dinners, but he never told her where he lived. His private number was changed at regular intervals.

Elizabeth wondered about those things. Some things...like the changing phone numbers...seemed odd. She knew they were the subject of a lot of mall gossip, but when she discovered that no one dared confront her (even in a joking manner), she ceased to care what anyone thought. Until Marc Grenwald entered her life.

Neville Drastin deeply opposed her relationship with Marc.

CHAPTER FOUR

Elizabeth sat idly for some minutes before allowing her pencil to continue shaping images of the people most prominent in her life.

Marc Grenwald was employed as a security guard at *The Plaza* only a few weeks when they met. They were never formally introduced; but instead, seemed to repeatedly encounter one another somewhere in the mall halls or parking area.

Few words other than greetings were spoken until the day Elizabeth encountered difficulty trying to hang a large display. Sally was causing so much havoc, Elizabeth, in exasperation, climbed the ladder herself only to discover it had to be the rickiest in the entire mall. She was on the top step nearly eight feet in the air when the ladder began to totter. By mere chance, just happening by, Marc sprang to support the ladder until she finished hanging the long silk cords around a popular painting.

Elizabeth was so embarrassed she was unable to look him in the eye. That, however, was not the case with her twittering assistant, who Elizabeth sent fleeing with a single glare. She somehow managed to thank Marc, and he promised he would see to it the ladder was promptly discarded. She was convinced he would prefer to discard her as well.

Many of *The Plaza* employees ate lunch in a small restaurant located in the east wing of the mall. Elizabeth often saw Marc there.

Several days later, she was delayed by a customer who could not make up his mind; and so, took lunch an hour later than usual. She'd just placed her order when he approached her table.

"Been on any ladders lately?" he asked, sporting a huge grin.

"Not funny," Elizabeth retorted. "I could have broken my neck."

"Or your assistant's," he suggested.

Elizabeth glowered at him the same as she had Sally.

He chuckled, totally undaunted, as he asked, "Mind if I join you? You're eating later than usual."

Elizabeth was too shocked to refuse. Somehow, she mustered the courage to answer, "You're late today too."

"One of the other guards had a dental appointment so we switched breaks," Marc answered. Then he winked slyly, "I thought I'd miss seeing you today. Maybe our meeting is predestined."

What? Marc was as interested in Elizabeth as she was him? That seemed impossible.

Lunch that day was one of the most pleasant times she ever experienced. Time passed far too quickly and she felt no hesitation accepting a date with Marc the following Saturday evening.

They went to a popular dinner/dance establishment. Marc was astonished to discover that Elizabeth rarely frequented such places. She didn't know how to dance very well either, but he didn't tease her about being a country bumpkin (as others did). Marc was raised on a farm in southern Illinois, he explained. He seemed genuinely astonished that she didn't have a score of men knocking on her door and refused to believe she'd never been seriously involved with anyone.

It would seem they had begun a promising relationship. Unfortunately, the following week Elizabeth watched Marc arrest a teenage shoplifter in a way that stunned and horrified her. She believed his actions were ruthless and cruel, so unlike the man she thought she knew he totally repulsed her. She began to avoid him in every way possible.

One Friday evening Sally Lungstrom managed to convince Elizabeth to attend a private party with her. Elizabeth never went to parties. She chalked the decision to go, not from Sally's incessant persuasion, but instead the result of lonely desperation.

Sally was a petite, bubble-headed blond who believed it to be a blemish upon her character to spend a single night alone in bed. If it were not for her eye for color, and charm with customers, Elizabeth would have fired her months ago.

At that fateful party, less than an hour passed before Elizabeth began searching for a telephone to call a taxi to take her home.

After searching the lower story of the house, and receiving several eyefuls of people in positions she really didn't want to acknowledge, she finally found a wall phone in the kitchen. The kitchen was such a mess of strewn food and dirty dishes, it took her a while to find a clean cloth so she could wipe down the phone before she used it.

Even as she scrubbed the receiver, she chastised herself for being stupid enough to come here with Sally, for feeling suspicious enough to scrub down a damned telephone!

She heard the snort of amusement seconds before a hand grabbed the receiver and a familiar voice gruffly offered, "I'll drive you home."

The gasp of outrage died on her lips as blue eyes bore into hers.

"No...I...r...ra...rather" she stammered unable to finish.

"Rather what?" Marc demanded in a low harsh tone meant only for her ears. 'What the hell turned you off me anyway? I thought we had a good time on our one and only date, but you've treated me like poison ever since. What did I do?"

He sounded more insulted than angry. Perhaps, she should give him a chance to explain. He was a security guard after all and that kid had not been the least bit respectful. Suddenly ashamed of her hastily drawn conclusion, she mumbled, "It's just me...I guess..."

"Maybe we ought'a talk about that." Marc's tone became gentle. He put the receiver back on its receptacle.

Every room in the house was filled with a smoky haze and a sickly sweet odor. Music was loud. Some were dancing in the living room. Most had divided

off into couples and were in various stages of undress, including Sally and her new boyfriend.

Marc grabbed hold of Elizabeth's arm and gently tugged her toward the back door. Once they were clear of the narrow, concrete, back stoop against the rear entry, he hissed suspiciously, "How in the hell did you get mixed up with *that* crowd?"

Elizabeth bristled immediately, but any sarcastic remark refused to emerge from her tongue. Marc's dark expression rendered her silent until they'd settled into his Ford Bronco. When he asked if she was hungry, she managed to reply with a curt, "No."

"We can go for a drive," he decided.

"I'd rather you took me straight home," she replied.

He steered onto a busy street and switched the radio to a country music station. "That's what you like, isn't it? Country?" he asked, sending her one of his most charming smiles.

She shrugged and recoiled into the passenger seat.

"Oh c'mon! Has your friend Drastin put me off-limits, or something?"

"How dare you!" Elizabeth gasped, bolting upright. "No wonder you have the job you do! It's just one more way to push your weight around! If you think you can bully me like you did that poor kid, you can just think again!"

"*What?*" Marc stared at her in astonishment so long he narrowly missed sideswiping an oncoming vehicle.

"Watch where you're driving!" Elizabeth snapped.

"I think I better stop altogether," he muttered and quickly steered his SUV into the nearest parking lot, a roadside strip mall where most of the stores had already shut down for the night. Even with passing vehicle lights from street traffic, the lot gave off an ominous aura. Elizabeth checked to make sure her door was locked.

Marc didn't seem to notice. He spoke in complete bewilderment.

"Please explain to me what you just said. What kid?"

"The one you arrested the other day?"

"Which one?"

"There was more than one?" Elizabeth barely managed to squeak the question.

"Elizabeth Anne..." he expelled in midst of a deep sigh. "I arrest shoplifters every day. Is that what you are talking about? A shoplifter? Most of them are kids and it's not unusual for me to arrest two or three of them in one day."

That was the first time he addressed her given name in that tone of complete tolerance. It didn't occur to her to question how he knew her full name. Maybe she told him. He probably saw it in some mall register where her manager credentials listed her name as Elizabeth Anne Miller. It didn't matter. What mattered was that she'd never felt so foolish in her life.

"I...I didn't realize..." she mumbled apologetically. "You sounded so mean! It was frightening to watch you shove that kid around like that."

"Honey, I have to be rough," he explained as he lay one arm across the back of the seat. "We try to scare the first-timers into not shoplifting again, but it

rarely works. Some of those kids already have records a mile long. They fight because they know they're going to juvenile hall. Sometimes we get lucky. Some kids really are desperate; and when I run across a situation like that, I try to help them. It's not always that simple. Was the 'kid' you're talking about skinny, wore a mini skirt that barely covered her hind-end and an orange mohair sweater instead of a jacket?"

"Yes. She was."

"Patty Faye looks about fourteen. She's nineteen and wore two more stolen tops underneath that orange mohair sweater and a couple diamond rings in the pocket of her skirt. She's also been picked up for soliciting on the parking lot. Patty Faye isn't going into juvenile court this time. She's going to adult court and then, hopefully, rehab. She steals that stuff and sells it on the street to supply her habit."

"Will that help her?"

"Probably not. She also carries a switchblade in those high heeled boots she wears. Cliff found out about that the hard way. She's a hardened criminal and she isn't even twenty-one." He shook his head sadly. "I knew we drew a lot of attention arresting her. That's what she wanted. I guess she thought someone would try to help her or something." His expression turned sympathetic. "I'm sorry you saw that. I can tell you were never a shoplifter. I bet you never even took change out of your mother's purse, did you?"

"My mother died before I was old enough to know what change was."

Elizabeth's truthful, albeit thoughtless, reply caused Marc to duck his head with sudden embarrassment.

"I remember you told me that. I've really gotten off on the wrong track, haven't I?"

"I was foolish to draw such quick conclusions." She smiled self-consciously. "I should have asked you what was going on instead of...It was ugly to watch..."

"I'm sorry."

"No. It's your job. I should have known better."

"So will you go out with me again?"

Elizabeth couldn't suppress a sudden burst of laughter. "You are relentless."

He grinned proudly.

"Where would you take me?" she dared to inquire.

"To my family reunion tomorrow night."

"Your family reunion! Marc! I won't know anyone there!"

"Neither will I." He chuckled over her horrified reaction. "My mother and some of my aunts and cousins decided to get all the Grenwalds—three or four generations from several states—under one roof for one evening. It's taken a couple years to plan it all, and the big event is supposed to occur at a dinner and dance tomorrow night. Say you'll come with me. You will meet my family. My mom and dad, both brothers and all three sisters. God knows who else we'll both meet. And, they'll like you enough to get off my back about finding someone to settle down with."

"Oh really?" Elizabeth raised one accusing brow. "Don't you think they'll know you're just using me to shut them up?"

"But I won't be using you. I want to show you off."

He certainly knew the right thing to say.

The following morning he arrived at her apartment an hour earlier than expected only to sheepishly explain, "I wanted to make certain you didn't back out."

She'd actually been considering that. They were in for a long drive to Marc's southern Illinois home town and they would, no doubt, have to spend the night in a motel somewhere...

As if reading her thoughts, he added, "We're staying overnight with my folks."

Her cry of outrage shocked him.

"Hey settle down! I'm not going to try to sleep with you in my folks' house! Give me credit for some decency, will you?"

He didn't tell her he'd called his mother at 6 a.m. that morning to beg permission to bring Elizabeth into her home overnight. His mother and sisters would have a grand time telling her all about it later.

"I don't know your parents!" Elizabeth protested.

"You will before the evening is over," he insisted. "It'll be fun. I promise."

One thing about Marc. He kept his promises. That evening—the entire weekend—was the most fun she'd had in a very long time.

The next time the nightmare occurred was the day Elizabeth quit her job at *The Gallery of Art*. She woke in a cold sweat and then sank beneath the covers allowing herself to cry for the first time during that long terrible month after the deaths of her grandfather and her employer.

She was alone. Marc had returned to his duties in law enforcement and erratic hours caused him to stay in his own apartment that night. She needed his steadfast strength and ability to explain away her fears. She longed to feel his strong arms around her and his broad shoulder beneath her cheek. She craved the tremor of love, of laughter, of soothing tenderness in his voice.

She knew she had only to pick up the telephone to fulfill one wish. She would hear his voice. If she would ask, not ten minutes would pass and she would have his arms and all of his loving attention as well.

As if by a will of its own, her arm snaked toward the telephone on the bedside table.

No!

She snatched it back.

It took all the willpower she possessed not to call him. She could not call him now! He needed his rest. Not to be chasing after her ridiculous nightmares.

She must learn to deal with this alone.

She tossed and turned the remainder of the night, but the nightmare didn't return.

At 8 a.m. her telephone awakened her out of exhausted sleep, the kind of sleep that shuts off the conscious mind but provides little rest.

She groped for the receiver, mumbling into its mouthpiece.

Marc's gentle laughter vibrated over the wire.

"Wake up, Cinderella babe! Something told me you overslept this morning. Better get up or you'll be late to work."

"I'm never going back there," Elizabeth mumbled, trying to sit up a little straighter while holding the receiver.

"Why not?" He chuckled, still believing she was speaking through sleep.

"I quit yesterday." Speaking more clearly now that she was sitting up, she began to rub the sleep from her eyes.

Marc was suddenly serious. "Why?"

"Sally...oh...I just lost my temper with her once too often and..."

"She got sympathy everywhere else," Marc concluded correctly. "Maybe it's for the best. I'm off today. I'll be over in about fifteen minutes. We can talk about some employment prospects for you."

"No...Marc...wait..."

He'd already hung up.

Ten minutes later boxes she had yet to pack blocked his entrance into her apartment. Elizabeth was busy packing dishes into a padded cardboard container she'd confiscated from the building supervisor.

"What's this?" Marc exclaimed the moment he stepped into her kitchen.

"Some kind of hint to move in with me?"

Ignoring his teasing, she soberly asked, "Want some coffee?"

"Sure." He replied as he leaned to plant a quick kiss on her lips. His eyes didn't leave her as she poured coffee (brewed from a European coffeemaker Drastin had given her) into two ceramic cups and set them on the small kitchen table before she faced him squarely.

"Answer me," he demanded. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going home."

She studied him, feeling the tremor that always crept from her spine into her toes when he watched her. The mere sight of him melted her so she very nearly changed her mind in that moment. But, that was not the answer. This was not something Marc could make better.

"For how long?" he asked.

"I don't know," she replied. "I need to pull myself together...somehow..."

"And you can't do that here?"

She watched the emotions cross his handsome face. Confusion, anger, remorse, and finally the inevitable question, "Do you love me at all?"

"Do you love me?" she countered in a hoarse whisper.

"We shouldn't have to ask each other that."

Elizabeth flinched from the anger in his tone. Several moments passed while she gathered the courage to try to explain.

"Marc, I'm not sure enough of myself anymore to be sure of you. So much has happened. Gramps is gone. I wish so much that I could have talked to him just one more time. There are so many things I would tell him; things I should have said long ago. I was so selfish not to visit, to push him and Aunt Lillie so far

away. I want to try to connect with Aunt Lillie, if I can but...Neville...I feel like I hardly knew him at all and..."

"What about me?" Marc interrupted tersely.

"I just need time to sort it all out..." she begged.

Perhaps Marc had held his patience too long. Where his understanding once seemed endless, in this, her returning to Carsonville, he possessed no understanding at all.

"You don't want me anymore. Right? Why? I tried to protect you from the truth the only way I knew how. Or, have I just fulfilled my usefulness? Sally told me you were only friendly with people who served your purpose. My services are rendered. Now I'm out the door. Right?"

"No! God, Marc! No!" Elizabeth cried, reaching out both hands to him. Just as quickly she whirled and faced the window.

Outside, Chicago was windy and warm for late September. Some children played in a residential park across the street while their mothers visited on nearby park benches.

Marc stepped up close behind her, softly whispering her name.

"Elizabeth Anne..."

He was the only person to ever call her by her full name. Growing up, she was 'Betsy' to family and in school. In college, she became 'Liz' to her roommates and friends. At *The Plaza*, she became the more dignified Ms. Miller. Marc spoke her name in a special loving way only he possessed, especially when he was angry or impatient with her.

"Elizabeth Anne..." he repeated. He passed a hand through her hair to gently kiss the nape of her neck. When she turned to face him, he kissed the tears spilling from her eyes and the telltale tremor of her lower lip.

"All right..." He heaved a deep sigh that blatantly revealed his reluctance. "Maybe you should get away for a while. You're right that you should try to connect with your aunt again. The two of you can help each other get over your grandfather's death. But, I refuse to tell you 'good-bye'. If you don't return to Chicago by Christmas, I'm coming after you."

That was fair enough. Unfortunately, she had to make one more request.

"I hate to ask, but I need you to give back your key to this apartment."

"Why?" Abruptly his voice turned harsh again.

"I can't pay the rent on this place if I don't have a job. So I'm giving it up. The furniture too. I haven't any use for most of it. I won't have anywhere to keep those things while I'm gone."

Marc didn't speak while he removed the apartment key from the carrier of others he always kept in his jeans pocket. Elizabeth was startled by the way his hands shook. The physical revelation of how much she was hurting him broke her heart.

"I'm not leaving you, Marc," she protested feebly.

"Yes, you are," he insisted.

"No. Please. I just need a little time to try to get my life back on track..."

He stared at her for a long moment before he laid the key in the palm of her hand. His blue eyes glinted steel. The set of his mouth was grim.

“You have until Christmas.”

Then, he marched over to the VCR he'd purchased for them, and unhooked it from the back of the T.V. After he found an empty box to place it in, he gathered a pair of running shoes from beneath a chair, and a few other items, before he strode from the apartment. He did not look at her again.

The click of the latch rendered his departure final.

Tears streamed down Elizabeth's face. She hastily resumed her packing. Her thoughts formed a rhythmic succession.

“I have to get away from here...away from here...away from here...”

CHAPTER FIVE

The rain had stopped and the first streaks of dawn were turning the sky pink. Elizabeth's sketch was complete. She stared at the faces of the four people who had influenced her life so deeply and wondered, "Who next?"

Sleepy now, she laid her sketchpad aside and trotted back to bed, but her mind still refused to turn off. As she snuggled into the warm featherbed she thought about her last date with Marc.

The Plaza celebrated its Tenth Anniversary with a large gathering for all of its employees during the same month she and Marc celebrated being together one year.

For Elizabeth, who had not attended her senior prom, the celebration was to be quite an event. Her seemingly endless search for the perfect dress ended with a wispy blue chiffon that accented her porcelain skin and auburn hair. Its skirt floated around her leggy figure like a shimmering blue fountain. She had her hair done up for the occasion as well. She felt like a princess, and Marc embarrassed her a little, raving about her beauty to everyone they spoke to.

She supposed many expected her to attend the event with Neville Drastin. He asked her to accompany him, but she preferred to go with Marc. Neville accepted that decision with subdued silence; and that evening, the empty chair beside him drew a great deal of speculation around the dining hall. Elizabeth didn't see him during the dancing after the dinner; but, by then, she was too wrapped in Marc's presence to care.

Later, as she and Marc lay in her bed, he whispered, "I think I'd like to marry the most beautiful girl in the world."

Elizabeth pretended to pout. "Who is that?"

Marc kissed her pout away. "Someone who has everyone fooled into believing she's this cool, aloof creature without a concern in the world. But, I know she has a lot in common with Cinderella."

"I feel like Cinderella," Elizabeth confessed, then added with a mischievous grin, "You make a perfect Prince Charming."

"I do?" He raised one speculating eyebrow. "How did that fairy tale about Cinderella end, anyway?"

"She married Prince Charming and they lived happily ever after..." Suddenly, as the reason behind his question dawned, her eyes grew wide with astonishment. "Marc! Are you serious?"

"I have never been more serious in my life," he answered. "I cannot imagine living without you."

"Me, too," she replied.

"Will you marry me?"

"Yes! Oh, yes!"

After a night of such sweet lingering love it was impossible to believe their relationship—their lives and wellbeing—screeched to such a devastating halt mere weeks later.

Elizabeth's dreamless slumber was rudely awakened by loud pounding on the back door. Minutes later, a hulking figure blocked the morning sunlight from the east window of her bedroom.

"Hey, sleepyhead!" Ted yelled while assaulting the window screen with his fingers. "If you're still alive in there you better open the door before I tear it down!"

Elizabeth jumped from her bed, grabbed her robe, and ran to the kitchen. Acutely embarrassed that Ted should discover her sleeping so late, she was even angrier that he dared to awaken her in such a rude manner. She had every intention of telling him off. However, anything other than mumbled stuttering died on her lips the moment he stepped into the kitchen carrying a large toolbox.

"Do you always sleep that sound? I pounded on the door for ten minutes!" Ted halted his bellowing demand long enough to peer at her in total exasperation. "Hell! Don't tell me you forgot I was supposed to work on your cookstove this morning! That storm befuddle your brain or somethin'? I told you I'd be here early!"

Uncertain which shamed her more—her absentmindedness, or the crimson flush spreading across her face—Elizabeth sheepishly admitted, "I did forget. I don't usually sleep this late. Last night was the first time in weeks I've really slept at all."

"Right through that storm, I s'pose," Ted commented drily.

"No! *After* the storm!" she snapped only to instantly relent. "I love storms. I watched this one until dawn."

Ted studied her with a raised eyebrow, all the while scratching his chin in a manner that clearly stated his skepticism. Abruptly, he grinned.

"I s'pose it takes all kinds. Ahh, well, this valley's got to be better sleepin' than any city."

Elizabeth successfully avoided that barb by hugging her arms around herself and peering toward the fireplace in the living room. The house was chilly. Since she had not stoked the fire during the night, it had gone out.

Ted's gaze followed hers, anticipating her thoughts. He glanced at her again; and this time, his eyes seared the length of her with a leering twist of his lips.

"Why don't I build a fire while you get some clothes on?" he drawled.

The only way Elizabeth could keep from slapping his face was to make a mad dash for her bedroom and slam the door. She even locked it just to be safe. She hastily dressed in comfortably worn jeans and a loose sweatshirt and brushed her hair, tying it back with a red scrunchie. By then, Ted had built a roaring fire in the fireplace. He stood by the window examining the sketches in her sketchbook.

"A person would think you could find somethin' better to do with your time than draw pictures," he commented.

"I'll have you know a good number of people maintain a living drawing pictures," she retorted indignantly. "My living the past decade came from displaying and selling those pictures."

"That so?" His skeptical drawl gave rise to one dark eyebrow while he continued to examine her sketches. "I figured you didn't know what an honest day's work was."

"I beg your pardon!" Elizabeth replied furiously. "You're a fine one to talk about an honest day's work when you haven't spent one in three weeks!"

Ted glared at her with an expression of pure malice. She refused to look away or even blink. After all, he really had some nerve coming into her home and going through her sketches without permission. She would not give in first. In fact, if he continued to glare at her, she would insist he leave.

Abruptly, Ted began to laugh.

"Guess I asked for that. You sure got some temper, sweetie."

"Don't call me 'sweetie'."

The command fell on deaf ears. Ted had discovered her most recent sketches.

"Who's these people?" he asked with genuine curiosity. "Say! That's Lillian! And that looks exactly like Ole Joe! This other one...hey! I seen somethin' bout him on T.V. the other week. He's some kind of criminal. How'd you get mixed up with the likes of him?"

"That's none of your business!"

Elizabeth lunged for the sketchpad, but Ted jerked it high out of her reach.

"Betsy Miller involved with gangsters! Ain't that a snort?" he jeered. "Are you gettin' riled at me again? Jeez, woman, you really got a quick temper. Who's that other guy? Your lover or some drug dealer?"

"Will you please give me that and get out of my house? I'll find someone else to repair that old cookstove."

"Oh no you won't!" Ted bellowed. "I promised Lillian I'd fix that old relic. *She* thinks I'm a gentleman, you know."

At that point, Ted finally realized he was pushing too far. He attempted to persuade Elizabeth to smile by wiggling his eyebrows. He wasn't successful.

"Your brand of humor leaves a lot to be desired," she snapped.

"I was only curious." Ted handed the sketchpad to her. "You really are talented, you know. It must have taken a long time to learn to draw like that."

"Flattery won't redeem you either."

Giving a seemingly indifferent shrug, Ted picked up his toolbox and returned to the kitchen. At the door, he turned sporting an odd expression.

"You could at least thank me for lighting the fire so this hut warms up."

Hut? Elizabeth bristled again; but this time, chewed her tongue.

Throughout the next hour, as she watched Ted carefully disassemble the ancient gas cooking range piece by piece, she guiltily remembered all the repairs he'd made on the house at Lillian's request. Eventually, she tried to apologize.

"When you get done, I can fix you some breakfast. That is, if you have time..."

Ted glowered at her suspiciously. "I ate breakfast hours ago. Besides, from the looks of this relic, I don't believe even I'm miracle worker enough to get it in workin' order." He inclined his head toward the microwave sitting on the countertop. "You might have to settle for that thing if you're too cheap to buy yourself another stove."

Elizabeth bristled again, but Ted was too engrossed in his task to notice.

Was it possible he really didn't mean anything by those barbs he kept uttering? Aunt Lillian said speaking so directly was 'just his way'. He was making a special effort to ease Lillian's qualms about Elizabeth living there alone. From the looks of him, at that moment, he had no idea he'd said anything offensive.

BOOM!

Suddenly the room filled with smoke and nauseating ethereal fumes.

Elizabeth could barely see Ted's prone form lying against the far wall. Whether he'd been thrown there or rolled to safety, she could not tell.

"Ted!" she screamed.

"Get out!" he bellowed. "Turn the valve off on the gas tank or the whole house is going to blow!"

Elizabeth sprang through the kitchen door across the porch, outside and around the house to tug, pull and push at the stubborn valve attached to the upright gas tank parked against the back of the house.

When the valve finally ceased to hiss, she backed a few feet away and bent from her waist, convulsing in dry heaves. Her empty stomach didn't have anything in it to regurgitate.

Suddenly Ted's large hands gripped her shoulders, supporting her from behind. He guided her around the house and gently pushed her to sit with him on the stoop before the front door.

"Rest here, sweetie," he said. "It'll be a while before we can breathe inside the house. I opened doors and windows but..."

"What happened?" she gasped.

"Damned gas line was corroded. When I cleaned and reconnected it, the oven pilot exploded. You been tamperin' with that tank out back?"

"I never touched it!"

"I guess it never was turned off, then," he muttered more to himself than to her. "Ought to have my ass kicked for not checking it before I started to work on the stove."

Now that her senses were clearing, Elizabeth raised her head to view the cold, crisp morning. Rain droplets glistened on the grass while pools of half-frozen water crusted the driveway and dripped from the gutter spout. She briskly rubbed her hands over her upper arms to ward off the chill.

Ted was covered from head to toe with black soot and grime. Streaks of brown whiskers appeared where he'd rubbed his fingers across his jaw. At the moment, his attention centered on a deep cut dripping blood onto the grimy sleeve of his flannel shirt.

"Are you all right?" Elizabeth asked, only to gasp in alarm when he faced her.

His eyebrows and a large portion of his hair above his forehead had been singed.

"I'll live," he answered. "What about you? Feelin' better?"

"The gas fumes made me sick to my stomach."

"It's a wonder the house didn't explode. Do you realize we both could have been killed?" he asked, furrowing what little remained of his eyebrows.

"Yes," she replied meekly, gnawing on her lower lip.

"Maybe Lillian's got something with her fear about you living out here alone."

"Oh, phooey!" Elizabeth scoffed. "It's probably her fault that valve was never turned off. Besides, if she didn't want me to live here, I'd find a similar place where I can have some peace and solitude."

"Hidin' from your gangster friends?"

Elizabeth's glaring eyes spit immediate rage.

"Uh-oh," he groaned, making a stricken face. "I got you riled again. I was only teasin'! I heard you artists were a queer lot but..."

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed threateningly.

"Yikes!" he yelped. "I guess I better stop trying to speak to you altogether. I can't say nothin' that don't get under your skin."

"You haven't yet," Elizabeth replied, taking a deep breath to calm herself down.

Ted heaved a deep sigh.

"Well...soon's the air is clear inside, I'll get my tools and be on my way. You will probably be able to cook on top of the stove, but I'm going to shut that oven off permanently. If you want to bake something, you'll have to get another stove."

"I have a small confectioner's oven," Elizabeth informed him.

"If you'd a'told me that a couple hours ago I might not've taken a chance at gettin' blowed to hell!"

Ted's scowl beneath ridiculously sparse eyebrows caused Elizabeth to burst into laughter.

His scowl grew deeper. "I don't see nothin' funny."

"It's not, I guess," she sniffed, forcing herself to sober up. "It's just so silly. Especially since you and I can't seem to hold a civil conversation when we've known each other all our lives."

"What the hell you think I been tri'en to tell you? You been so snobbish, a feller didn't have a chance in hell to say nothin'!"

"I'm sorry." Elizabeth suddenly felt very ashamed of herself. "I've got a lot on my mind."

"Humph," he grunted. "Your gangster friends, I s'pose."

"Something like that." She worried her lower lip a thoughtful moment before hesitantly offering, "I have an electric coffeemaker and some bakery rolls if you would care to share a peace offering."

Ted winked and grinned. "Sounds good." His gaze strayed to his injured hand.

"I can wrap that up for you too," Elizabeth offered.

"You really should have a doctor looks at this," Elizabeth said as she liberally spread salve over the wide cut in Ted's hand. She'd pulled several metal particles from it with a tweezers before it stopped bleeding so she could medicate and wrap it.

"Aah, I'm tough," Ted scoffed. "A little festerin' won't hurt me."

"A little blood poisoning might."

"Naa. A kiss would help a lot."

Elizabeth stepped away from him pretending she had not heard him.

"I said..." he began, but stopped abruptly when Elizabeth whirled to glare at him. "What's wrong now? All's I asked for was a little kiss."

"You really think you're some macho, don't you?" she accused. "Just because you nearly got blown to hades trying to repair my cookstove, you believe I should hop into bed with you."

"I never said nothin' about bed, sweetie," Ted drawled easily enough but a threatening glare filled his eyes. "It's a big step from a kiss to the bedroom, and I don't think you got any business insinuatn' that I don't know the difference."

He rose from the edge of the table where he leaned and took the single step to tower over her.

"I don't know what your problem is, little lady. Who or what you're hidin' from but I ain't gonna be your tormentor. Your aunt is one nice lady. I've been lookin' after this place for her ever since ole Joe first took sick and they moved into town. It was for her that I decided to get friendly with you, but you made it clear you aren't interested. I'm not one to butt in where I'm not wanted, so I'll just get my tools and be on my way."

Elizabeth thought she should have been afraid of Ted's threatening pose and the steel radiating from his eyes, but she wasn't. What she was, was ashamed...again. He'd made the house repairs for Lillian. He could have been seriously injured trying to fix that cookstove. Why did she keep jumping to the wrong conclusion over every word he said?

"But you said you would have coffee with me," she protested meekly.

Ted's jaw dropped near to his chest. He slowly shook his head in disbelief.

"If you ain't the damnedest female I ever met! You change your tune more than a dog has fleas! What is it now...once and for all? Friends or enemies?"

Elizabeth held both of her hands forward pleadingly.

"I certainly don't want to be your enemy, Ted. And...I need a friend."

CHAPTER SIX

"I plan to get a lot more done expandin' the place now that my uncle's back." Ted paused to stuff a fork full of mashed potatoes smothered in gravy into his mouth.

They were eating dinner in Lillian's apartment. For two solid hours, Ted had talked non-stop about himself and his plans for the farm he inherited from his father.

"All I asked was how the corn harvest was going," Elizabeth mentally berated herself. She wished Ted's mother, Agnes, had been able to come along to this dinner. Agnes would have managed to change the subject to something else, anything else. Lillian was too polite to interrupt him, and Elizabeth didn't dare.

Now, however, Elizabeth glanced bewilderedly from Ted to her aunt. Seeming unaware anything was amiss, Ted continued to dig into his food with a gusto that suggested he had not eaten for several days. Lillian, however, sat completely motionless staring at her plate.

"What uncle?" Elizabeth asked innocently. She had never heard of an 'uncle'. There could be one, she guessed but...maternal or paternal...why had she never heard of him?

Lillian sprang from her chair mumbling something about "getting the cake".

Ted's head snapped up and he gazed after Lillian muttering, "Uh-oh, I shouldn't have mentioned him."

"What uncle?" Elizabeth repeated.

Ted glowered at her. "Edwin Hexle."

"Why does he upset Aunt Lillie?"

"He just got out of prison."

"So?"

Ted's expression revealed how little he believed her wide-eyed innocence.

Lillian returned, looking neither Elizabeth nor Ted in the eye as she set a double layer chocolate cake on the table, and seated herself in front of it. It was questionable whether the sigh she heaved was of resignation, or to gather courage.

"Betsy doesn't know anything about Edwin," she explained. "After Evie's death Pop forbade his name be spoken in our home."

"You could'a warned me," Ted grumbled.

Finally, Lillian faced him as she apologized, "I'm sorry, Ted. I never thought Edwin would return to Carsonville. Are you certain he's coming back here?"

"Well...I gotta admit, it surprised me too." Ted pushed his plate aside and took a leisurely gulp from his coffee.

"Thirty years without parole is a helluva long time for a guy who swears he's innocent. Anyway, he asked Mom if he could start over back here. To tell the truth, if Dad was alive he'd have turned Ed down. But...Ed's Mom's brother, and she feels like she has to give him a chance."

"I wish she would've told me." Lillian sliced a generous portion of chocolate cake, placed it on a dessert plate, and passed it to him. "That the real reason why she backed out of visiting us this evening?"

"No...no..." Ted shook his head for emphasis. "Mom's down with her back again. She went to the doc yesterday, and what he gave her helps the pain, but it makes her sleep all the time. Maybe that's the idea. Anyway, she knows you and her will be discussin' Ed, one way or the other. Honestly Lil, I don't think she knew how to tell you he was commin' back. She's awfully afraid of hurtin' your feelins'."

"She's my best friend," Lillian replied. "I would try to accept her reasons for any decision she made whether I agree with her or not."

By this time, Elizabeth was livid with indignation and curiosity.

"Will one of you please explain why I don't know Ted's uncle? Why was he in jail for thirty years?"

"Manslaughter," Ted answered.

"*What!*" Elizabeth gasped.

Lillian studied her niece thoughtfully as she passed a slice of cake across the table to her. "Your parents," she explained.

"But they were killed in a car accident when my father attempted to escape prison..." Elizabeth was more confused than ever.

"Yes," Lillian nodded in somber agreement. "Edwin was your father's accomplice. He was with them. Actually, the sentence he served was partly for the money he and your father stole from *Handly Products*."

"What was *Handly Products*, anyway," Ted inquired.

"Textile plant," Lillian explained with a shrug of little concern. "It closed up twenty-five years ago. I think it was on the verge of bankruptcy when Ed and Dusty were accused of extorting that money."

"But the accident!" Elizabeth's deeply confused gaze shifted from Lillian to Ted and back to Lillian again. "How come he lived when my parents didn't?"

"Your mother lived long enough to claim Ed caused the accident," Ted explained. His gaze never wavered from her face. He was clearly analyzing her reaction, and not necessarily liking what he saw.

Tears pricked Elizabeth's eyes. She tore her gaze from Ted to Lillian, demanding, "Why didn't you tell me?"

Lillian's smile held both sympathy and pain.

"When you were little there was no reason to say anything. When you got older I didn't know what to say. It was so difficult to find a way when Pop was not around. He became furious at the mention of Edwin's name."

"Do you have any idea how not knowing hurts me?"

Elizabeth's voice was shrill. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Lillian's face contorted, displaying her own pain.

"You're over-reacting," Ted commented making no effort to conceal his disgust.

"You weren't called 'the convict's daughter' all through school!" Elizabeth exclaimed.

"I was 'the convict's nephew'," he answered. "What's the difference?"

"You knew the reason why! I didn't!"

"The hell I knew! My dad was as closed-mouthed as your grandfather. The only reason I know anything now is because I demanded Mom tell me."

"Enough! Both of you!" Lillian commanded sharply. "No one really knows much of anything, including me. I do know that Edwin went to prison as a result of my sister's deathbed confession. It is possible she lied to protect herself as Edwin swore she did. If he's bitter, perhaps he has reason. In a way, I commend his wish to clear his name in this community. The less said of the matter, the better for everyone."

Stubborn Elizabeth was not yet ready to concede.

"What if I meet up with this Edwin person? I wouldn't have any idea who he is."

"You ought'a have better things to worry about than meetin' up with the likes of him!" Ted scoffed around a fork full of chocolate cake.

"But I don't even know what he looks like!"

"I'll bring you a picture so you know what to expect."

He was teasing her, grinning, and daring her to retaliate. Refusing to take the bait, Elizabeth dug into her cake with a vengeance.

What else had Lillian not told her?

The Riverfront, Carsonville's one drinking, dancing, eating, gossip collecting, social gathering place was blaring with the mingled din of jukebox music, shuffling feet, loud jokes, and laughter.

Elizabeth initially declined Ted's invitation to stop by there on their way home, but Lillian encouraged her so she decided to brave his company a little longer. He was only trying to make peace; and so far, she did not regret her decision. They were in the dimly lit tavern less than half an hour when she lost track of him; but, she'd run into probably her only 'true' friend from high school, Jenny Carpenter Lohmann.

Still cute, and petite with bubbly warmth that attracted everyone, Jenny had aged little. In high school, she was varsity cheerleader, lead soloist in the school choir, president of the local FHA chapter as well as active in several other school organizations. All with a straight-A GPA. Elizabeth remained in awe at all Jenny achieved. She had a difficult time believing someone with so much potential would settle for her high school sweetheart and three children, with a fourth on the way.

However, it was Jenny who rubbed her obviously pregnant belly as she exclaimed, "Look at you! You really did become a famous artist, didn't you?"

"I wish," Elizabeth scoffed.

"But you're so talented!" Jenny protested in surprise.

"I managed an art gallery, selling pictures, statues, things other people created," Elizabeth explained. "There was never enough time to work on my own things, much less display them."

Jenny's expression said she didn't believe that. Betsy's western cut silk shirt and designer jeans blatantly proclaimed success. Jenny fought to conceal a flush of envy. Her husband would never be able to afford to buy her such extravagant clothing.

"But... Chicago...I mean...doesn't Chicago rank right up there with New York?" Jenny mentally applauded her ability to conceal her inner feelings.

Elizabeth shrugged. "New York, San Francisco, Chicago, St. Louis. I think all big cities are the same. I've had my fill of them."

Jenny thought it was odd that Betsy sounded so disillusioned. She wondered how the exciting life in a big city could have caused such disappointment; but once again, she concealed her inner thoughts.

"Home to stay? Good! We'll have to go shopping or something soon...before the arrival..." She patted her tummy meaningfully. Abruptly a thought struck and curiosity broke all restraint. "Betsy? In all these years, didn't you meet anyone? There must be some gorgeous men in the city! Or, have you and Ted got something going on?"

"Not Ted," Elizabeth wrinkled her nose, making a rueful face. She sighed, swirling her beer in its glass mug, not wanting to look Jenny in the eye as she explained. "There was...someone. It didn't work out..."

As Elizabeth's voice trailed off and sadness filled her expression, Jenny felt like kicking herself. Always was too nosey for her own good, she thought, and glanced around for a means to change the subject. The moment she spied it, she grabbed Elizabeth's hand and tugged her along the edge of the dance floor toward the bar.

"That Nancy Larsen! Would you believe she is trying to make *my* husband? Come. Help me rescue him."

Elizabeth was given no other choice but to allow Jenny to drag her to a long table where a dozen people stood, or sat, engaged in several private conversations.

Jenny curved one hand beneath the elbow of a particularly tall, lean fellow in order to draw his attention from the flashy redhead he was speaking to.

"Kenny...honey..." she entreated sweetly, "Do you remember Betsy Miller?"

"Betsy Miller..." Jenny's husband's brown-eyed gaze followed Elizabeth up and down as he drawled. "I sure do! You studied to be an artist and went off to the big city to make your fortune. Correct?"

"Close," Elizabeth answered, both startled and flattered that Kenny Lohmann remembered her. He'd been the varsity basketball captain. She couldn't remember speaking to him more than three times in four years; and then, only because she happened to be accompanying Jenny. Today, he owned

and operated the local M.F.A. service station in partnership with his father. Despite her surprise that he also chose to remain in Carsonville, Elizabeth thought he and Jenny made the ideal couple. She told them so.

"You two are still looking as sweet and perfect together as you did back when we were teenagers."

"So the wimpy little artist made it big and came back to gloat," sneered a throaty, spiteful voice to Elizabeth's left.

She turned to stare into the emphatic, green gaze of redheaded Nancy Larsen, with whom she had never been friends. It went without saying that neither Nancy's attitude, nor reputation, had improved since high school. However, before Elizabeth could think of a snide retort, Jenny jumped to her defense.

"That wasn't very nice, Nancy!" Jenny snapped. "Betsy's grandfather died a few weeks ago! But, you wouldn't understand that kind of love, would you?"

Elizabeth blushed, remembering the countless times during their childhood that Jenny defended her against some unkind slur. She mentally chastised herself for having dismissed such a loyal friend all these years.

Nancy turned away without comment. If she was offended, she concealed it well. The next moment, she reached a slim-fingered hand, decorated with numerous rings, and extremely long fingernails painted blood red as she cooed, "Teddy, baby..."

Ted gave her a chilling glare. He seemed about to speak but checked himself. Instead, he grabbed Elizabeth's arm and tugged her onto the dancefloor.

Watching them, Jenny's tall husband commented, "Looks like ole Ted's got himself a sweetheart."

"Betsy's not interested. She told me she's recovering from an affair." Jenny replied absentmindedly. She was trying to watch Nancy Larsen without being noticed.

Nancy's shoulders shuddered as she bit back visible tears, an obvious result of Ted's rejection. Her gaze followed him and Betsy around the floor. When Ted said something that caused Betsy to burst into laughter, Nancy tossed her head with an air of disdain and trotted off—far too briskly—to the bar and the first unattached male who would award her with his attention.

Jenny gave her head a confused shake and turned to face her husband. She said, "Betsy seems sad and lonely. She needs a friend..."

"Nothin' wrong with that." Kenny reached a long arm to gather Jenny close to his side. "You two were good friends once, weren't you?"

"Not really," Jenny answered. "I liked Betsy. She was so smart, but she was always so quiet and reserved. And, I was always so busy." She made a hopeless face.

"You're still busy and you're going to be busier in a few months." Kenny patted her enlarged abdomen meaningfully. "But you don't see most of your old friends anymore. It wouldn't hurt you to find some outside interests besides taking care of me and our kids."

"You wouldn't mind if Betsy and I went shopping sometime?"

"Ahh...we can afford 'some time'," Kenny teased with a chuckle. "Let's you and me dance while my arms still fit around you."

The selected song from the jukebox was playing a good two-step melody. "Say! You don't dance half bad!" Ted grinned as he whirled Elizabeth around the floor.

"Neither do you." She smiled as she answered, concealing her surprise that Ted could, indeed, dance very well.

"I thought they didn't do nothin' in them big cities but that disco stuff."

"Disco went out eons ago," Elizabeth grumbled.

"Hey! Are you getting' mad at me again?" Ted exclaimed. "I was only teasin'!"

He looked so stricken, Elizabeth burst into laughter. "I'll let it pass this one time," she said. "But I must say your brand of humor needs improvement."

"You mean your sense of humor," he corrected gruffly, grinning when she glared in return. "I'll try if you will," he promised. Then, asked much more seriously, "You are havin' fun tonight, huh? Not sorry we came?"

"Yes, I am having a good time," Elizabeth answered. "I've run into some old friends I'd forgotten I knew."

"Nice to see them again, ain't it?" Ted inquired as if he'd once had the same experience.

"Yes, it is," she agreed, and on impulse, stretched to kiss his cheek. "Thanks for being my friend, Ted."

He blushed, much to Elizabeth's delight. But the moment was short-lived as someone drew Ted's attention behind her. His tone of voice spelled his displeasure when he explained, "Betsy...this is my uncle, Edwin Hexle."

Elizabeth dared not turn around lest Ted's uncle see her face contort with indignant accusation.

"His idea. Not mine," Ted explained. An apologetic lopsided grin curled one corner of his mouth.

Narrowing her eyes with unspoken promise to get even, Elizabeth glared at Ted a moment longer before she whirled to face this mysterious person she'd just heard about a few hours ago.

She was shocked.

In his youth, Edwin Hexle possessed a physical frame as large and imposing as his nephew's. Today, despite his six-foot plus height, he was gaunt and stooped. What remained of his once thick brown hair was streaked with dull gray. His skin was weathered and wrinkled. He possessed a narrow, twice-broken nose and perpetually drawn lips. His pale, deep-set blue eyes never ceased their shifting, suspicious movement. He looked seventy, but Elizabeth knew he could not be more than mid-fifties. She accepted his cold, but strong, handshake with a great deal of apprehension.

"Does she speak?" Edwin gave his nephew a gap-toothed grin.

"I'm just startled to meet you," Elizabeth boldly explained. "I didn't know you were...home yet."

She glanced at Ted uncertainly. He gave her a reassuring squeeze in return.

Their easy communication did not go unnoticed.

Edwin's shifty gaze narrowed as he said, "I just wanted to meet Lillian's...niece. Do you know you resemble her enough to be her daughter?"

"So I've been told," Elizabeth replied without offense. "I hope everything goes well for you here in Carsonville."

"Do you?"

The acutely accusing question sent shivers the length of Elizabeth's spine. She glanced uncertainly at Ted, who squeezed her once more, then said—not as an apology—"We gotta be goin', Ed," and steered her among the other dancers crowding the floor.

They were driving home when Ted apologized.

"I'm sorry you met Ed that way. I told him you didn't even know he existed until this evenin', but he wouldn't have it no other way."

The county road was dark, cold, and dismal. There was no moon. The temperature had been hovering at freezing for several days. It seemed more like December than October.

"It was quite a surprise," Elizabeth replied.

"I guess it was." Ted sent a strained smile in her direction. "For what it's worth, Bets, I don't think Lilli and Joe were right by not tellin' you everthing about your parents."

"I guess it's too late to worry about that," Elizabeth sighed. "Maybe I should try to find out about them now...or should I? Is it better to leave it all in the past?"

"At first, I thought it didn't matter to you. Thought you were one selfish broad until I realized you know less about your parents than I know about my uncle." Ted gave his head a slow shake. "I honestly don't know what I'd do in your place." He paused a moment. "Uhhh...I'm not sure I trust Ed. The first thing he did was hit me up for money. On the other hand, I guess things ain't been easy on him all these years. He's going to be working for me; now, so you'll probably see him from time to time."

"Were you talking to him the whole time you were gone tonight?"

He glanced at her in surprise. "I didn't think it was that long. Was it?"

"I was talking to Jenny." Elizabeth shrugged before a sly grin curled the corner of her mouth. "You *were* gone for quite a while."

"We're home!" Ted sang as he steered his four-wheel-drive Ford F250 pickup onto the long lane that led to the little farmhouse in the valley. He didn't speak again before he parked the truck beside the yard gate. Then, he laid an arm across the back of the seat, he asked, "Noticed I was gone a while, did you? Miss me?"

Elizabeth laughed out loud. "What a line!"

"Do that again."

"What?"

"Laugh. Do you know you sound a lot like Lilli?"

"No, I..."

"That's a compliment, you know. Lilli is quite a lady."

Ted's fingers drew a lingering trail from her shoulder through her hair along the nape of her neck.

"Betsy..." he murmured softly and drew her across the seat into his arms.

His embrace was as overwhelming as it was intoxicating. His lips sought hers hungrily, yet gently. His actions—the feel of his broad chest and long muscular arms—reminded her of another. Ted kissed quite differently. Still, she could not still the urge to allow her fingers to explore the separate textures of his rough, bearded jaw and thick hair.

Abruptly he drew away, muttering, "C'mon," as he grabbed her hand and pulled her from the truck. He waited wordlessly while she unlocked the back door, and when she turned to thank him for the evening, he shouldered his way into the kitchen. When she reached for the light switch, he caught hold of her wrist and drew her into his arms again.

It would have been so easy. She could barely make out Ted's features in the darkness. His hands ran a leisurely trail the length of her spine, drawing her against his brawny frame. He pressed his face into her hair so like that of another—the one man who could make her forget everything but himself.

"Oh, Marc!"

The name escaped without awareness.

Ted peered at her curiously and then lowered his mouth on hers again, switching to the brute strength he believed women found appealing.

Elizabeth tore her mouth from his and shoved both hands against his chest as hard as she could.

"No!" she cried.

Ted immediately backed away, holding both hands aloft in a defensive gesture. His tone of voice was harsh and accusing.

"What the hell kind of woman are you?"

Elizabeth's anger dissolved into confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Hot as hell one second; cold as ice the next. Why did you come on to me so fast when you didn't intend to carry it through?"

"I'm not looking for a one-night-stand, Ted."

"That don't answer my question." He reached around her to switch on the light.

Elizabeth flinched, trying to turn away, but Ted cupped her chin in one hand, forcing her to face him. Squeezing her eyes shut only caused him to growl.

"Dammit, woman, what kind of game are you playing?"

Elizabeth flinched from his harsh tone of voice.

"I didn't come on to you..." she whispered. "Not...not deliberately. It's just that...sometimes...sometimes you remind me of someone else. I didn't mean to use you..."

"That guy you draw pictures of?" Ted's voice remained harsh.

Elizabeth's refusal to answer caused Ted to conclude, "So you've been burned real bad, have you? Now you're hiding. Do you really believe lettin' it hurt

all alone out here in the boonies is going to solve the problem?"

"It's none of your business!" she stormed defensively.

Why oh why, couldn't he just leave her to her humiliation?

"You involved me when you came on to me like that!" he insisted.

"You pushed your way in here!" she accused.

"But you didn't protest, did you?" He asked that question considerably more calmly, but that only caused Elizabeth to become more defensive.

"You didn't give me a chance! You were as eager as...as a rutting bull. Nothing could have stopped you!"

"Something did tho'." Ted countered. "You pretending I was someone else."

"I was not!"

"Liar."

"I am not!" Elizabeth stopped herself just short of stomping her foot in indignation. He made her feel so childishly stupid.

"You're a beautiful woman, Betsy. But you sure are one helluva mixed up broad. Hidin' out here on this farm ain't gonna solve your problems. Neither will using me."

He turned and opened the door, pausing to glance over his shoulder just before he walked out. "Maybe when you get your head on straight we can try this again."

Elizabeth gasped in outrage. She wanted to storm after him, but she was too ashamed. The humiliating fact that several hundred miles, and six weeks, had not even begun to separate her from Marc kept her rooted where she was.

CHAPTER SEVEN

After Halloween, the weather returned to mild. Thanksgiving passed by uneventfully. The next week—deliberately choosing to avoid the weekend crowds the day after Thanksgiving—Elizabeth and Jenny embarked on that much-wanted shopping spree. After reconnecting at the Riverfront, they'd taken to calling each other every couple of days. Their friendship grew so that Elizabeth felt, in Jenny, she finally had a true friend. So much so, she even told Jenny about the fiasco her 'date' with Ted had turned into.

Jenny's reaction was to comment that "Ted had no business accusing you of using him to forget someone else when he was doing the same thing."

Elizabeth had no idea what Jenny meant, and she wasn't sure she wanted to know. So she didn't ask.

Ted's visits to the farm grew less and less frequent. After repairs on the house were complete, he concentrated on harvesting his crops.

As the weeks passed Elizabeth became plagued by nausea and sudden dizzy spells. She ignored the third absence of her period until the week she vomited three mornings in a row. Then, she was forced to admit she could no longer tolerate the odor of perking coffee or the taste of many spicy foods.

A local family practitioner's diagnosis left her reeling. Fourteen weeks. The baby must have been conceived the night of *The Plaza* anniversary celebration.

After her appointment, she stopped at the local IGA to purchase a week's supply of groceries, but her mind reeled so she barely remembered driving home. All she could think about was Marc. She had a favorite photo hidden in a cardboard box containing other mementos of her life in Chicago. The box remained unopened beneath a bedroom window. In all these weeks she had no desire to search through it; but, as she unpacked her groceries that photograph seemed to beckon her.

Eventually, with the contents of the box scattered everywhere and that photograph in her hand, she curled on the floor in front of the window. "My Prince Charming", she thought, tracing the outline of his chiseled features with her fingertips.

The setting sun left only orange streaks in an otherwise darkening sky. Elizabeth didn't need to see the photograph to remember the way Marc's thick, unruly hair curled around her fingertips, or how merrily his eyes twinkled when he laughed. His jaw was firm; yet, he possessed an engaging smile that revealed perfect white teeth. His deep, pleasant voice carried easily, rarely rising unless he was angry.

She wondered how much their child would resemble its father.

As devastating as this news was, Elizabeth was not disappointed. Her memories of Marc were precious and good. She would at least be able to tell their child that, if nothing else.

What would Marc think?

She knew without question Marc would want the baby. No matter what he thought of its mother, he would never abandon his child.

This was not a question of wanting so much as it was a question of revealing. It was his right to know she was pregnant. That evening, however, the baby was still an invisible entity whose existence Elizabeth was not prepared to share with anyone.

During her teen years, Elizabeth entertained little interest in sex. Not that she didn't wonder what secrets other girls were always twittering about behind their hands. None of the boys were discreet in their comments, few of which were complimentary toward her. No one confided in her, and Lillian was far too prim and proper to relate anything about 'the birds and bees'. Elizabeth found enough information in books to still her curiosity about the physical aspects of sex. She pretended not to care about the rest.

During her college years, one of the girls in her dorm died as the result of a botched abortion. Another suffered a mental collapse when she was scorned by a professor after their short-lived affair. Both experiences led Elizabeth to conclude sexual love was not to be trifled with. So, she ignored her longing for companionship in the belief that no emotional encounters were better than the kind of suffering her friends endured.

As she grew into her twenties, she finally began to 'blossom'. Men began to notice her, but she wasn't sure that was a good thing. Dates generally ended with some man attempting to get her into bed and stalking off when she refused. Some men were forceful enough to convince her to take self-defense training. Once or twice, she was left to find her own way home.

Until Marc Grenwald entered her life, Elizabeth believed she was better off living without sex, without intimate ties of any kind.

From the very beginning, Marc had ways of letting her know he was attracted to her. Their first kiss was anything but casual. He was always touching her. His hand at the small of her back when they walked; or, his arm around her shoulders while they sat in a theatre. He sometimes held her hand while they waited for their meals in restaurants. He often brushed strands of her hair from her face or tickled her earlobe with a finger while they talked. But, he was never offensive with any of his 'affection'. As he was not one to remain in deserted corridors or parked cars for any length of time, she was never forced into a grappling match in the darkness with him.

The more they saw one another, the more often they were alone together, the greater the desire to touch one another, to share unspoken intimacy, grew. They often seemed to think as one.

One evening Elizabeth cooked dinner for them in her apartment and afterward, they relaxed in front of her television watching a video of the movie "Love Story" on the V.C.R.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful to experience love that transcends death?"

"We can try that," Marc replied confidently.

She snuggled against him, welcoming the familiar caresses, losing herself in the pleasure of his lips on hers.

"I want you," he whispered.

Elizabeth's breath caught. She shoved him aside and sprang to her feet racing into the kitchen with the excuse of fixing them something to drink.

Marc followed her. "I don't want anything to drink. I want to make love to you. What's wrong with that?"

His demand was so harsh and critical, she knew he would settle for nothing less than the truth. She whirled to face him, not even taking a breath to gather courage before she blurted, "I'm a virgin."

"What?" His eyes grew wide with disbelief.

"It's true," she insisted, bristling a bit at his reaction.

"Not even with Drastin?"

That question angered her. She slammed her fists onto the counter and exclaimed between clenched teeth, "I wish everyone would stop assuming I have a sexual relationship with Neville. He's never been more than a friend, a father figure at best."

"Never?" Again, his expression spoke his disbelief.

"Yes, dammit!" she stormed.

Marc ran a hand through his hair. He stared at her while trying to comprehend this unexpected information. "Do you have any idea how jealous I've been, believing Drastin's experienced what I want?"

"I don't care!" Elizabeth cried. "Why are you more concerned about that than the fact that I've never been intimate with any man?"

"Oh, I deeply appreciate your virginity. It only makes me want you more. I think you want me too. Don't you?"

He closed the space between them, willing her to look him in the eye.

"Yes..." Her voice trembled. "Why deny the obvious but...I don't want a one night stand. I couldn't bear it if you made love to me tonight and forgot all about me tomorrow."

"Elizabeth Anne, forgetting you is something I will never do," he declared in that husky, bone-melting whisper.

They stood beside her bed. The illuminating light of a street lamp just opposite the window allowed Elizabeth to see Marc's lean, muscular silhouette clearly. She knew he could see her—all of her, and, that he felt no misgivings when he tugged the hem of her shirt over her head. She willingly stretched her arms upward, and then around his neck, returning his tender kisses. He tugged at her bra and the waistband of her jeans, unsnapping, unzipping, pushing them aside until she stood naked and self-consciously attempting to cover herself. He brushed her hands aside, continuing his bold stare.

"You are so beautiful!" he breathed reverently.

"Don't tease me, Marc," she pleaded, near tears.

"I'm not teasing you!" he gasped incredulously. "Hasn't anyone ever told you how beautiful you are?"

"No," she replied meekly. "I don't think I'm attractive at all. I'm orange... mousy. Too tall. Too skinny."

"Mousy? Hell! Your hair looks like spun gold!" He caught a few strands with his fingertips. "You aren't nearly as skinny as some of those models *The Plaza* employs in their designer dress shops. *They* look like mannequins with all that make-up and artificial hair. You look real. Warm and soft." His hands brushed across her shoulders and down her back to her waist, scanned her hips, and came to rest against the outer sides of her thighs. "Your legs are downright gorgeous. Why don't you show them off more often? You wore a dress the day you nearly fell off that ladder. I damned near went mad standing below you with a clear view of your ankles...knees...thighs...and those lace panties covering everything else..." One hand wandered to her inner thigh.

"Marc!" Elizabeth gasped, clamping her thighs together.

"Don't you want to know how much I like your body?"

"Yes...but..." she hesitated, glancing in every direction but his face. Finally, taking a bold breath, she confessed, "I like your body too."

"Do you?" he chuckled. "Help me undress."

He lifted his arms over his head, coaxing her to remove his t-shirt the same way he had removed hers. However, he ended up standing there with his arms stretched above his head, tangled in his t-shirt, while Elizabeth's fingertips explored his broad muscular chest and lean ribcage.

"Do you believe I will never intentionally hurt you?" His breathless voice revealed how he enjoyed the way she was touching him.

"Uh..hum..." she replied somewhat absently. This was fun. But she immediately dropped her hands when, next, he asked, "Do you believe I want you more than I've ever wanted any woman in my life?"

"Have you had a lot of women?" She gnawed her lower lip, daring to look him in the eye.

"None like you." The swift flick of his wrist sent the t-shirt flying across the room.

"What does that mean?"

She gasped when he wrapped his arms around her, crushing her bare breasts against his broad naked chest.

"That means you are the only woman who has not tried to suffocate me before a relationship had chance to develop. You're so sweet and sincere, I got hooked before I realized what was happening."

"You're hooked?"

"Definitely," he murmured against her throat. "You can do anything you want to me."

"Anything?"

She meant to tease, but her voice was barely more than a ragged gasp for air.

"What do you want?"

In the light from the streetlamp, Marc's eyes were wide and sincere. She did not possess the willpower to turn from those piercing blue orbs. Or to lie, even though she could scarcely breathe.

"I want to be closer to you than I have ever been to anyone in my life."

Marc lowered her gently onto the bed before he stepped back to remove his jeans. A sudden thought caused him to hesitate, glancing her way long enough to let his gaze wander the length of her, then back to her face again. He sent her a bold wink, grinning as he withdrew his wallet from a hip pocket, and several condoms sealed in cellophane from inside the wallet.

Elizabeth giggled despite her apprehension. "Are you anticipating some kind of marathon or something?"

"Baby, I've been carrying these around for weeks," Marc confessed as he laid the condoms on the nightstand. Then, he removed his jeans and briefs and lay down beside her. "I wanted to make certain, when we finally got around to this, we do it right, without creating a lot of heartaches and regrets later."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Elizabeth began to gather items she'd strewn from the box. Most of them were just small mementos, keyrings, shot glasses, ribbons, and markers from her college days. She kept a folder of restaurant menus and brochures, places she'd frequented with Neville. She also had a small album of photos beginning with the weekend of the Grenwald reunion that she spent with Marc's family. When she went to replace Marc's picture safely inside the album cover, a bookmark fell out.

Two little blond-haired pixies—a blue coverall clad boy and a girl in a pink dress—bent their heads together over a yellow daisy below the words, *True Love Means Never Having to Say You're Sorry* in embossed gold lettering.

Really, Elizabeth thought, maybe that's what's wrong with the world. Not enough love and too much apologizing for things people weren't sorry for.

It was ridiculous to think how careful she and Marc originally intended to be. That first night was more awkward than romantic. Marc approached her with the same patience he'd courted her, but even he couldn't hold back forever.

"Tell me you're ready..." he urged.

Ready? She was so damned scared she shook!

His resolve 'to get it over with quickly' might have been intended to ease the tension for her, but it was he who lost control in a matter of minutes.

"I'm sorry," he confessed. "It's been a while for me. We'll take it slower next time."

"There's more...?" At that moment she was not certain how she felt about any of it. Sure books said it was painful the first time but...the intimacy...

Marc wrapped his arms around her so they lay spoon fashion beneath the covers. "Baby, we've hardly begun," he said.

"Really?" she questioned uncertainly. "I used to dream of someone holding me all night long. No one ever has."

"I will," he promised solemnly. "Tonight. Every night. Whenever you want me."

By the time of *The Plaza* anniversary celebration, they had been living together much more than apart for the better part of a year. Everyone who knew them wondered why they kept separate apartments. Gossipers claimed the reason was because of Neville Drastin's disapproval of their relationship.

It took Neville a while to realize the extent of Elizabeth's and Marc's intimate relationship. Perhaps he ignored it. Marc was very careful to keep away from the weekly evening dinners Elizabeth shared with Neville. It sometimes puzzled her that Marc never objected to those visits. Once, she asked him why.

"I trust you," he said. "I feel like I have more of you than he does; so, he can have his visits...for now."

Neville was dead before Elizabeth understood exactly what Marc meant by that. In fact, when she saw Chuck Willows' lifeless body lying on the office floor that night, she recognized him as someone she'd often seen in the mall, or sitting at back tables in the restaurants she and Neville frequented. It puzzled her that she could not remember ever seeing the man near Marc.

Neville repeatedly warned her to stop seeing Marc. When he realized they were lovers he was livid with rage.

After dinner one evening, he began to admire the V.C.R. perched on a shelf beneath her television. He wanted to know when and where she purchased it.

"It's Marc's," she answered absently as she prepared their after-dinner coffee.

Neville's face immediately darkened with fury. His angry gaze quickly assessed the room and other items belonging to Marc he had not noticed before. A stack of videos on the shelf beside the V.C.R.; several hunting and sportsmen's magazines on an end table; a pair of running shoes tucked beneath an armchair.

"Good God, are you living with that bastard?" Neville roared.

His voice caused Elizabeth to shudder, but she refused to let him get to her. After all, he was her guest. Yes, technically, he was her employer. However, beyond her work, he held no claims on her. She faced him squarely and calmly informed him, "It is none of your business."

"The hell it isn't!" He took forceful steps toward her. "I never gave you permission to date anyone, much less sleep with them. Especially scum like that Grenwald!"

"Permission?" Elizabeth took a step backward, both in astonishment and indignation. "I do not need your permission to do anything. I consider you a friend. Nothing more!"

He glared at her. His breath erupted in short gasps. A vein in his temple pulsed rapidly.

"Grenwald is poison," he rasped. "For your own good, you have to stay away from him!"

"Why? What has Marc ever done to you?"

"He's a goddamned..." Neville bit off whatever he was going to say and clamped his mouth shut, refusing to add more. Now, Elizabeth realized he nearly told her that Marc was a cop...an undercover cop spying on his every move.

That evening, however, she innocently continued to defend Marc.

"He is so good to me. He's a beautiful person inside and out. I love him and I will continue my relationship with him. Perhaps, one day, we will make it a permanent arrangement."

"He's using you!" Neville roared. "He will not have you so long as there is breath in my body!"

"That's not your responsibility." Elizabeth's voice shook with anger. Neville had never acted like this before. She didn't like it and she certainly didn't want him believing he had that kind of control over her.

"I think it's time for you to leave," she decided, calmly walking toward the door and opening it.

Neville's gaze widened in astonished disbelief.

"You're choosing Grenwald over me?"

"You give me no choice," Elizabeth replied.

After Neville left her apartment, she collapsed into a keening, wailing fit of hysteria. Then she called Marc, who immediately rushed to hold her all night while they argued.

Why did Neville hate Marc so much? What had he done?

Of course, Marc could only respond with vague answers to her questions. If he'd told her the truth then, he would have blown his cover.

Love means Never Having to Say You're Sorry

As she sat beneath her bedroom window turning that bookmark over and over in her hand, Elizabeth finally began to realize the danger Marc placed on himself for her sake. After that night, he was with her most of the time, even while they worked. It was almost as if he became her bodyguard. He would pop up at the gallery several times during the day. He accompanied her home and stayed almost every night. When it was needed, they even shopped together. Neither spent separate time with family or friends. However, she still did not know if Marc was protecting her from Neville Drastin or from his own people.

Several days later, Neville apologized for his behavior by explaining he knew things about Marc that she was better off not knowing. He refused to tell her any details. As a result, they had no more weekly dinner visits. In fact, she stopped going to his office without specific reason.

Neville's request that she accompany him to *The Plaza* celebration was quite a surprise, as was his intention.

"Let's let the world know we are not afraid of our relationship."

Unfortunately, by that time, Elizabeth was convinced they no longer had a relationship worth salvaging. Having chosen Marc, there was no longer a place for Neville Drastin in her life.

So, she attended the celebration with Marc; thus, publically declaring her preference. That should have been the end of it.

At a store manager's meeting the following week, Neville's refusal to speak to her started tongues wagging all over again. That night he was shot to death in his penthouse office. Thus, the trust she and Marc shared also began to vanish along with the intimacy.

Now, as she sat in her bedroom, she was faced with the consequences of their mistakes. In the beginning, Marc was adamant about using precaution. She loved and appreciated his concern. However, as time passed, and he began to live more in her apartment than his own, they ceased to be so careful. They slipped up more than once.

The night of *The Plaza* celebration they returned to her apartment giddy, half-drunk, and totally in love with one another. They didn't 'forget' to use birth control. They made a conscious choice not to bother to use it. That night, they were so sure of each other and their future together, they threw caution to the wind without thought or concern to the possibility of a future life, much less how quickly their fairytale world would disintegrate before their eyes.

She could dream forever, she supposed, but dreaming would not rectify the past. What she needed was to get to work on something that would consume her waking hours until such time as she was ready to consider when—and how—she would inform Marc he was to become a father. 'If' was not an option. 'When' was an issue she had to condition herself to. She feared, 'how' was going to include some of those apologies that little platitude insisted weren't necessary when you loved someone.

Unfortunately, finding that 'something' to transform her thoughts was easier said than done. The days dragged endlessly. Any attempt to improve her painting of the old barn failed. Housework was too tedious, and cooking no fun when there was no one to praise her efforts. Besides, she didn't have an appetite. Several days later, she carried her sketchpad upstairs hoping to gain a better view of the valley.

The upstairs was unheated and chilly. Views from the windows were the same as downstairs but from a higher angle. None-the-less, she set to work determined not to waste another day wandering around the house agonizing over her situation.

After an hour or so of sketching the upper area of the barn and the row of cedar trees along the edge of the woods, she flexed her aching fingers and set her sketch pad aside. The chill of the room began to penetrate as it had not while she worked and she drew her heavy woolen sweater more closely around her body.

This room was once Lillian's bedroom, but there was no trace of her aunt there now. In fact, the only object to draw the eye from the barren wall was a narrow five-foot-high door that opened into the attic above the back porch.

Curiosity drove Elizabeth to see what, if anything, remained in that attic.

It ran the width of the house over the back porch and the kitchen with a roof slanted against the floor on the far side and upward against the eight-foot bedroom walls. There were no windows. The frozen air it generated now would be stifling during the heat of summer.

All that was visible in the dark interior were cobwebs and an antique roll-top trunk.

Elizabeth grasped hold of one of the trunk's end handles and dragged it into the light of the bedroom. The heavy lid opened easily and she was delighted to discover a removable tray filled with ribbons, baby booties, and a little girl's clothing. Every piece was wrapped in tissue paper and labeled, 'Betsy's'.

Gasping with joy, she eagerly lifted the tray, hoping to find more treasures in the bottom of the trunk.

But it only held old newspapers. She sighed with disappointment and began to return the tray when a headline caught her attention.

Miller and Wife Die in Fiery Crash

Hexle Convicted of Manslaughter

The newspaper beneath that one read:

Miller and Hexle Sentenced to Fifteen Years in State Pen

Another newspaper with a much earlier date read:

Hexle Arrested. Names Miller Brain Behind Embezzlement Scam

Elizabeth carefully lifted the small stack of newspapers from the trunk. Here it was. The answers to her questions neatly printed in black and white. She gathered them together, thinking she would take them downstairs to read in sequence when another object caught her eye.

Instinctively knowing, the small brown book with a worn cover was an item of personal value, she hesitated to lift it from the bottom of the trunk. Curiosity spurred her to just open it where it lay. Lillian's signature graced the inside of the front cover. Ink-smeared pages revealed it was a diary. Lillian's diary.

Beneath the diary lay a neatly stacked collection of watercolors bundled with cloth between them so time and elements would not damage them. Elizabeth set the newspapers aside in order to lift out the paintings, one by one. All were scenery paintings of places on the farm. All were initialed with 'D. M.' in the lower right corner.

Only one painting was encased in a frame. Elizabeth remembered that it hung on the wall in Lillian's bedroom most of her life. When once she asked Lillian who the girl in the painting was, Lillian replied with a dreamy look in her eye.

"Someone I knew a long time ago."

Now, Elizabeth recognized the young girl in the picture as Lillian. D.M. had painted her with her auburn hair in braids falling over her shoulders and chest, nearly to her waist. Dressed in bib overalls, she stood in front of the old barn holding a bucket full of ripe blackberries. The siding on the barn was freshly whitewashed. Hay spilled from the loft windows and wildflowers bloomed in the grass.

It was a lovely picture. Of course, D.M. stood for Dusty Miller. Elizabeth's father. What a delight to realize she had inherited her artistic talent from her father.

She decided to return the diary to the bottom of the trunk unread, but it fell from her hand and lay open on the floor.

"Our daughter was born at 6:15 this morning. She is so beautiful. I wish Dusty could see her."

Elizabeth gasped with astonishment. Evelyn was her mother! Perhaps she read wrong. No. The name written on the inner cover of the diary was 'Lillian M. Bannerman' in Lillian's unmistakable neat, precise handwriting.

A page further to the front of the diary read: *"I know that I am pregnant. I am so afraid. The only one who will understand is Dusty, but with the trial going on, it will only give him more to worry about. If I stay away from the courthouse, he will wonder if I am ill. What scares me is Pop's reaction. Momma will be disappointed in me—as always. Evie will only hate me more than she already does. I don't think I can bear it but I must. For Dusty and for our baby who will be born in the spring..."*

Lillian was her mother? Why did she lie all these years?

Abruptly, the sound of someone pounding on the front door downstairs jolted Elizabeth out of her shocked stupor. She had not heard any cars drive to the house. A quick glance out the hall window revealed only her car parked outside. Whoever her visitor was stood beneath the roof of the front stoop.

Leaving her newfound discovery where it was for the moment, Elizabeth scurried down the stair to the front door, curious to discover who was visiting her.

As she opened the front door, Edwin Hexle was just stepping off the stoop.

"I was about to leave," he grumbled accusingly.

"I was upstairs working. I'm an artist," Elizabeth explained and wondered why she felt the need to.

"Yer Ma had talent too," Edwin replied. His sly grin suggested he didn't necessarily mean artistic ability.

Elizabeth glowered at him, stubbornly refusing to take that bait.

His grin faded and he sniffed somewhat indignantly.

"I was wonderin' if you was needin' someone to do heavy chores and such. Ted told me you was livin' here alone."

"Did he send you over here?" Elizabeth inquired curiously.

"No," Edwin answered. "I just thought...well, a woman alone ain't got no business doin' some things, heavy like. You know, choppin' wood and such. You don't have livestock, do you?"

"No," Elizabeth answered. She wasn't sure how to react to this. He seemed genuine enough but... "I just moved in here a few weeks ago and I really don't know how long I'll be staying. Ted did all the repairs I needed to be done on the house and I bought several cords of wood from Mr. Stiers down the road. He delivered that and stacked it in the woodshed for me last week. I don't think I'll be needing anything else for a while."

"I see." Edwin's shoulders drooped dejectedly. "Well, keep me in mind if'n anything comes up, will ya? Ain't no business around here wants to hire me. So, I have to try to make a livin' off odd jobs and such."

"Sure," Elizabeth answered brightly and immediately bit her lower lip, wondering why she answered that way. She neither liked nor disliked him. At the moment, she felt sorry for him. Life could not be easy for someone with a criminal record like his. The best years of his life had been spent in jail. He seemed harmless enough...peculiar but could she expect anything else? Had he known about her mother...that Lillian was her mother? How many knew the truth? Why had no one ever told her?

Confusion clouded Elizabeth's face so Edwin peered at her suspiciously.

"You all right, Missy?"

She jolted back to the present so suddenly her whole body jerked. Her face flushed and she stammered with embarrassment.

"Oh s...sure. I...I'm just having trouble with some...some of my artwork..."

Edwin's shifty gaze raked her up and down. He didn't believe her, but he didn't say so out loud. Instead, he asked, "You mind if I set some traps out by your barn? It's trappin' season and I saw evidence of some possum down there."

Elizabeth shrugged with little concern. At the moment, she could think of no reason to object.

"See you around then."

With a wave of one hand that resembled an awkward salute, Edwin Hexle turned on his heel and ambled off toward the barn. Watching him, Elizabeth realized he had walked across the forty acres that separated her farm from Ted's. She should have realized he was living with Agnes and Ted.

CHAPTER NINE

Elizabeth wordlessly presented the diary to her mother.

Lillian's lips trembled as her fingers caressed the small book with gentle strokes. The mere sight of it recalled memories she never dared reveal in written word on its pages.

Witnessing this mixture of pain and sorrow twist Lillian's face caused the anger and resentment Elizabeth had been feeling to dissolve into overwhelming remorse.

"Is it true?" she asked. "Are you my mother?"

Lillian's voice trembled. "What possessed you to go into the attic and open that old trunk?"

"I just wanted to see what was in it. Please tell me the truth."

Lillian studied Elizabeth before answering. She had loved 'her Betsy' in silence for so many years; despite this shock, it was a relief to finally speak the truth. A soft smile curved her lips overshadowing the tears threatening to spill from her eyes. She reached out to tenderly touch Elizabeth's cheek with her fingertips.

"It's true," she said. "I kept those newspapers knowing one day you would need to read them. You are so much like your father."

Elizabeth recoiled, not trusting so easily.

"I've always been told I look like you."

"Yes," Lillian's voice quavered. "But, you have your father's personality. He was an artist, too. Did you see the watercolors in the bottom of the trunk?"

Elizabeth gave a reluctant nod, refusing to admit aloud she had carefully placed the paintings among a collection of her own until her emotions would allow her to study them with a professional eye.

"The diary doesn't tell everything," Lillian ventured uneasily.

Elizabeth's face clouded with suspicion. "Are *you* going to tell me *everything* now?"

Ignoring her daughter's ire, Lillian continued to speak in the soft tone that was her usual manner.

"I was sixteen when Evelyn returned home with Dusty."

"Returned?"

"Yes. You know she left as soon as she turned eighteen. Momma always sent her money. I don't think Pop knew how often Mom sent her money; but, she came back when she did because Dusty was in so much trouble in Chicago. He'd gotten mixed up with a bunch of gangsters. Drugs and such, I was told. Evie was pregnant and really angry about it."

"But..."

Lillian held up one hand in a stern gesture for silence.

"Evie lost that baby. Maybe she did something to get rid of it. I don't know." Lillian shrugged as if to say that part of the story was irrelevant. "As far as Evie was concerned that baby—Dusty too, for that matter—just got in her way."

Heaving a deep sigh, Lillian rose from the loveseat and walked to stare out the window while she continued to explain. "Dusty is the only man I have ever loved. He was so handsome! Tall, with dark, curly hair and the most mischievous brown eyes! They *danced* when he was happy. But that was seldom, thanks to Evie."

Lillian glanced at Elizabeth. Tears were beginning to trickle from her eyes. She wiped at them and faced the window again.

"Evie was always angry with Dusty about something. She refused to share a bed with him even though they swore they were married. He slept in the barn on an old cot in the feed/tack room. Sometimes Evie didn't speak to any of us for days. Mom kept trying to placate her. Pop barely spoke to anyone. He was as unreasonable as Evie!

"Dusty found a job with Handy Products, but that wasn't enough to please Evie. She hated this farm. She didn't want to be here. And then, she lost her baby. When the doctor told her she couldn't have anymore, she was delighted! Dusty was devastated. I felt so sorry for him. Evie was cruel. Mom was indifferent. Pop barely tolerated his presence at all. I don't know why Dusty didn't just leave this sorry place."

Lillian paused to glance at Elizabeth again before she swiped a tear away with a finger, and returned to gazing out the window while she spoke.

"Our relationship began so innocently. I just wanted to let him know that I cared about him even if no one else did. One day, we went to pick blackberries on the hill behind the barn and got caught in a rainstorm. We just made it back to the barn. Thereafter, the loft became our special place."

Abruptly, Lillian whirled and boldly declared, "I didn't care what kind of trouble he was in! I didn't care if he was married to my sister! She didn't love him! I did!"

"You still do," Elizabeth concluded softly.

"Yes, I do," Lillian proudly admitted. "I was so happy when I discovered I was carrying Dusty's child. You. The child his legal wife would never give him. You meant so much to him, Betsy."

"Why didn't the two of you get married?" Betsy asked with a trembling voice.

"Evie refused to divorce him! She found out about us and...and not releasing him was her way of getting revenge. Besides, I was sixteen. Under age. Jail bait. Pop refused to give his consent. It took some doing to prevent Pop from calling the authorities and having Dusty arrested for raping me. I told Pop, if he did such a thing, I would not testify to it. That, I would run away with my baby and never speak to him or Mom again."

Lillian rolled her eyes heavenward. She shook her head as if, even after all these years, she couldn't comprehend the volatile group her family became after the intrusion of Dusty Miller into their lives.

Elizabeth continued to eye her mother. It was evident Lillian truly believed what she was saying. But...Elizabeth could not suppress the suspicion that Lillian was white-washing the story. There was more. However, it was questionable whether Lillian denied the harsh reality, or if she just didn't realize how harsh that reality was.

"Dusty was just wonderful about you. He said he never felt married to Evie. He said our relationship was the most precious thing he'd ever known in his life." She sighed, heaving her shoulders again and returning to sit on the sleigh-bed.

"Edwin Hexle was a problem too. I...he had a crush on me. Back then, he was as handsome as Ted is and we went out a couple times. Just for appearances. He suspected something was going on between Dusty and me long before anyone else. I think Dusty confided in him just to keep him quiet. If he had just minded his own business..."

Lillian's gaze dropped to her hands primly folded in her lap.

"Did I ever see my father?"

Elizabeth's question was like a live cannonball hurtled in an otherwise still atmosphere.

Lillian nodded. "When you were a few months old I took you to the prison to see him. The trial was over by then. You were born here at home. No one knew but the doctor and..."

"Wait? What?" Elizabeth glared at her mother even more suspiciously. "You aren't making any sense. How did you cover your pregnancy? Didn't you go to the courthouse during the trial? You would have been a senior in high school. Is that when you quit school?"

"Yes. I got my GED a few years later when I was nineteen after all the commotion died down. No one knew I was pregnant because it was during winter and I stayed here in the house. If someone asked about me, Mom and Pop told them I was ill. If company came—and that wasn't very often—I hid upstairs. Evie told everyone she was pregnant again. There was a lot of publicity because of the trial. So, Evie made certain she was seen a lot. She stuffed pillows under her clothes and pretended to be plain giddy about being pregnant so soon again. She could put on quite a show when she wanted to. She should have gone to Hollywood and become an actress. She enjoyed every moment she made me suffer too!"

At the final sentence, Lillian's voice filled with loathing

Elizabeth was incredulous. "How could you do that? How can you say you were happy about me when you hid me?"

"I had no choice!" Lillian cried defensively. "Even Dusty thought it was best under the circumstances."

"What circumstances?"

"Dusty turned State's Evidence against those people in Chicago! They knew he was married to Evelyn, but they didn't know about me! At the same time, he was able to give you his name without anyone asking questions."

"If my mother was as bad as you say, she would not have gone along with that," Elizabeth insisted.

Lillian sighed in exasperation. It would seem, telling her daughter the truth was more difficult than she anticipated.

"Evie didn't go along with it. At the same time she pretended to be pregnant, she got herself mixed up with those gangsters and helped them plot Dusty's murder."

"What? How?"

At Elizabeth's outraged question, Lillian began to show signs of extreme discomfort. She began to pace the room, and she appeared unable to look her daughter in the eye. Obviously, she knew something not to be read in the newspapers or her teenage diary. The more Lillian paced that rose wool carpet, the more determined Elizabeth became to know the truth, no matter how terrible it was.

"If my father turned States' Evidence, why did he try to escape prison?"

"They tried to kill him while he was in prison. He found out about the plan somehow...and...and...oh, I never understood it at all!"

Lillian choked back an anguished sob. "The newspapers said one thing. Dusty told me something else. Evie and Ed swore Dusty burned to death in that car when it went over the bluff, but the authorities never found his body. How could they? He escaped and came here!

"His arms and back were badly burned and he had a terrible gash on his head. Momma and I nursed him back to health. Then, one day, those government men came to give him a new identity. He was supposed to move far away from here, but he wouldn't leave you and me behind. So, he began to live two lives so he could protect us."

"But he could have made a new beginning with us in another country!" Elizabeth gasped, not at all able to comprehend this tale.

"I used to think that," Lillian sighed. "I got so discouraged. He would come home in the middle of the night and leave again before dawn. He insisted we not have any more children. I would have given him a dozen but...no. I never knew when he would show up. Never knew how long he would stay. Usually, he would leave again the next morning. He could never call ahead and tell us he was coming because, at the time, we had a party line and he was afraid someone would overhear his call."

Lillian finally turned to face Elizabeth.

"He used to stand over your crib and watch you sleep. When you were an infant...before those men came...while he was recovering, he made me put your crib next to his bed so he would be there if you cried. When you got older, he didn't want you to see him because he knew you would ask questions. So, if he stayed into the morning, he'd hide in the attic or he'd sneak down to the barn to watch you board the school bus. He liked to watch you board the bus, he said, because then he knew you were safe. Most of the time he left before you woke up. He cried sometimes because he wanted to hold you like he did when you were an infant. He wanted so much to be a real father to you. That's why I let you go to Chicago with him..."

Lillian's hands flew to cover her mouth as if to stop her speech. She eyed Elizabeth fearfully as the truth she just blurted began to seep into her daughter's confused comprehension.

"No!" Elizabeth's horrified denial reverberated off the living room walls.

"He loved you so much," Lillian ventured hopefully. "Dusty loved Pop and me too. He said we were the only family he had. Pop eventually came around to accept his place in my life. Dusty paid the taxes and other bills after Pop's health became so bad. He paid for Pop's hospitalization and your education..."

"I went through college on scholarships," Elizabeth stubbornly declared.

"Partly. We were so proud you were able to do so much on your own, but the scholarships didn't cover everything, dear. The bulk of your expenses were paid by an account Dusty set up for you."

Elizabeth stared at Lillian in speechless confusion. Her mind was whirling far too fast for rational thought. She'd known from the beginning that something was greatly amiss with her expense account, but the cashier's office repeatedly assured her all was well. Over time, she ceased to worry about it. Shortly before her graduation, when a member of the College Board visited her to inform her of the position open at *The Plaza*, she knew such things were highly unusual, but deluded herself into believing his attention derived from her high scholastic achievements. At *The Plaza*, Neville Drastin interviewed, then hired her, himself.

Neville Drastin

His name buzzed over and over through her mind.

His eyes were dark brown and she'd seen them alight with joy many times. Usually over something she said or did.

He had scars. A couple of times, in the privacy of her apartment, he'd relaxed enough to loosen his tie and roll up his shirtsleeves. His forearms were covered with hideous scars. He didn't offer an explanation for their origin and she didn't ask, believing herself perceptive enough to sense pain those kinds of wounds must have caused.

Neville Drastin also directed her to the apartment complex where she lived. His explanation, that the previous owner had to sublet the apartment just after redecorating it, explained the manufacturer's labels hanging on the furniture. She didn't question him about that either.

He personally helped her set up a bank account with a bank he recommended. From time to time, her statement revealed deposits she couldn't account for, but when she questioned a bank clerk about it, they always seemed to provide an explanation. None of the extra amounts were ever withdrawn. And, with that too, Elizabeth chose to ignore the obvious.

"Where is my father now?" Elizabeth inquired hoarsely.

She wanted desperately to go find that pile of sand her head had been buried under most of her life, and wallow beneath it again. It was safer there. Not knowing was more comfortable. She stared at Lillian, mentally willing her to explain it all another way.

But Lillian ducked her head, swallowing hard before she was able to reply.

"He was shot and killed this past August."

The room swayed around Elizabeth. She shut her eyes to steady herself, but visions of that terrible night slammed into her unwilling mind anyway.

"I saw my father die! Neville Drastin was my father!"

She sprang from the sleigh bed as far from Lillian as possible. "You knew!" she accused. "All these years, you knew! Why didn't you tell me?"

"He forbid it!" Lillian cried, reaching out both arms toward her daughter.

"He was afraid of what you would do if you found out about his past. He thought you wouldn't understand why he had to live in secret. But he loved you and wanted you near him. Now he's gone and I'll never see the two people I love the most in the world together in the same room again. I couldn't even claim his body to see that it was buried in our family plot as it should be!"

Avoiding her mother's outstretched arms, Elizabeth bolted out of the house.

She didn't have the presence of mind to grab a jacket and the chill December breeze soon hurtled her to her senses. However, by then, she'd wandered so far into the woods the house was no longer visible. It was peaceful there. The sun shining through near leafless trees provided some warmth. Beneath her feet, leaves blackened from frost and left to decay crackled replies to her confused mind.

Piece by piece the answers fell into place.

Many nights as a child she awakened to hear whispering voices in Lillian's bedroom across the upstairs hall. When she asked about them, she was told it was just the old house creaking, or it was the wind. Often, she awoke abruptly with the distinct impression someone had just left her room. The times she dared to crawl from her bed to investigate, she always discovered Lillian awake. Lillian calmed her fears by explaining that it was herself come to check on Elizabeth in the night.

Now, Elizabeth realized that presence must have been her father. The same as he was the source of numerous gifts that materialized from nowhere...a toy, a new dress, ribbons for her hair.

No wonder Gramps was such a cynical old man!

Elizabeth finally understood the current of animosity she sensed about her grandfather, why he often spoke with such bitterness. How disappointed he must have been in both of his daughters! She could well imagine how he resented Dusty Miller's intrusion into his home. No wonder he was so strict while she was growing up, and so distant after she moved to Chicago. He must have felt she betrayed him just like his daughters. And, he probably feared the consequences should she discover Dusty Miller's true identity and hidden relationship with her mother...her real mother, the woman who claimed to be her aunt until this very afternoon.

My, what a double life Lillian Bannermann had lived all these years!

How strange it was to view Lillian as 'mother' now when so often as a child Elizabeth had longed to have a mother instead of an old maid aunt.

Elizabeth did not want to acknowledge Lillian's suffering. She wanted to scream and declare she would never speak to the woman again. Instead, her

common-sense-self admitted that Lillian was as much a victim of Neville Drastin's persuasive charms as she was.

Neville Drastin. Dusty Miller. It was difficult to picture them in the same likeness. Yet, in recent years, her longing for a father had been fulfilled by Neville Drastin. More than ever, she regretted never having had the opportunity to tell him she loved him as a father. No matter what his name was; no matter what he did in the past. He definitely loved her as his daughter. And, she wasn't even allowed to place flowers upon his grave.

"No peace for the damned," crackled the leaves beneath her feet.

Neither of Neville Drastin's loved ones were allowed to mourn for his soul in public.

A crunching sound echoed the whisper of the leaves.

Twigs snapped

Elizabeth brushed a low, hanging limb aside.

What was that sound?

The crunch of footsteps on dry leaves was not created by her sneakers. She had not moved.

She whirled abruptly, hoping to startle the intruder behind her, but the trail was empty. Only a brisk breeze stirred the leaves on the trees.

The woods were silent. Too silent.

Were the animals afraid of her presence, or that or another?

Should she run?

Her muscles tensed in preparation....then...the sound of the trickling creek reached her ears.

As a child, she had often wandered about the farm with her grandfather. She didn't believe anyone would intentionally follow her any more than she believed she could become lost in these woods. Yet, a small sigh of relief escaped when she spied the brace of cedar trees that lined the lane to the house.

Just ahead, large rocks provided an easy ford across the creek. She emerged into the clearing just beyond the barn.

Her gaze traveled up the hill to the rambling hedge of blackberry briars and back again to the two-story barn in front of her. The huge clapboard structure looked sad and forlorn, standing empty with both its east and west double entries flung wide open. The roof had begun to sag in the middle and several boards rattled against the wind.

"I was probably conceived in there," she said to herself

It wasn't difficult to imagine. Once upon a time, the barn smelled of animals and feed downstairs, and fresh, sweet hay in the loft. As a child, she played in that loft. It would have been a perfect lover's nest

Knowledge that her parents continued to love one another despite numerous obstacles was a comfort she never thought to experience.

Elizabeth completed the remainder of the lane to the house with a brisk stride.

Lillian met her at the door with a tear-streaked, ashen, face. Her generally immaculate hair escaped its demure bun, and she clutched her hands in front of her breasts in a spasmodic gesture.

Feeling somewhat ashamed of her irrational departure, Elizabeth quickly blurted, "I have a couple pictures. They were publicity shots for *The Plaza* but we're together...my father and I...if you want to see them...Mom. Can I call you 'Mom' now? I've always wanted to..."

"Oh! Yes!" A bright smile lit up Lillian's face. She beckoned her daughter with open arms.

Elizabeth eagerly gave herself up to an embrace from her mother... something she had always wanted but believed she would never have.

"You frightened me near to death," Lillian scolded while she hugged Elizabeth tight. "You were gone more than an hour."

"I'm sorry. I had to sort it all out." Elizabeth hugged her mother several moments longer before gently pushing her aside, worrying her lower lip as she asked, "How did you stand it all these years? You were separated most of the time."

"That was the difficult part," Lillian admitted. "Dusty had his work in Chicago. He would have moved us there, but I refused to leave Pop, especially as he got older and frailer. I didn't think I could adapt to big city life... especially since we would have had to be even more careful about our secret relationship there. So...Dusty came home when he could and I had to be content with that."

They returned to the living room while they spoke, walking with arms around each other, reluctant to let go.

"I...uhm...I lived in fear that he would be killed like he was. Still, if you had not come home for Pop's funeral and told me what you saw, I don't think I would believe Dusty is dead."

"That was so hard. I was there. I laid my hand on his body, knowing he was someone dear to me, but not knowing he was my father." Elizabeth sniffed her tears back. "Marc wouldn't even allow me to have a memorial service for him. He insisted I not do anything to bring attention to myself."

"Marc? That handsome young man who accompanied you when Pop died?" Lillian paused, waiting for Elizabeth's acknowledging nod. "He was so nice. Perhaps, he knew more than you realize."

"Marc was afraid I would be singled out if I revealed my friendship with Nev...my father. It was bad enough that I just happened to go to his office right after the shooting as I did."

"Yes, I suppose it was." Lillian took a deep breath and firmly decided, "Enough of this morbid talk. What's done is done and there is nothing we can do to change it. What about Marc? Have you heard from him since you left Chicago?"

"No."

Elizabeth's tone plainly revealed her reluctance to speak of Marc. She crossed over to the fireplace and began to stoke the fire with a black cast-iron poker kept in a caldron beside the hearth.

Lillian was equally determined the subject of Marc not be discarded as idle chitchat. During the three days she had become acquainted with Marc Grenwald, she also became certain his interest in her Betsy had nothing to do with his profession. In fact, Lillian was quite certain the couple were romantically involved. She was disappointed not to have heard wedding plans during the months since. Betsy's sudden retreat into seclusion was indeed a mystery. Now it occurred to her that, possibly, Marc Grenwald was the reason.

"I really liked him, Betsy," Lillian ventured cautiously.

"Most people do," Elizabeth answered without taking an eye from her task.

"Not you?" Lillian persisted.

Casting the poker aside with a vehement gesture, Elizabeth stalked over to her easel to study the unfinished painting of the barn. Suddenly, she exclaimed, "Now I know what's wrong with this painting! It doesn't have any romance!"

"Romance?" Lillian questioned beneath suspiciously raised eyebrows.

"Because I told you Dusty and I used to meet there?" After surveying the grey and black watercolor for several minutes, she agreed. "It needs something. I hardly think 'romance' is the correct word tho. Perhaps, some color. It looks dull."

Giving an agreeable nod Elizabeth retrieved her paint box and began to search its contents. Glumly, she said, "I'm pregnant."

"What?" Lillian gasped, visibly stricken.

Finally, Elizabeth faced her mother with trembling lips and eyes brimming unshed tears.

"I'm pregnant with Marc Grenwald's baby. Does that tell you how much I liked him?"

"Oh, dear!" Lillian sighed. "What did he say when you told him? I cannot believe he is the kind who would deny his own child!"

"He isn't. I only found out a few days ago. I should have realized it before, but I kept ignoring the symptoms."

"So you just haven't had a chance to tell him."

"I don't want to tell him."

"But you must!" Lillian grabbed Elizabeth's shoulders, intent on giving her a sound shake.

Elizabeth flung herself free, irritably demanding, "Let me handle it! Please! Just let me deal with it as best I can!"

Lillian's face crumpled causing Elizabeth's instant remorse.

"I know what I'm doing," she attempted to reassure her mother. "I will tell Marc in time. Now, what colors do you suggest for this...this failure?"

CHAPTER TEN

Ted emerged from the woods oblivious to the membranous blood clinging to his clothing. Deep in thought, he cleaned his hands with loose black dirt from the ground beneath a nearby tree, then wiped them 'dry' on the legs of his jeans.

Damn! He hated it when things like this happened to his animals. A calf born healthy in the woods was always at risk. The calf he just found, born far too soon, never had a chance.

Behind him, a twig snapped and he turned to face his uncle.

"I see you found the calf," Edwin commented.

"What was left of it," Ted replied. "Where's the cow?"

"I had her half out'a the woods when she bolted. She's down yonder by the pond. Her prolapse is pretty obvious."

Ted gave his head a dismal shake. "We have to get her to the loading pen so we can haul her in to the vet, or we'll lose her too."

The two men headed toward the pond, each well aware of the duty that lay ahead. They'd discovered the cow missing about noon and had been searching the woods for her for a couple of hours.

Ted had just discovered the remains of the calf when he also spied Betsy. He wondered what she was doing in the woods. It was obvious she was distraught and preoccupied. Probably something to do with that gangster boyfriend of hers. Jeez!

Wouldn't that'a been something if she came upon that dead calf first?

Then, he spied Edwin not fifty yards beyond her. He was still puzzling as to why Edwin didn't make his presence known.

Unknown to Ted, Edwin had quite a few suspicions of his own. He trusted no one. Perhaps, Betsy had the right to be wandering around her grandfather's woods, but he had every intention of keeping an eye on her. He'd heard Ted ask his mother about Miller, the prison plot, and all that extorted money that was never found. Ted was up to something. Edwin would stake his life on it. He didn't trust anyone—not even his sister and certainly not her son. It wouldn'ta been funny if Miss Betsy Goodie-Two-Shoes had stumbled into one of those traps he set down by the barn.

Once positioned in daylight, the watercolors Dusty Miller painted took on dimensions all their own. Elizabeth lined them along the wall beneath the west living-room window where she could study them individually as well as together.

She hung the painting of her mother over the mantle to remind herself of the love her parents shared. It saddened her to know she didn't understand the

depth of her father's interest in her talent—the talent she inherited from him—before it was too late to appreciate it.

In following days, the weather grew from unseasonably warm to cold and blustery. Six days remained before Christmas. Three inches of snow had already fallen. Weather forecasts predicted four to six more within the next twenty-four hours.

Elizabeth was grateful for the robust fires burning in the kitchen heat stove and the fireplace (courtesy of the woodshed filled to the roof behind the house). She'd taken a trip into town the previous day; and so, would not have to venture out into the storm for food. If she did become snowbound, she decided, she had nothing more important to do than concentrate on that pesky painting of the barn. She decided to take Lillian's advice and try adding more color.

One of Dusty's paintings was a view of the farm from the hill beyond the barn. Elizabeth lifted it into the light of the window to study the shades of fall color he'd used when a grinding loud motor nearly frightened her out of her wits.

A late-model black Ford Bronco slid sideways in the driveway as its driver attempted to steer around the narrow bend just before the creek crossing. He jammed the accelerator with such force the vehicle shot backward onto a stump and hung there. After spending several minutes uselessly spinning tires, the driver emerged from the vehicle, slamming the door behind him with a solid thunk.

Had Elizabeth still been paying attention, she might have heard the surge of caustic language he emitted when he discovered the source of his problem. As it was, she had only to glance at the Ford vehicle to recognize it. She didn't need to see its driver.

Instinct told her to run and bolt the doors against him. Rational thought realized the folly of such an act. After all, he had given her fair warning. Christmas, he said.

Damned man was nearly a week early!

The driver began walking the remaining distance up the slick, narrow lane to the house. The strength and agility of his muscular build was evident in the way he concentrated on careful steps. He was tall. His age was late thirties. His face was not clearly visible as he kept bowing his head against the hurtling wind and blinding snow.

Elizabeth flung open the front door just as Marc Grenwald raised a fist to rap on the oak panel. The bright red of a red and brown buffalo plaid flannel shirt peeped above the collar of his pile-lined denim coat. He wore slim-fitting jeans and waterproof insulated boots that reached mid-calf. The fingers of black leather gloves poked out of one pocket. A red woolen stocking cap perched on his thick brown hair. He looked like a lumberjack. But that didn't surprise Elizabeth, either. She knew how Marc's country upbringing surged forth when he left the rigid confines of his city employment.

"It's not Christmas yet," she commented sarcastically.

"I came early." He shrugged carelessly. "You going to let me in?"

"I don't have much choice, I guess," Elizabeth grumbled and stepped aside. She shut the door firmly behind him, quickly blocking out the icy wind. She

watched with a grimace while he stomped the snow from his boots onto the rug left in the hall for such purposes. Her tone remained irritable.

"How did you find out where I was living?"

Marc studied the hazel eyes peering at him with outright suspicion beneath a rumpled mass of auburn curls. He thought Elizabeth's beauty had bloomed during the past three months. Her cheeks were rosier. Her face was fuller. Country life evidently agreed with her.

He decided the best course was to tell her the truth, even though he anticipated the anger and indignation soon filling her beautiful features.

"Your Aunt Lillian called me. She's worried about you, Elizabeth Anne. She said there is something you need to tell me, but cannot bring yourself to make the first move."

"Oh-h-h!" Elizabeth wailed in both humiliation and anger. She whirled to escape, but her foot caught on a corner of the rug in front of the door causing her to stumble.

Marc instinctively steadied her by wrapping one arm around her waist.

To the naked eye, her pregnancy was still concealed beneath loose clothing. However, Marc was so familiar with her normally slim figure, when his hand slid across the unusual fullness sweat pants concealed, he could not mistake the difference.

At first, while his fingers explored their discovery, several expressions chased across his face. Astonishment. Confusion followed by realization. And then, anger. His blue eyes glinted like hot steel. The smile that had been ready to spring forth vanished behind the grim rasping query, "Is this the real reason you left Chicago?"

"No! Oh, no!" Elizabeth cried in dismay. "I didn't know then."

"Is it mine?"

"Of course!"

At that moment, Marc was torn between the desire to take her into his arms and the urge to turn her over his knee. She was pregnant! All these weeks he thought...

"Elizabeth Anne..." he chided in that old familiar tone of indulgent tenderness mixed with just a bit of impatience.

After a curious glance into the bedroom, he took hold of her hand and drew her along with him into the living room. There, he pulled off his hat and jacket, dumping them on the sleigh-bed before he stepped into the kitchen to survey its interior with leisurely curiosity. He returned with a broad smile spreading across his face.

"This place suits you."

"I grew up here," Elizabeth replied cautiously, remembering in recent weeks how Ted had sniggered and made sarcastic comments about her 'city slicker' ways.

"There's truth in the saying 'you can take the girl out of the country but you can't take the country out of the girl'," Marc continued. "You were never really happy living in the big city."

Elizabeth didn't reply. She doubted she would be happy anywhere.

Then he spied her easel. "Say! That's the old barn down by the creek, isn't it?" he exclaimed. "I think I'm going to like that painting when it's finished. It's like you...down to earth...simple..."

"Will you stop insulting me?" Elizabeth snapped. She stomped over to the north window to perch upon the window seat.

"I'm not insulting you!" he replied defensively. Suddenly that teasing grin appeared. "You have a brain. You just don't use it all the time."

The watercolors caught his attention then, and he stooped to study them. After some thoughtful moments, he inquired, "Who's D.M.?"

"My father," Elizabeth answered.

"You never told me he was an artist."

"I didn't know until recently."

"So...did you discover these accidentally, or have you found someone willing to tell you about him?"

"Both."

"Who?"

"My mother."

"Who?" Marc's astonishment not only filled his voice, but also, his movement as he whirled to face her.

Heaving a great breath, Elizabeth explained, "Aunt Lilli is really my mother. I found her diary and some old newspapers upstairs so I questioned her about them. She and my father were never married, and he wasn't killed in that accident with my...with Evelyn, the woman I believed was my mother. They thought not telling me the truth was protecting me. I disagree but..." She shrugged as if that was irrelevant. "My father was involved in syndicated crime and he turned state's evidence to obtain a lesser sentence. After the accident—he escaped that somehow—the government gave him a new identity and well...he began to live two lives. Supporting us in secret and as a successful businessman in public...until someone recognized him and put a contract out on his life."

"A contract?" Again Marc's confusion came through in his voice.

Elizabeth nodded sadly. Her eyes grew dark and her voice trembled as guilt overpowered her. Guilt that she should have given Neville Drastin a chance to remain the father figure in her life. Tears stung her eyes as she faced Marc, never once anticipating that he would disagree with her.

"My father was shot last August, but not before he shot and killed his assassin. You and I were witness to that."

Marc's eyes grew wide with astonishment.

"Wait just a minute..." he began, intent on correcting this misinformation about his former partner, but Elizabeth sat upright determinedly informing him, "Neville Drastin was my father, Marc. His real name was Dusty Miller."

Marc ran a harried hand through his hair. A low curse escaped his lips. Little of Elizabeth's hastily construed tale connected to the life of Neville Drastin he was certain was fact.

It wasn't difficult to believe the man was Elizabeth's father. That certainly explained his overwhelming interest in her. Nor did Marc doubt Lillian Bannerman was Elizabeth's mother. However, Lillian did not appear to be the kind of woman who would deliberately lie to her daughter about something as serious as this.

Marc swore a silent vow to discover the truth, whatever it was. At the moment, however, something more urgent alarmed him.

"Elizabeth Anne, do you realize your life could be in danger? Neville Drastin was an influential man who exercised a great deal of power. You are automatically heir to his fortune...and his enemies."

"Well...yes...but that's why he kept our relationship secret." She shrugged refusing to let his declaration alarm her.

"Do you get any visitors here?"

Marc had some nerve just waltzing in here and trying to scare her into thinking people were after her because...because...

"That isn't any of your business," she retorted, once again attempting to shut him out.

Marc was not going to tolerate that. His anger was immediate.

"The hell it isn't my business! You're pregnant with my child! I'll be damned if I'm going to allow you to get into a situation that will endanger you and our baby!"

"Oh—h...!" Unable to think of anything more intelligent to voice her indignation, Elizabeth flounced from the room refusing to accept even the possibility that Marc could have sound reason for his concerns.

During the remaining hours of the afternoon, Marc retrieved his belongings—a large suitcase, a carry-all, and a thick clothing bag—from his Bronco. Elizabeth grimaced as she watched him drag them in, realizing he evidently planned to stay for some time regardless of the weather.

He also carried in enough firewood to last well into the next day, stacking it neatly in the large wood storage box on the porch and the smaller one near the fireplace.

Rather than thank him, Elizabeth refused little more than stilted conversation. By the time she informed him their evening meal was ready, he had discovered her sketchpad and was deeply engrossed in studying her collection of drawings.

"I see you've been busy the past few months," he commented.

"Some days," she admitted. "Dinner is ready. I'm sorry it's only canned chili and crackers. I wasn't expecting company tonight."

Marc's gaze narrowed. He opened his mouth to respond with a sarcastic reply but immediately thought better of it. She hadn't been expecting him.

In all fairness, Marc had just begun to realize why Elizabeth felt justified in fleeing Chicago. Regardless of whether he agreed or not, she believed their separation was necessary to preserve her sanity. He supposed, given the same position, he might draw the same conclusion. What galled him was that she thought only of herself. He had difficulty forgiving her for not at least talking it over with him before she decided to return to Carsonville.

During the initial weeks after her flight, the memory of Elizabeth haunted him incessantly. She stood between him and countless bottles of liquor he consumed. Her face dominated his dreams. Her tinkling laughter penetrated his thoughts, no matter where he was. Eventually, his erratic behavior—depressed one day, angry at the world the next, and nursing a hangover most of the time—affected his work. He was reprimanded several times before the day Elizabeth's former assistant, Sally Lungstrom, was arrested on drug-related charges. When Sally accused him of concealing Elizabeth's personal relationship with Neville Drastin, he lost all rational control. The end result was Capt. Morgan insisting he take an extended leave of absence.

Around Thanksgiving, he returned to the farm in rural Illinois where he'd grown up, but Elizabeth's memory followed him there. The last time he visited his family was the previous summer when Elizabeth accompanied him. Despite their effort, his family could not provide comfort. Being 'home' only caused him to realize how much he missed them, and farm life in general.

Eventually, he came to the conclusion that he must confront Elizabeth at least once—if for no other reason than to make her realize how she had ruined his life. Fate intervened when Capt. Morgan called him to relay the message that Lillian Bannermann was trying to locate him. Lillian's insistence that he contact Elizabeth only gave him a reason to keep his 'promise' to follow her by Christmas.

As he sat in her living room stunned by the startling realization that she carried his child, he knew he was the only man she was ever involved with (assuming there'd not been anyone since August). For him, mandatory periodic check-ups had always proven himself clean. So, even though they used precautions to prevent pregnancy in the beginning, eventually, he dismissed that importance. Elizabeth was so trusting of him, he wondered if the possibility of pregnancy ever crossed her mind. He ignored it when it crossed his.

The hostility Elizabeth was displaying was just her way of protecting herself. The two men she loved and depended upon had lied and betrayed her. A sudden change of heart convinced Marc he'd gotten exactly what he deserved when she left him.

No form of revenge was going to solve their problems now. The mere sight of her proved he still loved her beyond reason. The events of the afternoon led him to conclude that Elizabeth loved him too, no matter how she denied it. It was her fear and confusion—especially the memories surrounding Neville Drastin—that turned her away from him.

Marc vowed he would fight that memory to the death if it took eternity.

With a resolute sigh, he rose from the sleigh-bed and followed her into the kitchen carrying the sketchpad with him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

They ate in virtual silence. After Elizabeth refused Marc's offer to help wash the dishes, he began to study her sketches by the brighter light in the kitchen.

"What's the purpose of this thing? Do you plan to sell these, or what?" he asked, searching for some kind of conversation. The silence wore on his nerves.

Elizabeth glanced over one shoulder toward him without turning away from the sink.

"I just sketch sometimes while I'm thinking. Then I keep the sketches for reference later when I work on something specific. I do want to sell some things if I can."

"Not that painting of the barn!" Marc protested loudly.

Elizabeth instantly bristled. "What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing." His grin was a bit sheepish. "I like it. It looks like sunrise on a fall morning."

"Humph!" Elizabeth snorted. How strange! She had so much trouble with that painting! Taking her mother's advice, she left the black and greyscale to the barn, but added bright fall colors to the trees with yellows and blues to the sky, simulating sunlight. It didn't occur to her at the time, but now, she realized she'd painted the 'light' as if the rising sun cast shadows on the east side of the barn.

Marc realized that?

He'd only been here a few hours. Shaking her head clear of astonishment, she desperately tried to cling to indifference.

"It shouldn't concern you."

"But it does. They all do. Especially ones like this."

He indicated the sketch of himself she copied from the snapshot his sister gave her. A crimson flush covered her cheeks. She hastily returned her attention to a pot in the sink, scrubbing it with far more zeal than necessary.

Marc smothered a triumphant snigger. After a moment, he complimented her with genuine sincerity.

"It's amazing how real your drawings are, Elizabeth Anne. You are a talented artist."

"Thank you," she acknowledged in a barely audible voice, refusing to raise her gaze from the pot she appeared to be attempting to scrub the finish from.

A few minutes later, Marc commented. "I like this."

He referred to a sketch of cardinals, blue jays, and little brown snowbirds she'd drawn just before the snow began to fall. Having scattered seeds on the ground to attract their attention, she sat in a window seat and sketched them

while they ate. The detailed, precise drawing clearly indicated someone watched the birds through a window. Marc studied it for some minutes.

Elizabeth finally turned to face him, worrying her lower lip while she waited for him to discover the last drawing.

He studied it at length too. After some minutes he looked up, asking, "You believe that's how he looked thirty years ago?"

"My mother saw it and said it was a very good likeness."

She had drawn her father dressed in bib overalls, standing in front of the barn as he had painted Lillian, but with greater emphasis on his features. He was smiling and his dark hair fell over his brow. His fists relaxed against either hip.

"There is no doubt in your mind at all, is there?"

She gave her head a solemn shake.

Marc rose from the table and came to stand behind her. His hands automatically nestled on either side of her waist. He spoke with deep sincerity.

"I am so sorry, sweetheart. I wish there could have been some other way..."

"I don't blame you," Elizabeth sighed as she rinsed the pot and let the water drain from the sink, forcing herself to remain occupied. The urge to burrow into Marc's arms was overwhelming. "You couldn't have known what would happen."

"That's just it, Elizabeth Anne. I did know," Marc confessed.

"What?" Elizabeth whirled to face him with the dishcloth dripping soapy water in one hand.

"Neville Drastin's arrest was a carefully planned police action. The only thing we didn't foresee was that he would choose death over arrest. I know for a fact that your mother does not have all of her information straight."

"Are you calling my mother a liar?"

"No. Of course not." He sighed. "I'm saying someone has fed her a line of bull. I studied a hefty profile on Drastin before we began to work the case. There never was any government cover-up. He was never blackmailed by any syndicate organization. Weren't you ever suspicious of the company he kept, or his armed guards?"

"No." Even though Elizabeth's practical sense was beginning to warn her, she lifted her chin in defiance. "They were always nice to me. I accepted them as part of mall security."

"You never had any personal contact with any of them? Not even Maurice, the big, tall one who practically lived in Drastin's office?"

"Sure I did. Maurice escorted me to restaurants on several occasions when Neville was delayed for some reason. He always talked about art. He even came to the shop sometimes..." She frowned, refusing to acknowledge that Maurice may have had ulterior motives for the polite attention he gave her.

"Maurice had a record ten miles long. Most of those who worked as Drastin's personal guards were convicted felons..."

"So who put the contract out on Neville?"

"No one!" Marc grasped her arms, giving her a shake, hoping to force her to see reason. "Drastin was the one who put out the contracts. One of them was on me after we started dating!"

"I don't believe you!" Elizabeth cried, doubling her fists against his chest, washcloth and all. "My father would not do something like that just because he didn't like the man I was dating!"

"But he did! He wanted to keep you all to himself!"

"That has nothing to do with the fact that he was shot in cold blood by...by one of your cronies!"

An angry breath hissed between Marc's teeth. The muscles of his jaw worked as he sought to control his temper.

"Listen to me, Elizabeth Anne. Chuck Willows and I worked side by side for eight years. I knew his moves and habits as well as I knew my own. Drastin's arrest would have cracked one of our biggest narcotics cases wide open, but I blew my cover when I fell in love with you and gave Drastin reason to investigate me! He was waiting for us that night. Our team arrested three of his men before we got to the penthouse office. One of them was Maurice. I guess Maurice had some way to warn Drastin because when we opened his office door, he aimed his revolver at me. Chuck shoved me aside. Chuck's return shot saved my life! If Drastin had not died instantly, I might well be six feet under with both of them!"

Elizabeth's eyes grew wide with horror. She struggled to escape, but her efforts only caused Marc to grasp her tighter.

"I can't handle this!" she sobbed. "You just keep making it worse and worse!"

She flung her arms up in a desperate attempt to spring free. The wet dishcloth struck Marc square in the face.

A slap of ice water could not have been more sufficient.

He let go of her with a startled gasp, and she seized the opportunity to flee the room.

The dishcloth slowly trailed down his shirt front and jeans to lay in a soggy heap on top of his stocking foot.

His chest heaved with his exasperated sigh as he stooped to pick up the soggy cloth and fling it into the sink.

Sometime later, Elizabeth returned to the living room dressed in a flannel nightgown concealed beneath a worn, blue terry robe. She carried a weighty looking bundle.

"What the hell is that?" Marc demanded fighting back an amused grin.

"My mother's eiderdown comforter." She nearly tripped over one sagging corner. "I'll just turn the heat up in the bedroom a little so I won't need it and you can use the comforter out here. The sleigh bed is comfortable. If you push it a little closer to the fireplace you shouldn't have any trouble keeping warm..."

"God damn!" Marc roared.

Elizabeth nearly jumped out of her skin. Several stray folds of the comforter slipped to the floor.

Marc took the comforter from her and dumped it on the sleigh bed before he asked, "Why are you afraid of me?"

"I'm not," she denied in a hoarse whisper.

"Why did you jump just now?"

"You startled me."

He stepped toward her

She retreated a step.

He reached out to grasp her shoulders and she quaked visibly.

"See? Or is it that you just don't want me to touch you? Since I arrived here, I've gotten nothing but arguments, and you ran out on both of them. Now you tell me you won't sleep in the same room with me."

"There's only one bed!"

"It wouldn't be the first time we shared a bed, Elizabeth Anne."

"No...o...!" she cried, fleeing from him the third time in less than five hours.

Minus her robe, the bedroom felt extremely chilly. Perhaps the real chill was within herself. It was evident Marc had no intention of leaving their relationship at its present standstill. In truth, she didn't want to remain in such limbo either.

In her heart, Elizabeth knew Marc told the truth. She'd seen the revolver in Neville's lifeless hand. Neither she nor Marc knew Neville was her father, then.

But how could anything ever be the same between them again?

She stretched one hand over her abdomen, caressing their unborn child.

Marc paced the living room floor with rapid, angry strides for precisely three minutes before he hastily banked the fire in the fireplace for the night, then snatched up the comfort and marched across the hall.

"Enough of this damned foolishness!" he bellowed as he burst through the bedroom door and flung the comforter onto the bed.

Elizabeth whirled to face him. Terror filled her round eyes.

Marc's anger vanished at the sight of her. The last thing he wanted to do was frighten her, but it took all the willpower he possessed not to cross the room and pull her into his arms.

The flannel nightgown did not conceal her feminine curves as well as the robe and sweats she'd worn earlier. Instead, it clung to them, emphasizing her high round breasts and the gradual swell of her abdomen. Believing she looked more beautiful now than ever before, and his voice grew rough in his desperate effort to control his emotions.

"It's a lot more practical to share the bed," he said. "It'll save fuel in the stove in here and we'll still keep warm. I banked the fire in the fireplace. It'll keep the living room and kitchen warm." After a lengthy pause, he ran his fingers through his hair, adding in the midst of a deep exasperated sigh, "If it'll make you feel better, I'll keep my damned jeans on, too."

Elizabeth pressed one hand against her mouth to conceal an abrupt giggle.

Here they were. A blizzard was raging outside. It might be days before they could drive out, and the father of the child she carried in her womb was attempting to be practical.

Was she avoiding him out of anger, or fear that he would manage to melt her heart once again?

During the night Elizabeth awoke to discover Marc's arm casually thrown over her outside the cover. They lay so her back fit against the curve of his torso. His legs made a protective niche behind her own. It *was* warmer than when she slept alone. Comfortable too.

She was grateful when he got up after midnight to stoke the fires and check the trickle of water left to run through the faucets so the water-pipes wouldn't freeze. These were necessary chores she held a strong aversion to because the bed was always so cold when she returned.

She felt no qualms when she awoke again in the early hours of the morning to discover she had rolled against his back and wrapped one arm around him.

Seven a.m. found Marc's breath fanning the nape of her neck. Bristly whiskers from his unshaven chin pricked her shoulder through her flannel nightgown. One arm surrounded her waist again, this time, beneath the covers. The palm of his hand nestled comfortably against the underside of her breast. When she tried to push his hand away he drew her closer. His lips grazed her ear with the soft command, "Don't."

"Marc..." she protested, choking back a sob.

"Is it the baby you hate so much?" he asked.

"No!" she gasped. "I could never hate our baby!"

"Our baby," he repeated. "Conceived in love. I thought it was love. How do you stop loving someone so easily, Elizabeth Anne? Tell me so I can stop loving you."

"I still love you, Marc!" Her declaration caught on a gulping sob.

He rolled her over to face him. "What are you trying to do to me? To us?"

"Nothing...I...oh, there is so much to deal with. So many things are not what they appear to be..."

"The most important thing has not changed. The fact that we love each other. Proof of that is right here."

His hand gently caressed the small mound concealing the presence of their unborn child.

Elizabeth didn't flinch or pull away. In fact, her eyes were closed and a half-smile curled her lips. He let his hand linger, savoring the privilege of touching her, knowing it might be the last time for a while, a few hours, anyway. He was determined not to spend another night clinging to the edge of a featherbed with his jeans on!

He dared to press a fleeting kiss against her mouth, rolling his tongue lightly over her lower lip. To his profound elation, her lips parted, welcoming his tender caress. Drawing courage, he kissed her more deeply. She didn't protest until he whispered softly into her ear.

"You held me last night."

Elizabeth's eyes shot wide open. He knew! The prospect was so unnerving she scrambled from the bed and dashed out of the room.

Breakfast was an ordeal. Elizabeth's embarrassment remained so acute a pink flush filled her cheeks the whole time she fried bacon and scrambled eggs. Marc's low chuckle as she set his generously filled plate before him did nothing to ease her discomfort. She refused to look at him or to speak while she picked her own meager portions.

Midway through the meal, the silence was interrupted by the loud grind of someone's vehicle plowing through the additional four inches of snow that had fallen during the night.

Marc began to rise from the table, but Elizabeth stopped him.

"It's just Ted," she said.

"How do you know?" he asked suspiciously.

"I recognize the sound of his truck." She shrugged. "Just sit. He'll come around to the back door."

Marc continued to scowl. "Who did you say it is?"

"Ted Cooper, my neighbor."

True to her word, not long after the grinding motor ceased the porch door slammed and heavy footsteps tramped across the porch floor. Then, a hefty knock rapped on the kitchen door.

"C'mon in, Ted!" Elizabeth sang so merrily Marc glowered at her even more suspiciously. However, his exasperation did not begin to match the look of astonishment on Ted's face when he found another man sitting in Elizabeth's kitchen at this hour, especially with the couple in a somewhat questionable state of dress.

Marc wore only his t-shirt and jeans. He was unshaven and his hair was rumpled.

Elizabeth clutched her terry robe at the neckline to conceal her flannel nightgown. She had not taken time to run a brush through her hair either. To make matters worse, her voice emerged in a breathless rush as she hastily explained Marc's presence.

"Marc was stranded here last night." She paused to clear her throat, further displaying her discomfort. "Uhummm...Marc, this is my neighbor, Ted Cooper. Ted, Marc is a friend from Chicago."

Ted immediately recognized Marc as the man who escorted Elizabeth and her aunt to Joseph Bannerman's funeral. He was also the central figure in many of Elizabeth's sketches. As Marc stood and offered his hand, Ted was given the impression the man was speculating his role in Elizabeth's life. Ted wisely chose to explain his presence.

"Lil's worried about you, Betsy. Seems she's been trying to call you, but your phone isn't working. I brought you yesterday's mail...after I found your mailbox..."

Clearing his throat, Marc sheepishly faced Elizabeth. "I forgot to tell you...uh...I sort'a crashed into your mailbox when I nearly missed your driveway yesterday."

"You hit my mailbox!" Elizabeth hissed beneath an ominous glare.

"Knocked it clear to the ground," Ted chortled, clearly mistaking Marc for a green horned city character. "I guess that's your rig hung up on that stump down by the crick?"

Marc's ego would not allow Ted his obvious conclusion, even if he did deserve it. He shook his head in disgust.

"I knew the four-wheel-drive needed servicing before I began this trip, but the farm boy in me decided I could handle some little ole snowstorm without it. I realized what a fool I was about the time I hit that mailbox. Thought I'd never get as far as I did."

Elizabeth watched apprehensively while Ted and Marc discussed four-wheel-drive vehicles and past experiences in similar weather conditions. Several minutes passed before Ted spoke to her again.

"I'm headed into town; so, I'll stop by the factory and tell Lil everything's fine here. I can report your phone to the company too, but it'll probably be a few days before they get out here to fix it. Mom wants me to pick up some groceries for her. Do you need anything?"

"I'm not sure," Elizabeth answered thoughtfully. She ventured an accusing glance at Marc. "I wasn't planning on company when I bought groceries the other day. But, since Marc is here...could you bring some milk, bread, meat...that is, steaks, a chicken..."

"Whoa!" Ted held up one hand in protest. "You better write all that down or I'm liable to forget half of it."

The men shared glances of mutual amusement while Elizabeth began moving around the kitchen, peering into the cupboards and refrigerator, all the while mumbling to herself as she listed items on the back of a pad left lying on the counter. In the end, she requested twice as much as first suggested.

Ted read the list item for item before eyeing Marc beneath an arched brow.

"Don't look like she intends to let you starve. Got enough food here to feed an army."

"She's a good cook." Marc grinned with his reply. "Do you mind if I ride along with you? I could run Elizabeth's errands myself."

"Better yet, Bets, why don't you come too?" Ted suggested. "Lil can see for herself that you survived the snowstorm."

"Oh, I don't know..." Elizabeth hesitated. "I have some laundry to do..."

"You actually use that thing?" Marc indicated the aged wringer wash machine standing against the far wall.

"What else?" Elizabeth asked.

Ignoring her sarcastic tone of voice, Marc stretched one long arm around her waist and drew her near his side.

"C'mon, Cinderella-babe," he coaxed. "The fresh air will be good for you."

In that single gesture, Marc claimed her as his. His use of that particular endearment blatantly stated the intimate nature of their relationship. Indignation gripped Elizabeth, but she didn't know who she was angrier with. Marc for his nerve; or herself for lacking the willpower to deny him. Of its own volition, one of her hands crept to rest on his shoulder. His grasp tightened ever-so-gently.

"All right," she conceded in a tone that bespoke the warring apprehension in her mind.

CHAPTER TWELVE

During the time it took Elizabeth to dress in suitable warm clothing, Marc and Ted ventured outside to survey the effects of the snowstorm. She could hear their voices drifting around the side of the house where her bedroom was located but paid little attention until she heard a low curse such as Marc often used. She began to listen warily as they paused outside her bedroom to check the amount of oil in the tank located there. They didn't seem to be arguing over anything; still, she knew something angered Marc. A couple of hours would pass before he would give her the grim details.

When the men returned to the kitchen a short time later, Ted was saying, "That happened at my place a couple of years ago. We had snow on the ground yet in April. There was no way Harley could get close enough to the tank out back of our house without getting his truck stuck. So, me and him got a couple fifty-gallon drums, hauled them up to the house on the tractor and siphoned the oil from one tank to another. Think you and me could do something like that?"

"If we can get hold of some drums small enough for you and me to lift," Marc agreed.

"What are you two talking about?" Elizabeth inquired as she drew on her pile-lined, hooded parka.

"Your oil tank is almost empty," Marc informed her.

He faced her with his back to Ted so only she saw the expression that repeated his disapproval of her behavior the previous night. If she had turned up the heat in the bedroom, while he slept in the sleigh-bed in the living-room, there might not have been enough heat in the bedroom for the night.

She hastily pulled on a pair of leather gloves, grateful for the excuse to look away from Marc's disapproving scowl.

So, even with Ted's four-wheel-drive pick-up, it took twice the normal time to reach Carsonville. The snowplows had yet to clear away last night's additional snowfall from the county road.

Carsonville was the epitome of a small-town Christmas scene. Decorations were strung on every corner street lamp while shop windows glittered with colorfully lit displays. The hazardous weather appeared to have little effect on shoppers because the stores were quite crowded. The public schools had closed for the holidays before the snowstorm; so, snowmen were popping up everywhere in the residential areas. Snowball fights occurred just about anywhere without any reason.

After a brief visit to the factory, where Elizabeth managed not to be too annoyed with Lillian for having contacted Marc behind her back, Ted left Marc

and Elizabeth downtown with the promise to meet them at the IGA parking lot in an hour or so.

Elizabeth only intended to do necessary errands, but Marc, having other ideas, began to tug her along the sidewalk. When she paused to study a particular maternity ensemble displayed in a clothing store window, he urged, "Go ahead. Buy it."

"I'll have to do something soon," she admitted. "I have a few things I can alter. Maternity clothes are so expensive."

"Nonsense," Marc grumbled. "There's no reason why you shouldn't have new maternity clothes."

He ushered her into the store and not only purchased that maternity top and matching pants but also an ivory wool dress as he proposed 'they do the town' on New Year's Eve.

Elizabeth was overwhelmed by his generosity and contagious Christmas spirit.

Did she plan to put up a tree? Just a small one?

Insisting they should, Marc purchased a strand of lights, a box of ornaments, and some tinsel.

Did she have her gift shopping done?

As Elizabeth had only planned to purchase a gift for Lillian, she assured Marc she'd done all her shopping. And then, had the devil of a time trying to slip away to purchase something for him.

Marc's spirit dwindled some when they visited the telephone company's local office. From the instant he entered the building, he affected an air of authority. He asked to speak to the manager and, when the man appeared, immediately presented his Chicago I.D. They conversed in low tones no one else could understand, but the manager repeatedly glanced at Elizabeth. Finally, as he turned to leave, his voice drifted in her direction.

"Yessir, I'll send someone out to repair those lines right away." Then, he paused, adding as an afterthought, "But if what you suspect is true, they could be spliced again."

"We will rely on you to repair them again," Marc replied.

Elizabeth scurried to them, alarm written all over her face.

"Marc? What are you talking about?"

The manager beat a hasty retreat. Marc gently brushed her hair from her face as he explained, "I didn't want you to hear what I told the manager because I knew it would upset you. Honey, your telephone wires were not damaged in the snowstorm. They were deliberately cut. When was the last time you used your phone?"

"I don't...remember...days ago..." Elizabeth frowned in thought. "But you can't be serious. Those lines were so old."

He didn't speak again until after they emerged from the telephone office and were walking along the street.

"The wires were replaced when the company installed your telephone. They've been cut, honey. Take my word for it."

A cold shiver crept the length of Elizabeth's spine. Unconsciously, seeking protection from an unknown, unseen enemy, Elizabeth moved closer to Marc's side. He slid a protective arm around her as they walked to the IGA. They didn't mention the telephone again while they purchased groceries, and waited for Ted to complete his business in another part of town.

Much of the day had passed by the time the trio returned to the farm loaded down with Elizabeth's purchases as well as those Ted bought for his mother, and five ten-gallon drums filled with fuel for the bedroom heat stove. Had anyone been watching while they ate lunch in a downtown diner, they would have believed the trio had been close friends for years.

Elizabeth successfully forced all thought of telephone wire vandalism, and its possible sources, from her mind. Once all the purchases were unloaded onto the kitchen table, the men went to work transferring the fuel from the drums into the tank beside the house. She had just stepped into the bedroom to hang up her new clothes when, once again, their voices drifted through the sparsely insulated farmhouse walls.

"How long have you known, Elizabeth?" Marc asked Ted.

"Elizabeth?" Ted sounded confused. Then, he began to chuckle. "Oh! You mean Betsy!" He snorted with amusement. "All my life, I guess. But, I never knew she had another name."

"I cannot imagine calling her 'Betsy'," Marc chuckled. "The first time I heard her mother call her that I nearly cracked up."

"You should know her mother is dead," Ted corrected gruffly.

"Oops..." Marc breathed a guilty sigh. "I just dropped a well-kept family secret. Look, Elizabeth recently discovered her mother wasn't killed in that accident years ago..." He paused a moment as if pondering how much to say. "It's probably best not to say more..."

"Probably," Ted agreed. He didn't sound the least bit shocked.

Elizabeth crept closer to the wall, being careful to remain out of sight through the window. She wondered just how much Ted knew; or, had he just put two and two together.

"I told Bets I thought it was good for her to find out what she could about her folks..." Ted was saying. "I think I know who you're talking about. It is for the better not to say more. Bets seems to be handlin' it all right." Then, even though Elizabeth could not see them, she knew Ted was eyeing Marc with a critical expression as he commented, "You're a little over-protective of her, I think."

"I got reason to be and it ain't got nothin' to do with cut telephone wires," Marc grunted his reply. He was pushing one full drum closer to the empty tank as he spoke. Elizabeth could hear the scrape of metal over the concrete sidewalk.

"I don't see any tags on her," Ted commented drily.

"Look again," Marc replied. "She's pregnant with my baby."

Marc was tired, yet exhilarated, by the day's accomplishments. After numerous attempts, and subsequent refusals, to pay Ted for his help, he bade a new friend good-bye.

"Just take good care of Betsy," Ted said.

"I can do that," Marc replied. He was still smiling with ideas of just how when he entered the kitchen.

Elizabeth waited there with arms folded across her chest while one stockinged foot impatiently tapped the linoleum floor. Her eyes flashed fire that matched the golden highlights of her hair. Her full lips pursed with irritation.

Marc could not prevent the smile of appreciation that curved his lips as he studied her from head to toe, wondering just what caused the brewing storm this time.

Abruptly, she blurted, "You did not have to tell Ted I'm pregnant!"

"Eavesdropping?"

Marc shrugged out of his heavy coat, stretching it over the back of the nearest chair before he sat down in that chair. He removed his boots before he spoke again. He was dead serious.

"Now he has no reason to doubt you are mine! I will not step aside for any man, Elizabeth Anne."

"Oh, you men and your blasted egos! I belong to me and no one else, Marcus Grenwald!"

Elizabeth stomped from the kitchen to perch on the north window-seat in the living-room. Marc stalked right after her.

"You are not running away from me again!" he declared. "This time, we're going to talk."

"I don't want to talk to you!" Elizabeth stormed.

"Tough," Marc growled.

He pushed her legs against the windowpane and sat down in front of them, propping his stockinged feet in front of her against the window frame. Viewing her trapped position, Elizabeth granted him a rueful glare before she faced out the window.

What little patience Marc still possessed disintegrated in a few seconds. He placed a forefinger beneath Elizabeth's chin trying to turn her face around to him. When she refused, he grasped the lower half of her face in his hand and forced her to turn her head. His gaze narrowed just enough to convince her he was serious. She didn't believe for an instant he would hurt her; but he'd had enough of her childish, evasive behavior. It was time they discussed the situation to the end, whatever that end might be.

Abruptly, he released his hold and leaned back against the window frame.

"Tell me about your father again," he said.

"It's such a long story..." Elizabeth relented with a sigh, lowering her chin to rest against her bent knees.

"We have time," he said.

Still, she hesitated.

"Please," he pleaded, gently tugging her earlobe with a forefinger and thumb.

She giggled. Once again, his charm crushed her wall of reserve. So, she repeated the story with as much detail as she could remember.

"You're certain that's all?" he asked when she finished. "You believe your mother told you everything?"

"What else could there be?" she asked, frowning in bewilderment.

"If Drastin was in so much trouble in Chicago, why did he go back there? How come the money he stole was never returned? And a new identity? You say two men just appeared at the door when everyone believed he was dead? The whole story sounds like a bunch of trumped-up excuses to me. The more I hear, the less I like it."

"Why can't you just leave it alone?" Elizabeth cried defensively. "Haven't enough people been hurt?"

"More people will be hurt if it is left alone," Marc insisted.

"As if I haven't been already," Elizabeth muttered, facing the window again.

Her determination to erect that wall between them cost Marc his final shred of control.

"Do you believe you never hurt me?" His voice sounded like the growl of an angry animal. "You left me! You didn't even trust me enough to tell me you're expecting our child!"

"You didn't trust me enough to tell me you were a cop!" Elizabeth retaliated in an anguished wail. "You lied to me! I don't give a damn if it was your job! You used me to get information about my father!"

"I never used you in any way!" Marc exclaimed. "I didn't know he was your father! I thought I was protecting you! How long do you think you could have kept my true identity from him?"

"I didn't know he was my father either!" Elizabeth threw up her hands in exasperation. "Why must we keep going over it and over it, Marc? The facts don't change, no matter how much we argue about them."

"The hell they don't change!" Marc got up to stalk over to the fireplace. He shoved a couple of logs on the coals and began to prod them until a flame roared with a vengeance that matched his tone of voice. "The facts don't add up. I intend to find out why, one way or the other."

"And not give a damn who gets trampled in the process!" Elizabeth accused. "That's the way you always operate, isn't it? Just plunge in, tear everything to pieces and let someone else try to make do with what's left."

For a split second, Elizabeth thought Marc was going to hit her. His steel blue gaze bore right through her. Every muscle in his body tensed as if he was about to spring.

Instead of vengeance, his next words emerged as raw agony.

"Did you ever love me at all, Elizabeth Anne?"

"I loved you more than I could breathe from the very beginning," she answered. "I still love you. That's why all of this hurts so much."

"Because you don't believe I love you? What? Why did you leave me?"

His hands swayed uselessly at his sides. He clenched his jaw, stubbornly fighting back tears.

"The first time I saw you, I thought you were the most beautiful woman ever created. But, you were so aloof. You kept yourself so distant from everyone

at *The Plaza*. People told me it was because of Drastin. They said Drastin claimed you as his property the day you arrived. At first, I just wanted to find out if that was true; but, then I got to know you. You became everything to me. Chuck warned me over and over that I was playing with fire, but I was determined to prevent you from discovering the kind of man Drastin really was. I was terrified he would manage to drag you down with him. I wanted him out of your life; but, I swear, if I had known he was your father, I would have backed out of the assignment altogether. I loved you too much to deliberately put you through this kind of hell."

Never had Elizabeth anticipated such a confession. It was so totally unlike Marc to reveal any sign of vulnerability. She could only stare at him in disbelieving consternation.

"Why didn't you tell me as soon as you found out you were pregnant?" The tremor in his voice indicated he had not yet regained full control of his emotions.

"I was afraid you wouldn't want me anymore."

Elizabeth's answer was a choked, pathetic whisper, but Marc heard and groaned her name as he reached for her. She scrambled up from the window-seat into his arms.

"Do you realize what we've done?" His voice muffled into her hair. "We've destroyed all the faith we had in one another. I want it back. Of course, I still want you. My world is empty without you. I want our baby. I'm not going to give up until I have you both. I do love you. It's because I love you so much that I've tried to be patient and let you sort it all out for yourself."

"The more I think about it, the more I discover, the more complicated it gets!"

Her plaintive wail was muffled into the front of his shirt. His arms tightened so she could barely breathe.

"It's time to let me help," he said.

"How?"

"Let's start with this..."

His words were a husky murmur as his mouth closed over hers so thoroughly he forced everything from her mind but the reality of himself, his kiss, his arms protectively pressing her against his lean frame.

Elizabeth returned Marc's kiss with a fervor he had gloried in months before. It would have been easy, then, to just take her right there. But, he sensed they had barely scratched the surface of their differences. It would take a lot more than singular confessions to regain the trust they lost.

Lord, she felt good! Pressing her slender body against his while her fingers tugged his hair at the nape of his neck. She tasted so sweet...and so vulnerable. He refused to destroy what they'd just regained by taking advantage of that vulnerability now.

After a few more moments savoring the sweetness of their embrace, he set his hands firmly at her waist and guided her to the armchair in the corner between the two windows. There, he sat down and drew her onto his lap.

Once, it was a cherished habit for Elizabeth to sit on Marc's lap in the armchair in her apartment while they discussed deep subjects of most everything. Once, no topic was foreign to them. Now, seeking to regain the sweet intimacy of those moments, she lifted her legs across the arm of the chair and tried to cuddle into his embrace.

But, it wasn't the same.

She was acutely aware of the extra roundness of her abdomen. It was uncomfortable to draw her legs too tightly upward, and she couldn't press into Marc's body as she once had. When he began to massage the lump separating them, she realized he was as acutely aware of the difference as she was.

"I can't get as close to you as I used to..." she apologized tearfully.

He scooted the two of them around a little and lifted her more onto the arm of the chair.

"There. That's better," he decided. One hand fell to caress her belly again; the other caressed her back.

"Do you mind?" she asked uncertainly.

"Told you I didn't," he answered gruffly.

"The baby changes everything."

His reply was as reproving as it was tolerant, and almost created fresh tears.

"Elizabeth Anne, the baby is not the cause of my love for you. It is the result of it. So far as I can see, the baby just forces us to accept responsibilities we should have accepted a long time ago."

He was so right. She was glad he felt as he did. Because she was glad, she decided another confession was in order.

"I didn't get confirmation until last week."

He peered at her in confusion. "Why did you wait so long? There had to be symptoms."

"There were. I was so wrapped up in myself, I ignored them." Tears welled in her eyes, threatening to spill over again. "I'm so sorry, Marc. I never meant to hurt you by running away. I was just trying to find myself..."

He pressed his head against the back of the chair, admitting in the midst of a great sigh, "I realize that now. It still makes me a little angry that you didn't consider my feelings. Maybe I would feel differently if you had explained how you felt in your apartment the day you left."

"I tried." Elizabeth sniffed. "My mind was such a whirl of confusion, I couldn't find the words. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I realized I was hurting both of us, but it didn't matter. I couldn't even admit to myself that I was trying to run away from everything...you, my job, Neville. I couldn't even explain to my mother why I wanted to move into this house alone."

Elizabeth burrowed her face into his neck while he continued to massage her back with one hand. The other hand remained protectively covering their unborn child. He was just now accepting the state of confusion she had lived in for months. He was reluctant to continue but knew that he must.

"If Lillian had not caught up with me, were you going to tell me about the baby?"

"Yes!" She sat upright in shock. "Of course, I was going to tell you! I just hadn't decided how, or when, and I'm still mad at her for jumping you like that."

"I'm glad she did," he replied. "I was drifting off in a bad way. She gave me a reason to come after you like I said I would."

"You wouldn't have, otherwise?"

"I don't know. I've been pretty angry..."

A tear slid down her cheek. "The day the doctor confirmed my pregnancy, I couldn't think of anything but you. How wonderful our time together was, and how the baby might resemble you. I knew you would want it, even if you didn't want me."

"Why did you question whether or not I want you?"

Her lower lip trembled so she could barely speak. "Because you lied about so many other things..."

Marc's grasp tightened convulsively. He drew a deep breath, steeling himself to remain calm. Still, his voice was raw with indignation.

"Elizabeth Anne, I did not lie to you. I concealed some of the truth to protect you."

"And yourself," she dared to accuse, rising as if get off his lap.

He wouldn't let her. "Yes," he admitted. "But that isn't lying. I felt responsible for both of us, and I didn't know what Drastin would do."

"He wouldn't have hurt me," she stubbornly insisted.

Marc lifted one hand to cradle her face. She had no choice but to look him directly in the eye. "How can you be so certain? Remember how he frightened you the night he discovered our relationship? He'd been living a double life for thirty years. He was a convicted fugitive. Cornered, he would fight like an animal. Which is exactly what he did that night Chuck and I tried to arrest him."

Elizabeth unconsciously moved her hand to cover Marc's. She'd always adored the gentleness of his touch, even when he was being persistent. Even now, his fingers willingly curled around her hand while his penetrating gaze warned her not to evade the issue.

"Why don't you believe he turned states' evidence?" she asked.

Marc relaxed his hold and sat back comfortably again.

"I've helped a few people enter the Witness Relocation Program. In the first place, the government would have sent him a long way from Chicago. He could never have returned there safely, honey. He couldn't have operated a place like *The Plaza* and remained unknown for thirty years. Think about it. That doesn't make sense."

"You think he lied about that too?"

"I think he told your mother whatever he believed would keep her quiet. Maybe that's what made her happy; or, maybe he was using her."

Elizabeth bristled defensively. "I don't think he used her. He returned of his own free will throughout my life! Always at night, and in secret, but even after I moved to Chicago, he came back to visit. Mom told me he paid Gramp's medical expenses and his hospitalization, taxes on the farm, the down payment on her apartment in town, and a whole bunch of other things."

"All right."

Secretly, Marc was surprised to hear that Drastin had been so generous. That meant something.

"So, he did love both of you. That doesn't excuse the effort he took to conceal the truth, especially from you, your mother, and your grandfather."

Elizabeth had to agree with that. Tears filled her eyes again and she burrowed her face against Marc's neck, sobbing, "Why didn't he tell me who he was, Marc? Why?"

Inwardly, Marc's rage turned on his old nemesis. Neville Drastin had always been the cause of their differences. He was the root of their problems now, not an innocent baby. Neville Drastin was the reason Elizabeth fled Chicago and the reason Marc did not tell her his own identity.

Marc wished he could kill Drastin all over again. A single gunshot to his chest was not enough. He wanted to string Neville Drastin up and tear him to pieces inch by inch. Even that wouldn't compare to the suffering he'd caused both women who loved him so blindly.

Steeling himself to keep his anger hidden, Marc caressed Elizabeth's back, gently drawing her as close as possible.

"I don't know," he admitted against her hair. "I'm going to do what I can to find out. I think you and your mother deserve to know at least that. But, right now, I just want to hold you. Let's put everything out of our minds for the time being. Let it be just you and me."

Elizabeth gave her belly a meaningful pat. "That might be a bit difficult."

He covered her hand with his. "This is part of you and me. Us as one. I like having both of you here in my arms."

"I like it too," she agreed, snuggling again.

Outside, the winter sunshine caused water droplets to glisten on the snow. Bunny rabbits left their footprints beneath the brush. Across the field, a ten-point buck examined his territory. All was peaceful and serene.

Inside the farmhouse, fire crackled in the fireplace. A clock ticked steady time on the mantle. An occasional drip could be heard from the faucet at the kitchen sink.

The couple in the chair didn't notice. They had fallen asleep, nestled warm and content in their love for one another.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When they sat down to their evening meal Elizabeth giggled, "This is awful! All that food we bought today and we're having canned soup again."

"Yep," Marc grunted much to her dismay.

"Do you want something else?"

"Yep," he repeated, sporting a lascivious grin. "I definitely want 'something else'."

Elizabeth's face turned crimson. She delved into her bowl of vegetable soup without another word.

Marc's face contorted in dismay. Once a suggestive remark like that would have prompted a giggled reply from Elizabeth. Evidently, their discussion in the afternoon had not eliminated all the obstacles between them. He wondered how many more there were.

Later, when he returned from filling the wood-storage box with firewood, he commented, "It's snowing again."

"We might be stranded here for a month!" she groaned.

"Are you complaining?" he asked as he shed his coat and boots for the final time that day.

"Of course not," she scoffed. She'd finished the dishes and was curled on the sleigh-bed watching television. "Don't you have to be getting back to Chicago soon?"

"Not until after the first of the year," Marc replied on his way to stoke the stove in the kitchen. Another obstacle. How was he supposed to tell her this was not exactly a vacation?

Her gaze followed him while he also added a log to the fire in the fireplace before he sat down beside her.

"What will we do until then?"

"I can think of a few things," he gruffly replied.

Elizabeth's face turned bright crimson, and she turned all of her attention to the television.

Marc tugged her around so she lay across his lap facing him and lowered his mouth to hers in a kiss of such scorching intensity all other thoughts were quickly squelched from their minds...for the moment anyway. Surprised Elizabeth responded as willingly as she did, Marc took full advantage.

After a few minutes, when they both needed to come up for air, Elizabeth sat up so her back rested against Marc's chest. She drew his arms around her, and they sat quietly for a while, listening to the crackle of the fire and the drone of the television. Neither paid attention to either.

He became so lost in his thoughts he didn't notice when she tilted her head back to peer up at him. The slight movement of her forefinger across his jawbone jolted him out of his stupor.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"Lots of things," he replied, planting a brief kiss on her lips.

"What kinds of 'lots of things'."

"Us."

"Oh." She sat up, reaching for the television remote control. "I don't get good reception here," she complained and turned the television off.

"That's because of the hill behind the house. We have to put the aerial up on top of the house or further up the hill...and get my V.C.R."

"Why?"

"For better reception and so we can rent movies to watch."

Her rueful expression caused him to chuckle. They could manage this, he decided. A little small talk wouldn't hurt. He glanced around the room seeking a subject for conversation.

"What did you do with the furniture from your apartment?" He'd noticed earlier that most of the furniture in the house was antique in nature, nothing he'd seen before.

"I sold it to the manager of the apartment complex. I bought the end table, television stand, and that small cabinet I store my art supplies in at a second-hand place in town. Ted hauled them out here for me on his pickup. The rest of the furniture was already here."

She answered him without so much as batting a lash. He frowned.

"You could have stored your other furniture and had it moved later."

She sighed, deep and resolute. "I didn't want it. My father leased that apartment, Marc. He purchased all of the furniture before I ever saw it. It was generous of him, but it also was one of the ways he tried to control everything in my life. I let it go then, but after he died—the way he died—I resented it. When I left Chicago, I was running away from the memory of him more than I was running away from anything between you and me."

How could he argue with that? In fact, she deserved a hug for her honesty. He gave her one but was at a loss to further conversation.

Elizabeth liked lying with her back against Marc's chest. She appreciated the solid hardness in the body that supported her and the tenderness in the arms that surrounded her. She savored the pleasant aroma of wood and shaving lotion mingled with fresh outdoors and worn flannel. But she hated the silence. She would rather he yelled at her than not tell her what he was thinking.

"Good or bad?" she asked.

"What?" He frowned in confusion.

"Your thoughts about us."

"Oh." He chuckled softly as he stretched his long legs toward the fireplace. "What does Lillian plan to do with this place?"

"She was thinking of selling it before I moved back here."

"You think she'd sell it to us?"

"Us?" Elizabeth tilted her head around, staring up at him in amazement.

"Why does that surprise you?"

"But, your job!" She struggled to sit upright, facing him.

He wasn't too eager to let her go, or to admit her protest irritated him. He wasn't ready to confess that it was doubtful he still had a job.

"I think I'm going to apply for a position with the County Sheriff at Carsonville. Ted told me one of their regulars plans to retire this spring."

"But, Marc! That's an entirely different kind of work than you're used to!" Elizabeth exclaimed.

His reply was louder and more adamant.

"It's one helluva lot less dangerous! Now that I have you and the baby to think about, I don't want to live under that kind of pressure anymore."

Elizabeth stared into the crackling fire as lost in her thoughts as Marc was minutes before. Marc had no patience for that. Cupping her chin in one hand, he turned her around to face him.

"Now what are *you* thinking?"

She focused her gaze on the buttons closing his flannel shirt. Her voice was meek.

"I'm not going to force you into anything, Marc. Not marrying me. Certainly not giving up your job."

"Elizabeth Anne..." he chided reprovably. "You aren't forcing me. You know I grew up on a farm with a big, close family. That's the kind of life I want us to have. Undercover work...the kind that I did...can be adventurous for a single person. I don't recommend it for a husband and a father."

"Why not?"

"Because, when you're single, you look out only for yourself. When you're married, you have at least one other person to care and worry about. Besides, I think I'd like to farm this property on the side."

"You never told me that."

He realized she was ignoring the word 'married' and focusing on 'farm'.

"I guess the farmer in me has developed an itch since I've seen this place."

"Why didn't you stay on your folks' farm?" Elizabeth scooted around to draw her legs beneath herself and rest her elbow on the back of the sleigh-bed, propping her head with her hand. He had most definitely given her a path to ignore his proposal.

He heaved a long sigh. Then, knowing she would also ignore any show of exasperation, he explained, "My two older brothers took over the farm. It isn't big enough to support all three of us and our families." He gave his shoulders an indifferent shrug. "I guess I had to sow a few wild oats first, anyway."

"Have you?" she dared to tease.

"Uh-hum..." He leaned to brush his lips across hers.

A moan escaped her, but whether it was in answer or protest Marc could not tell. He ignored it, pressing his lips against hers thoroughly enough and long enough to once again squelch any brewing doubts.

Eventually, he asked, "Do you believe in long engagements?"

Caught completely off guard, Elizabeth gasped, "I don't know. Why?"

"We've been engaged for five months. That's why. Don't you think we should set a wedding date?"

"You decide."

Elizabeth refused to be forced into imposing a decision on him that she feared he would regret. However, his choice startled her beyond speech.

"This coming New Year's Eve."

She stared at him wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

Grinning, he traced a forefinger around her lips before gently pushing her mouth shut. "The sooner the better, don't you think?"

Marc banked the fires in the stove and fireplace, locked the doors, turned off the lights, and stepped into the unheated hallway just in time to spy Elizabeth scurrying from the bathroom to her bedroom. She was dressed in her terry robe with heavy socks on her feet and she carried a hairbrush in her hands. She was so deeply engrossed in yanking hairs from bristles of the brush while muttering beneath her breath, she didn't see Marc, and slammed the bedroom door in his face.

He shook his head, staggering in shock before he began to snigger. He'd find out what was on her mind soon enough.

While he shaved he began to think about the ancient fixtures and appliances in this old house. The house itself was sturdy but the rest—quaint as it was, he had no use for the claw foot bathtub or the porcelain commode with its chipped lid. The room had been recently painted. That was a reflection of Elizabeth, but Marc wanted to see her living in more elegant surroundings. Well, if not elegant, at least more modern and convenient. They could install insulation, central heat, and new appliances. A door leading from the bathroom directly into the master bedroom would definitely be an asset.

Try as she might, Elizabeth could not find the proper words to tell Marc how she feared being intimate with him again. She rehearsed and rehearsed, but the words sounded so calculated and insensitive. She knew he was waiting. His remarks and actions all evening revealed his growing impatience. Why wouldn't he? Their attraction to one another was sexually charged from the beginning. Once she had enjoyed it...him...so much...but that was before the baby.

Marc wandered into the bedroom clad only in a bath towel while rubbing his wet hair dry with another towel.

Elizabeth stood beside the bed, clutching the pillow she'd been fluffing. A chill shot through her both from the sight of him and the blast of icy air he let in from the hall.

"How can you come in here dressed like that?" she gasped.

He glowered at her from beneath the towel. "I suppose you want me to put those jeans back on that I wore all day yesterday, slept in last night, and ran around all day today in."

"No..." She blushed, embarrassed because he misinterpreted her question. "I mean...it's cold in that hallway. How can you walk through it nearly naked?"

"Very quickly." He grinned. "Now you're going to have to turn your back while I find myself some clean briefs and..."

"I don't want to..."

"What?" He'd cast the hair towel aside and turned toward his suitcases stashed in the corner. Now, he whirled to face her with astonishment written all over his face.

"Oh..." She tossed the pillow aside and closed the distance between them, burrowing her face into his bare chest.

Shocked as he was, Marc could not prevent his arms from crushing her. He buried his face in her hair, breathing in its fresh fragrance. His reaction to her body pressed against his was instant and somewhat embarrassing. He knew she felt it, and fully expected her to pull away. Instead, she burrowed closer.

"Elizabeth Anne..." he protested hoarsely. "You are going to have to make up your mind one way or the other. You cannot keep being loving and affectionate with me one minute and run away from me the next. You're driving me crazy, honey."

"I'm so scared, Marc," she whimpered into his chest.

"Of what?"

"Intimacy...sex..."

"With me?" That undeniably deleted his erection problem. He pushed her to arms' length, hesitating several moments before stating his shock. "Why? After all the times we were together before?"

"I wasn't pregnant then."

Her eyes were filled with unshed tears. Her lower lip trembled visibly. Once again, he'd read her so wrong.

"Honey..." he groaned, drawing her close again, but his shame was so great he couldn't think of suitable, comforting words.

"It's so different now," she whispered. "Every day there is something new. I can't move anymore without this lump in front of me. Can't bend or stoop and it's getting bigger by the day. My breasts are sore. My back..."

This, he had not considered. Feeling extremely selfish and foolish, he was certain nothing he could say would sound intelligent. He fought to control the alarm suddenly overwhelming him.

"Did the doctor say you shouldn't? I mean...damn...I should have asked yesterday. Is everything all right?"

Now, she'd really upset him. Elizabeth wanted to crawl beneath the bed. She reached up to caress his face with her fingertips. His skin was still damp from his shower and cool from his dash down the hall. Concern filled his handsome face.

Why was it so difficult to talk to him about something so important?

"The baby and I are fine," she said. "Oh, the doctor scolded me for not coming to see him sooner and he said I was too thin..."

"You are for being five months pregnant," Marc interrupted. His hands scaled the length of her spine. Then, he grinned, "But you're still spunky."

She made a face at him. "My blood pressure was up a little but not enough for medication. He thought maybe that was because of the stress I've been under

lately. You know, that Gramps died, my moving back here, and that I'd broken up with you."

Marc grimaced. Still, he appreciated her honesty.

"He said at my next appointment, he wants to do a sonogram. It's a routine thing doctors are doing now at six months. That's all. See? Nothing to worry about."

"So, what's the problem?" Marc inquired stupidly.

"Oh, Marc, nothing will ever be the same between us again!"

"Some things I don't want to be the same. Besides, the physical discomfort will be gone in a few months."

"But after the baby is born...it's another human being that I am always going to be responsible for. A whole person, you know, not just you and me."

She'd become so agitated, she was clutching his biceps, shaking him in determination that he understand.

Suddenly he understood. Feeling as overwhelmed by the journey they were on, he gathered her close against his chest as he admitted, "It scares me too; but, it's all part of the responsibility. Do you remember when I asked you to marry me five months ago—before this baby was conceived so far as I figure it? Having children is expected when two people get married. I didn't want to cut them out of the bargain then and I don't now."

"Children?" She drew away from him, blinking in astonishment.

"Maybe a dozen," he replied.

"Not from my body!" she cried.

He burst into laughter.

After a moment, so did Elizabeth.

It had been so long since he looked at her this way. Once, she thought he never would again.

His pupils darkened and he kneaded the tenseness from her back and shoulders with capable fingers. Feeling the muscles ripple beneath her hands, she could not resist tangling her fingers through the coarse curls smattering his chest. She had no power over her body pressing against him, inviting the request she knew would come.

"I've always loved you, Elizabeth Anne!" he breathed huskily, lowering his head so his lips were mere centimeters from hers. "This is the one thing between us no one else can ever touch. Don't destroy it with unfounded fear. Let me love you the way I used to."

Marc's name erupted as an eager sigh. Her lips melted beneath his, welcoming and returning kiss for kiss.

Their movements were automatic. He helped tug her flannel nightgown over her head. She yanked the towel from around his hips. They moved to lie on the bed but...the light was on...This was the first time he saw her pregnant body naked.

The thought was so startling it caused her to flinch.

He drew back, gazing at her in utter confusion. "What? Did I hurt you?"

"No..." She worried her lower lip. "Am I ugly now?"

He glowered in exasperation. "You are pregnant with my child. How could I possibly believe you are ugly? What is this? Another stall tactic?"

She didn't want to make him angry but... "Is that what I'm doing?"

"Yep." He continued to glower.

She attempted to smooth the tenseness from his shoulders, but couldn't look him in the eye as she confessed, "I...I just can't shake the fear..."

"You live out here alone, miles from nowhere, stranded in a blizzard and sub-zero temperatures. Someone has deliberately cut your telephone wires, but you're afraid of me. What the hell do I have to do to convince you that I am the last person you will ever have to fear?"

She worried her lower lip again. "Love me?"

"I've been trying to do that for two days, Elizabeth Anne. You won't let me. This is foolishness. If your breasts hurt, I won't touch them."

Elizabeth blinked in astonishment.

Where in their conversation had she said?

Of all her complaints, he'd picked up on that one. He always remembered the smallest detail. And still, she doubted him. She had to be the world's greatest fool!

Silence enveloped them. She was speechless in her shocking discovery.

He hovered over her, waiting expectantly; but when she couldn't seem to respond, he rolled onto his back and switched off the bedside lamp.

True Love Means Never Having to Say You're Sorry.

The phrase floated through her mind for no reason. If she didn't apologize right now...but what exactly was she sorry for? Her body was changing daily. She'd always had a problem with intimacy...except with Marc.

The silence expanded over them. The dark room was filled with shadows. A tiny flicker of orange flame peeped through the little window in the door of the heat stove. Elizabeth's tearful sniff was the only audible sound until Marc gruffly commanded, "Stop crying."

"I'm sorry," she sniffed.

"Stop apologizing. If you don't want to make love with me, we won't. I slept here last night without attacking you. I can do that for as long as I have to."

The silence dropped around them like a shroud.

Knowing she had to tear down that wall between them once and for all, Elizabeth whispered, "I want to make love with you, Marc. I want you to hold me. I want to hold you. I want us to be as close as we used to be, but I've gotten so used to being alone..."

"Elizabeth Anne, you are an expert at being alone in a crowd of a hundred people," he interrupted gruffly.

That hit her almost as hard as if he'd punched her. She swallowed the shame and tried again.

"Okay, I have a problem communicating. I feel so awkward and clumsy and...You used to tell me I was beautiful."

He rolled over to face her again. "You are still beautiful."

"Do you really mean that? I...I wasn't stalling a few minutes ago. I need to know..."

"Yes, I mean it. Why would I have come all this distance if I didn't still want you?"

"Revenge."

She hit the truth so squarely Marc's breath left him in a single, harsh gasp.

Did she know him that well? Or, was she grasping at straws?

It didn't matter. This was one truth he would never admit to out loud.

"Do you believe I want to make love to you out of revenge?" he asked, more gruffly than he intended.

"No," she sobbed, sniffing back a tear.

"Why is it so hard for you to believe I still love you?"

"Guilt maybe, because I left you."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Nothing does, these days."

"Only because you complicate it by being stubborn, and looking for excuses that don't exist."

"Hold me?"

"Not if you're going to push me away again in five seconds. I love you, and I have every intention of staying with you, but I can't take that kind of rejection anymore."

The choice was hers. There was nothing left to say.

Silence crept in again.

But, he was here and she didn't want him to leave. She wanted him to hold her, to love her, to make love to her. Except he wasn't making the first move this time.

He lay beside her, waiting.

Elizabeth did the only thing sanity would allow. She reached for Marc and locked her lips against his, hoping against hope he would not be able to resist her.

He wanted to. He willed himself to lie still, but Elizabeth became so aggressive, he began to fear she could hurt the baby.

This was fun! Elizabeth as the aggressor was something entirely new. Her tongue darted sweetly in and out of his mouth. Her hands caressed him everywhere. Where her hands were not, she pressed her body against him, rubbing her breasts against his chest, her legs along his, straddling him...

No normal man could resist that.

Marc rolled her onto her back again.

Their skin was slick with perspiration. The featherbed molded around them muffling the creak of the old iron springs underneath.

Abruptly remembering the unborn child lying between them, he drew back, panting, "Sweetheart, you have to tell me if I hurt you. Am I too heavy now?"

"No!" Elizabeth cried breathlessly. "Oh Marc, I've been such a fool. I ache for you!"

"That we can take care of," he declared huskily.

Their lovemaking would not solve the obstacles that lay ahead for them, but it would seal their love for one another. It would strengthen their resolve to conquer the past and face the future together, no matter what that future would be.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Where are you going?" Elizabeth asked.

"Just outside to have a look around," Marc answered. He had just pulled on his heavy coat and stood zipping up the front. "Think you'll miss me?"

"I might." Elizabeth stretched on tiptoe to plant a smacking kiss on his lips.

"Ummm...more..." he murmured, drawing her close for several moments. Then, he asked, "What are you planning to do?"

"The laundry." She indicated she'd already hooked a hose to the sink and was filling the wringer wash machine with steaming hot water from the tap.

"That thing really works?" he questioned skeptically.

"Like a charm," Elizabeth replied in a tone filled with utmost confidence.

"Have fun," he drawled disbelievingly and bent his head for one more kiss.

Elizabeth happily complied, then tugged his coat collar more securely around his neck. "You be careful out there," she commanded. "That ground looks awfully slick."

Elizabeth watched with a contented smile as Marc stepped out onto the back porch. His jaunty whistle as he crossed the porch was such a pleasant sound she began humming a tune as she went about her chores.

As soon as the wash machine was full of hot water, she switched the hose to a rinse tub and put the first load of clothes into the machine, and set it to agitate. Her thoughts returned to the night before.

She patently resisted Marc's idea that they marry on New Year's Eve.

"That's less than two weeks away! No one can plan a wedding that fast!"

"Do you want a big wedding?" He seemed surprised.

"Not big-big." She gestured with her hands. "But...shoot...I wouldn't invite more than five people."

"That's what I thought," Marc said. "We can get married and plan a reception or something later."

"Don't you want your family to come?"

"It's too far for them to travel during the holidays. Besides, they'll just take over everything..."

"Marc...they're your family."

"Yeah, bossy as hell...and...you have no idea how Mom and my sisters will step in and try to control the whole shebang."

"I wish I had a big, bossy family..." she ventured wistfully.

"They've already accepted you," he assured her. "And..." Placing a hand on her expanding belly, he added, "We're working on our own addition."

Their conversation continued until midnight, but the only thing they agreed on was a private, simple ceremony.

"It's New Year's Eve!" Elizabeth protested. "We won't be able to just walk into the courthouse and expect to find a judge waiting to marry us!"

"Don't you know a minister or someone who would marry us?"

"We never went to church. Oh...I think Aggie got Mom to go somewhere or something, but I'm not sure she ever officially joined any church. Gramps wouldn't have anything to do with any religion. Never did. After Grandma died we didn't..." Elizabeth shook her head in confusion. "I don't remember that you went to church in Chicago..."

"I didn't. We went when I was growing up. Mom and Dad still go. It's not that I don't believe in God...I've just seen so much of the other side. I...it's difficult to hope in good when all you see is evil..." He shrugged at a further loss for words.

"Well, we need to think about that too if we're going to have this baby christened." She thought a moment. "I want to ask Jenny to be my matron of honor. Maybe she can help us. She knows everyone in Carsonville and miles beyond. But, I still don't see how we could possibly plan to be married on New Year's Eve."

"I'm going to ask Ted to be my best man. He knows everyone too..."

Elizabeth frowned suddenly. "You're not going to ask one of your brothers to stand up with you?"

"Told you. It's too far for so many of them to travel."

"But...I thought you liked your family!"

"I do. In their place. Which is not on our honeymoon."

"Oh." Sudden curiosity struck her. "Does your family know you work undercover?"

Marc gave a long, resolute sigh. "They don't even know I'm a cop."

Her eyes widened with astonishment.

"Well..." He began to explain sheepishly. "Dad knows. He wasn't happy about me keeping it a secret, but he understood why. Everyone else knows I went to the academy, but I told them I preferred special guard duty. Mom and everyone else believe I work for a company that specializes in certain kinds of private security. It's for their own protection, you know. And, it helped maintain my cover."

"I understand," Elizabeth replied. "That explains why no one was suspicious when I said we met while you were on duty."

"I have to go back to Chicago after the first of the year to settle everything there. We can go see the family then if you're up to the trip. But, we'll have the whole New Year's weekend alone before that. I want to spend it *only* with you."

What a sweet declaration. To think she foolishly ignored it until much later in the night.

Marc's ability to draw her out of herself amazed Elizabeth. He was correct in his assumption that she deliberately distanced herself from other people. Life generally seemed less painful that way. However, once she gave in to the reality

that Marc and the baby were now vital parts of her life, it was easy to respond to his lovemaking.

Physical discomfort was cast aside in the need to respond to him, to draw response from him. He was as gentle as he was passionate; as caring as he was determined.

She realized his refusal to initiate their lovemaking was merely another tactic to draw her out of herself. There was a time the realization would have angered her. However, considering the turn of events, she could hardly be angry about his success.

Wondering where Marc had wandered off to, Elizabeth crossed the living room to peer out the window. She caught a glimpse of him down by the barn; and so, satisfied, she returned to the kitchen and her laundry.

As Marc crossed the frozen creek on foot he could hear a pitiful yip originating from the general area behind the barn. Some years had passed since he spent time intently listening to the sounds of woodland creatures. Nevertheless, he was sure this yip came from a small animal. Perhaps, a fox. Realizing the animal was probably caught in something, Marc approached the barn with caution. Any captured animal could be dangerous.

Abruptly, the yipping turned to a deep-throated growl.

Puzzled, Marc increased his pace around the side of the barn. What he saw both sickened and infuriated him.

The animal was a sable collie not quite fully grown. One of its front paws was caught in a small animal trap. A man stood with a heavy wooden club poised above the dog, preparing to strike its head rather than set it free.

The dog hunkered low, shying from the expected blow. At the same time, it barred its teeth and growled deep in its throat.

Without forethought, Marc stomped across the barnyard and wrenched the club from the man's hands.

"There's no bounty on dog pelts!" he swore as he sent club sailing into a bunch of thickets ten feet beyond the barn.

"Who the hell are you?" the man snarled, whirling around and doubling his fists in a threatening pose. "I got permission to trap on this here property."

"If Elizabeth knew you were trapping helpless puppies, she would retract that permission in a second."

Heedless of the man's threatening pose, Marc squatted to release the trap from the dog's foot.

"Ahh, the damned cur is one'a my sister's pets," Edwin Hexle growled. "I'm tired of it followin' me everywhere's I go. I'm gonna kill it."

"Not on this property, you won't," Marc warned, standing again to face the man squarely. "As a matter of fact, I think it's best you pull up all the traps you set out. If I find one anywhere on this property, I'll destroy it."

Edwin displayed both doubled fists. "You can't do that!"

"I can and I will." Marc was not the least intimidated. "Elizabeth Miller is my fiancée. I'm certain she won't object when I tell her what you were trapping."

An insolent snigger twisted the corner of Edwin's mouth.

"I heard my nephew tell his ma somethin' 'bout the little missy havin' a live-in man now."

With no difficulty and even less thought, Marc slammed a fist into Edwin's face.

Edwin sprawled into the snow-covered ground rear-end first.

"Get off this property," Marc warned, low and threatening.

"I'll get you for this," Edwin snarled, wiping a trickle of blood from his mouth.

Marc stooped to carefully gather up the injured dog before he turned his back, and returned around the side of the barn. He didn't so much as nod to indicate he'd heard Edwin Hexle threaten him.

When Marc entered the kitchen from the back porch, Elizabeth was nowhere in sight.

"Honey?" he called above the steady racket the wringer wash machine was making. "Can you come here for a minute?"

Moments later, when he heard Elizabeth's rapid descent down the stair, he remembered the clothesline strung upstairs for drying clothes on in cold and inclement weather. The thought struck him that it might not be a good idea for her to be climbing stairs these days, but he had no opportunity to voice that opinion. The moment Elizabeth entered the kitchen, her attention centered on the young dog nestled in his arms.

"Where'd you find him? Oh, he's so pretty!" she gushed and rushed forward with arms outstretched, only to draw back at the last instant. "Will he bite?"

Marc chuckled, having correctly anticipated she would love the dog.

"No, *she* won't bite. She's got an injured leg. Where can I lay her?"

Elizabeth gasped in alarm. "She's hurt? How? Put her by the fireplace where it's warm. I'll get a rug for her to lie on."

As she spoke, Elizabeth scurried into the living room to retrieve a rug lying near the door. Still chuckling, Marc followed and gently laid the dog on the rug before he examined her injured foot.

"What happened to her?" Elizabeth wanted to know.

Marc looked up, somberly debating how much of the truth it was wise to reveal. Finally, he said, "She was caught in a trap down by the barn. Some tall, skinny guy was down there. He said the traps were his and the dog belongs to his sister."

"Oh." Elizabeth shrugged her shoulders dismissively. "That's Edwin Hexle. I told him he could set some traps down there."

"He wasn't very friendly," Marc replied. "I told him to take his traps and get off the property."

Elizabeth knelt and began stroking the dog's head while she thought that over. "It's just as well, I guess. I don't know if he's trustworthy or not. He just got out of the state pen a few weeks ago. Are ex-convicts allowed to carry guns?"

"Does he?" Marc inquired so sharply, Elizabeth flinched and stared up at him in wide-eyed confusion.

"I've never seen one," she answered. "Wouldn't he have to carry a gun to kill the animals he traps?"

"Not necessarily," Marc replied. "Shot mars the fur so most trappers use a club."

"He carries a club." Elizabeth returned to petting the dog, who loved the attention.

"Well, next time I go to town, I'm going to check the guy out with the county sheriff," Marc decided.

"You're so suspicious!" Elizabeth accused.

"It's my nature," he drawled with icy sarcasm. "That's why I'm such a damned good cop."

Elizabeth's lips pursed in annoyance. "Are you trying to start an argument with me again?"

Marc was caught so off-guard his jaw dropped wide. It took several moments for him to find his voice. Finally, he replied, still gruffly, but tolerantly.

"No, Elizabeth Anne, I am not starting an argument. I just don't like the idea of some guy setting traps on property where anyone else might walk. All right?" He waited until she shrugged indifferently and continued petting the dog before he asked, "Who is this guy's sister?"

"Ted Cooper's mother, Agnes Cooper. Aggie. I guess that's why I tried to trust him."

"I don't trust him."

"Marc."

At her warning, Marc gave an exasperated shake of his head. He relented with a sigh.

"Maybe she'll let you keep the dog."

"Think so?" Elizabeth's face brightened with hope. "I've always loved dogs. Let's name this one." She took the dog's sleek head between her hands and gazed into her large brown eyes. "Muffin," she decided. "Muffins are brown and sweet and nice like you."

Marc snorted his amusement, but a warning glance from Elizabeth kept him silent.

'Muffin' settled the matter with a long swipe of her tongue the length of Elizabeth's face.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Over the weekend, Marc and Ted used Ted's four-wheel-drive pickup to remove the Bronco from its precarious position on the stump and take it into town for the necessary repairs. Ted also bladed the driveway so, if Marc and Elizabeth needed to go somewhere, they could drive her car.

Another couple inches of snow fell Tuesday night. The following afternoon, Elizabeth insisted on going for a walk. She could not tolerate being cooped up in the house any longer, she said. She wanted to take pictures with her Kodak Instamatic camera with the hope of recreating them in oil or watercolor later.

Knowing the futility of pointing out the danger of her falling on slick frozen ground, Marc tramped along with her on the pretense of finding a Christmas tree.

Agnes Cooper was a little upset when Elizabeth phoned to tell her about Muffin's injury, but she was equally delighted to give the dog to Elizabeth. She agreed 'Muffin' was an appropriate name.

So it was that Muffin—who had recovered rapidly from her ordeal—happily trotted along behind for a spell, then in front for a spell, and finally loped off out of sight to do some exploring on her own.

Despite the sun's warmth, one still felt the chill of below-freezing temperatures. Everything was covered with a thin crystal of ice resulting from partially thawed and refrozen snow. The sun caused even the duller leaf to glisten with a multitude of colors. Only the occasional tinkle of icicles hanging from the tree boughs interrupted the silence of the crisp, pure atmosphere.

Elizabeth and Marc tramped a brisk circle some distance around the house. She continually snapped pictures of the farm buildings, the woods, and the fields from all directions. They spoke little. In such moments, words weren't necessary. A single glance, or a pointed finger, was sufficient communication.

Elizabeth became deeply engrossed in photographing a group of cardinals fluttering around a cluster of icicles hanging from the limb of a large oak tree when Marc yelled, "Honey! Look out!" and grabbed hold of her arm so she could not walk further.

A giant snare lay half-buried in the snow just inches from her toes.

Elizabeth's eyes widened. Her mouth dropped open in speechless horror. She stared at Marc, and back at the threatening snare again.

"Don't move," he said.

He stretched out the handle of the ax he carried to trip the snare. The large, heavy rope snapped and grated as it looped upward to dangle precariously beneath the limb of the oak tree. The icicles shattered from that limb, setting off a tinkling waterfall as they tumbled to the ground causing the startled cardinals to flitter away.

“Damn!”

Marc’s curse echoed at discovery that the rope was anchored by another rope higher in the tree. It took some maneuvering to remove both. When the task was done, a menacing expression covered his face. His angry movements jerked the two ropes he looped together and slung over one shoulder.

“Marc?” Elizabeth’s voice quavered. “Isn’t that an odd snare? I mean, when Gramps trapped rabbits, he used a lightweight rope. Those are an inch in diameter.”

“That’s because this was meant for a much larger animal...or a man,” he explained. “Not only that. It was set out recently. If it’d been here overnight, it would have been frozen beneath the snow.”

“But why?” Elizabeth could not comprehend any reason for such an object.

“Someone has a nasty sense of humor,” March grumbled. He hefted the ax against the shoulder that secured the rope and stretched his other hand toward her. “Let’s go. We still have to find a Christmas tree.”

“Could that snare really hurt someone?”

“It’d just dangle a grown man by his feet for a while. You, it could cause to have a miscarriage.”

“Why would someone want to...?”

“Told you, someone has a rotten sense of humor.”

“But...who would know we’d be out walking today?”

“Someone’s been snoopin’ around the past few days. I’ve seen tracks in the snow.” Marc glanced around as if he expected to see some strange person lurking behind a nearby tree.

Elizabeth refused to acknowledge the icy shiver trailing the length of her spine. Surely Marc’s suspicious nature was getting the better of his common sense.

A few minutes later they found the perfect tree. A small, round little cedar barely three feet tall. Marc set about chopping it to the ground; but, for Elizabeth, the day was ruined. She could not wait to return to the safety of the farmhouse. Panic seized her when she heard Muffin barking some distance off. What if Muffin discovered whoever was snooping around? Would they hurt her?

“Muffin!” she called.

Seconds later Muffin bounded through the snow toward them, and Marc resumed his chopping. The task done, he slung the ropes over his shoulder and hefted the ax in one hand again. Grasping the base of the tree trunk with his other hand, he waited silently for Elizabeth to set the pace home in front of him.

She didn’t take any more pictures. Several times, she called Muffin back when the dog wandered off alone. They were about fifty yards from the house when Marc couldn’t tolerate her alarmed behavior any longer.

“If you’re that frightened, why do you stay here?” he demanded.

“I’m not afraid!” Elizabeth protested.

“Stop denying it! You acted this same way when your telephone wires were cut.”

"I don't believe they were cut!" she insisted vehemently, increasing her pace as if to escape him.

"The hell!" Marc exclaimed, tramping that much faster behind her. "With all the things that have been happening lately, you know I'm right about my suspicions. The other day I caught that ex-convict trying to kill that pup and..."

Elizabeth's gasp of horror made a hissing sound in the frozen atmosphere. She whirled around to face Marc so swiftly they almost collided.

Marc willed his anger to cool a moment before he explained, "I didn't tell you because I knew it would upset you. But, I didn't have to tell you! You're afraid for that dog's life without me saying a word!"

"All right!" Elizabeth conceded with childish indignation. She even stomped one foot in the snow. "So, I over-reacted to that rope thing back there in that tree! So Edwin Hexle gives me the willies! So, I don't want Muffin venturing off to God knows where into God knows what! That does not mean my life is in danger in my home!"

Marc glared at her. "It's not just Hexle! There are too many unanswered questions about Drastin to just dismiss every incident as unimportant!"

"Now we're back to him again!" Elizabeth grumbled irritably.

"Yes! Again and again! Until you see reason to protect yourself and our baby!"

For the remainder of the afternoon, Elizabeth and Marc spoke very little. At the evening meal, the only communication came from Muffin, who persisted in begging her just portions.

Marc created a stand out of a small bucket he found in the woodshed and set the tree before the west living room window. He didn't attempt to decorate it with the lights and ornaments he'd purchased. While Elizabeth did the dishes, he slouched on the sleigh bed glowering at the picture of Lillian hanging above the fireplace mantle

Finally, he inquired peevishly, "Why did you hang that painting there?"

Startled by his question, Elizabeth stepped into the living room to view the painting Dusty Miller had created of Lillian as a young girl standing before the barn.

"It used to hang upstairs in Mom's bedroom," she explained. "I liked it even when I was little. It covers the fading where Gram and Gramp's wedding photo used to hang."

"Where's that picture?" He seemed determined to pick another fight.

Elizabeth refused to comply. "It's hanging in Mom's apartment," she answered and returned to the kitchen.

It amazed her how easily the term of endearment 'Mom' slipped from her lips. However, at the moment, she was not as concerned with that as she was Marc's behavior. Unable to tolerate his brooding any longer, she escaped with the excuse of taking a long, hot bath.

So 'true love means never having to say you're sorry', did it? The little ditty reminded her of the movie, *Love Story*, and the trials the primary characters

endured. But their situation wasn't like this. She could argue with whether or not apologizing would accomplish anything. She hadn't gotten anywhere with that the other night and now she was sorry again. He was so stubborn...

So was she...and even though she refused to admit it out loud, she wasn't just afraid. She was terrified.

They'd finally begun to retrieve that closeness they'd lost...and Marc did have reason to be concerned...and she did have reason to be afraid...even if she didn't want to admit it aloud...

And there were other ways to work around such obstacles...

She lingered in the old-fashioned tub a long time, hoping to attract his attention with her absence. When that failed, she dribbled a little of his favorite perfume behind her ears, on her throat, wrists and elbows, and between her breasts. She possessed one expensive negligee she'd purchased the previous summer but never wore. It was a cream-colored, wispy item with a matching wrap. Both left little to the imagination.

When she entered the bedroom, she found Marc lying stretched on his back on the bed, staring at the ceiling. Trying to remain calm, she retrieved her brush from the dresser and began to smooth the damp frizzy ends of her hair. However, she could only contain herself for so long. After a few minutes of dragging silence, she whirled to face Marc, only to discover his blue eyes boring right through her.

He startled her so, she blurted the words without thought.

"I'm sorry..."

He swung his long legs over the side of the bed as he exclaimed, "Dammit, Elizabeth! I'm trying to protect you!"

She flinched involuntarily.

He rose and stepped toward the dresser.

Elizabeth retreated several steps away.

"What the hell are you doing that for?" he demanded.

"What?" she squeaked, sounding meeker than ever.

"Backing away from me!"

"I'm...Marc..." She worried her lower lip a moment before taking a deep breath and determinedly explaining, "Six months ago I would have sworn to anyone that you never raised your voice at me. But, that's all you've done since you came here."

"It is?" His astonishment was obvious. His hands flayed uselessly at his sides until he placed them on his hips. "It's because you keep avoiding the issue and it makes me mad as hell."

"I don't like to fight with you..."

"I like fighting with you."

"*What?*"

He crossed the space between them and wrapped his arms, gently but securely, around her.

"It's not the fighting," he murmured, brushing fleeting kisses around the perfect 'o' of astonishment her lips formed. "It's the making up that keeps me interested."

Sighing with relief, Elizabeth wrapped her arms around his neck and suggested, "Let's make up, then."

He maneuvered her around so he could gently push her to lie on the bed. Holding her arms captive above her head, he studied the enticing fullness that caused her breasts to strain against her wispy negligée. The narrow straps of the see-thru wrap parted, inviting his lips to create a fiery trail against the narrow lace edging the deep cleavage. Until he flinched, pricked by a garment tag Elizabeth had neglected to remove.

"New gown?" he inquired, tugging at the staple holding the tag in place.

"Do you like it?" she countered as, with some embarrassment, she brushed his hands away and carefully removed the tag without snagging the lace. "I was thinking about you when I bought it last summer."

"Were you?" His smile was jubilant...until a separate thought seized his attention and he glared at the open draperies flanking each window. "Don't those things close?"

"Yes," she answered. "I don't usually bother with them."

"So I've noticed." Marc pushed himself off the bed and crossed the room to yank the draperies across both windows.

His angry actions annoyed Elizabeth so she snapped, "Aren't you overreacting just a little?"

"Listen, that Hexle is the most shifty-eyed character I have ever met!" Marc declared as he returned to stand beside the bed. "I wouldn't put it past him to spy on us while we're making love."

"Honestly, Marc!" Elizabeth suppressed a giggle behind one hand. "You're paranoid!"

"It's not funny, Elizabeth Anne!" His voice was muffled as he yanked his t-shirt over his head. "Do you think someone put that snare there hoping one of us *might* stumble into it? No, ma'am! Whoever put it there *knew* we were walking in that direction!"

Marc dropped his jeans, laid down beside her, and drew her into his arms. She snuggled her face into his bare chest, wrapping her arms around him as tightly as possible.

"I don't want to talk about it," she protested in a hoarse whisper.

"We have to sooner or later." Marc lifted her face, forcing her to look him in the eye. "One way or the other, I'm going to convince you your life is in danger if you stay on this farm alone."

"The other day you wanted to buy the farm."

"I still do, after all this other business is settled."

"I just can't believe it, Marc. What does anyone have against me?"

He stroked her hair, cradling her as he replied, "I think that snare was meant for me. I'm the one who ran Hexle off, remember?"

"Then, who cut the telephone wires?"

"That is confusing. I know someone is watching our every move. I can feel it."

"I can too," Elizabeth whispered.

Uncertain he'd heard her correctly, Marc drew away to peer into her face.

"I was followed when I took a walk in the woods last week," she confessed, shivering with the memory. "I didn't see anyone, but I'm certain I heard footsteps and the woods was so quiet..."

"You have argued with me since I got here, when all along..." Marc squeezed her, growling threateningly, "What am I going to do with you, Elizabeth Anne?"

"I didn't tell you because it just seemed so silly to suspect I was followed. The birds could have been quiet because I was the stranger in their woods."

"It's not silly, honey. Did you tell your mother about it?"

"No. Why?"

"I wonder if someone is watching her, too."

"Oh, my God! What if someone is?"

"We have to consider the possibility."

He pressed her head against his shoulder, and they were silent some minutes before Elizabeth spoke again, hesitantly, in a voice so low it was barely audible.

"You said my father had a contract out on you. Did anyone ever actually try to kill you?"

"Couple times," Marc answered.

She peered up at him in horror. "When?"

"Never when I was with you. I guess Drastin gave orders you were not to be involved in any way. Someone shot at me once downtown. Chuck and I had a special place to meet there so I wouldn't blow my cover at the mall. Another time, someone shot at me just outside my apartment building."

"What did you do?"

"Ducked."

"I'm serious!"

"So am I." He gave her earlobe a playful tug. "Both times, I ducked under the nearest cover and stayed there until the shooter gave up."

"How long did that take?"

"I got lucky both times. Someone came along. The shooter would have drawn too much attention if he tried to fire again."

"But, how can you be so certain my father put out the contract?"

"The two of you never discussed me?"

Elizabeth shamefully admitted, "We argued about you all the time."

Marc held her while his mind reeled with indignation. After the night Elizabeth called him because she had quarreled with Drastin, she avoided even the mention of his name...until the night he died. Wondering what else she hadn't told him, Marc decided to confront her with another ugly fact.

"Drastin called me into his office and warned me to stay away from you more than once, Elizabeth Anne. When I refused, he tried to get me fired. My record was flawless, so the board of directors ordered him to lay off. That's when the attempts on my life were made."

Tears streamed down Elizabeth's face. "He told me he would stop at nothing to prevent us from being together. I refused to believe him and....God! I'm so sorry! Burying my head in the sand only made the situation worse!"

Marc wiped her tears away with his fingers.

"That doesn't matter anymore. What does matter is that you believe me and listen to the precautions I want you to take."

"All right..." Elizabeth reluctantly agreed. "It's so difficult to believe that someone wants anything from me or to harm me. Who are they, Marc? What do they want?"

"I don't know," he replied thoughtfully. "Most of Drastin's men were arrested the night he died, or shortly after. Some managed to escape, but no one had any idea he was your father, or that your mother exists. None except Sally."

"Sally?" Elizabeth sat upright, expressing her surprise. "What does that bitch have to do with anything?"

Even though her reaction amused Marc, his voice remained bitter.

"Sally was one of Drastin's top dealers," he explained. "Shortly after you left Chicago, she was arrested on drug-related charges. When I questioned her, she accused me of covering for you. She infuriated me so I...lost control...and..." He expelled a deep sigh. "The result was I take voluntary leave, or be suspended from police duty altogether."

"Marc! No!" Elizabeth gasped.

He let go another lengthy sigh. This one of relief. Had he known it would be this easy to confess, he would have done so a lot sooner. He knew his 'confession' was distressing; but, Elizabeth had to be told everything, especially if it meant she would become more cautious.

"Honey, Sally wanted Drastin to herself. She believed the two of you were having an affair."

"So did everyone else at The Plaza," Elizabeth replied bitterly. "I sometimes think he wanted everyone to think that. Well..." She faced Marc with a trusting gaze. "What do we do now?"

He hugged her so tightly she could scarcely breathe. His voice filled with determination.

"We are going to get to the bottom of it one way or another. This nightmare has to end. I'll be damned if I'll live under the same kind of anxiety Lillian has all these years. Drastin is dead. The sooner he is buried, the better."

Elizabeth disliked the tone of Marc's voice, but she knew he was right. Neville Drastin (alias Dusty Miller) was creating more havoc for her now than he ever had while he lived.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

On Christmas Eve, when Ted came to take Marc to town to retrieve the Bronco from the repair shop, Elizabeth felt apprehensive about being left alone. But, she didn't tell Marc. They had exhausted the subject, discussing and re-discussing it, with no solution in sight. At least, they weren't arguing anymore; but, the whole thing was a conundrum to both of them.

Someone was watching the farmhouse. She could feel it. She refused to turn Muffin out unless Marc was outside, too. And, she continually pondered the 'who' and 'why' of the man-sized snare she had nearly stumbled into. Had it been left there by someone who knew she'd never suspect such danger? Or, was it Edwin Hexle's way of getting even with Marc?

Marc left the rope coiled on the porch. Elizabeth heard him discussing its origin with Ted when they left that morning. Ted didn't seem to have any idea who it belonged to.

Elizabeth locked the doors securely behind them and set about decorating the Christmas tree. While she worked, she kept sneaking glances out the window, but no human form emerged anywhere within her sight.

After a couple hours, Muffin heard the Bronco motor and began to bark long before Elizabeth spied it slowly traveling along the snow-packed lane toward the house. This time, the vehicle managed the corner passing the barn very easily. She waited, holding her breath until the vehicle parked in front of the house and Marc emerged. The moment he opened the kitchen door, she catapulted into his arms.

"Hey! I didn't know you would miss me this much!" he laughed. Later, he commented, "I don't like it."

"Why not?" she asked, believing he was speaking of the meal she was preparing.

He peered into the pots on the stove. "I don't like seeing you so frightened when I have to leave you for a few hours."

"Oh..." she mumbled in a small voice.

"It makes me mad as hell to think that any person can intrude into our privacy so much we cannot even take a walk in the woods!"

She knew that. He'd said it several times. What was she to do?

"Aggie called to invite us to Christmas dinner tomorrow."

Deciding it would be wise to allow Elizabeth to change the subject this one time, Marc replied, "Ted told me. I forgot to ask if you want to go."

"I told Aggie we'd be there. I also spoke to Jenny." Elizabeth put down the ladle she used to stir the boiling potatoes she planned to mash. She had steak

sizzling in gravy on another burner that she turned to 'low'. "She's really enthusiastic about the wedding."

"Our wedding," Marc corrected, grinning when Elizabeth blushed.

"Our wedding," she repeated. "I don't know what to wear."

"Why not the dress I bought you last week?"

"It's a maternity dress."

"You're pregnant. Are you ashamed of that?"

"Of course not!" Elizabeth burst indignantly, then sheepishly changed the subject again. "You haven't commented about our Christmas tree yet."

"Come, look at it with me," Marc beckoned, catching hold of her hand and tugging her into the living room.

He pointed to a jeweler's box secured by a bright red ribbon near the top of the tree, and said, "That looks kind of silly up there between all those twinkling lights, don't you think?"

Feeling inclined to agree, Elizabeth took the box down. She had no idea where it came from, or how it got hung on the tree. She suspected Marc was the culprit but stood staring stupidly at it in her hand, not knowing what to do with it.

A mischievous grin tugged at his lips. "Maybe you should see if there's something in it," he suggested.

Inside, nestled against dark blue velvet, lay a solitaire diamond engagement ring beside a matching gold wedding band.

"Oh, Marc!" Elizabeth gasped her surprise. "For me?"

"I don't see Muffin attempting to claim them," he chortled.

Muffin stretched comfortably on her rug near the fireplace. Hearing her name, she thumped her tail a couple times before curling with her back to them, as if telling them the suggestion was of no interest to her.

"I bought them the day after I asked you to marry me."

"You kept them all this time?"

"I kept hoping..."

He had, in fact, entertained the thought of throwing them at her. Pain from the memory flickered across his face.

"Oh, Marc!" A sob caught Elizabeth's throat. "I never meant to hurt you! It seems I keep doing that no matter how hard I try not to!"

"You aren't hurting me. Unless..." He hesitated. A suspicious frown furrowed his brow. "Unless you don't like the rings."

"I love them! I love you! I love the clothes you bought for me!" She stretched to press a tender kiss against the corner of his mouth. "But I don't think you understand why I want to keep my pregnancy a secret until after we're married."

"No, I don't," he gruffly agreed.

At least he put his arms around me.

Still clutching the jeweler's box in one hand, she wrapped both of her arms around him. From some unknown source, she drew the courage to admit, "I just feel we won't draw so much attention that way."

Marc's expression was nothing short of total consternation.

That was all?

The twinkle returned to his eyes and he began to chuckle. "Honey, the old hens are going to gossip and count dates no matter what we do. What difference does it make if they find out you got pregnant before we got married?"

"It just does." She pressed her face against his shoulder, not wanting to see the laughter in his eyes.

Marc shook his head in disbelief. All this time, Elizabeth's reluctance was caused by plain old-fashioned shyness? This of the sophisticated, aloof woman who stopped the hearts of countless men in Chicago?

Would he ever understand her? Would he ever learn how to penetrate that protective shield she boxed her emotions behind?

He reached for the jeweler's box in her hand and withdrew the engagement ring. Slipping it onto the third finger of her left hand, he said, "On New Year's Eve, when you wear the dress I bought for you, I'll put the other ring on your finger, too. Let's see how that affects the wagging tongues."

"You..." Elizabeth sputtered in exasperation. She held up her hand to examine the engagement ring. It sparkled in the sunlight creeping through the window between the branches of the Christmas tree. After a moment, a giggle escaped. Then, she shrugged her shoulders in delight before she wrapped her arms around Marc's neck in an exuberant hug so unlike her usual reserve it confounded as well as delighted him beyond speech.

Some years had passed since Elizabeth last visited the Cooper farm. Feelings of apprehension overpowered her as Marc steered the Bronco into the narrow driveway leading the short distance to a large, white farmhouse. She was surprised to discover the farm had changed little from her memories. The white picket fence that once surrounded the house had been replaced by a painted rail fence. A new roof and siding replaced the old tin and clapboards, but a wide, wrap-around porch still dominated the lower story. As they emerged from the Bronco, Ted's mother stepped through the door to greet them with open arms.

Agnes Cooper—known as 'Aggie' to most everyone—was a large, robust woman who Ted resembled in stature as well as personality. She wrapped Elizabeth in a smothering embrace as she boomed, "I'm so glad to see you, Betsy! It's been years! Why haven't you come by just to pass the time of day since you been back? You've been home for three months!"

Dumbstruck, Elizabeth glanced over her shoulder to spy Marc, grinning from ear to ear, behind her. Then, Agnes literally pulled her into the spacious living room and began to unzip and tug her coat from her arms as if she was a small child.

"It was awfully nice of you to invite us," Elizabeth murmured shyly.

"Well, honey, it's like this. My oldest girls—you remember Celia and Sarah? Well, Celie and her family live in Oklahoma now. Sarie's husband wanted to visit his folks today. They'll be here on Sunday, but today it's just Sophie, Ted, and me. So I said to Lilli, I said, we should just get our families together for oncet." Agnes puckered her chin, threw up her shoulders in an elaborate shrug, and abruptly changed the subject. "Introduce me to your young man."

"This is Marc Grenwald, my fiancé."

Elizabeth mentally praised herself for how easily that term fell from her lips. It was the first time she'd ever said the word 'fiancé' out loud. She faced Marc with a bright smile.

"Marc, this is Ted's mother, Agnes Cooper...Aggie to most of us."

"I figured that out." He grinned around the large commercial basket of fruit he carried, and greeted Agnes with a polite, "Pleased to meet'cha, m 'am," that caused her to beam from head to toe.

Elizabeth was grateful he'd had the forethought to purchase the fruit basket when he was in town the day before. Still, she felt the need to apologize.

"I wanted to bake something to bring along today but my oven..."

"Oh, yes!" Aggie interrupted with a hearty laugh. "I remember Ted's singed eyebrows very well. Isn't he lucky they grew back so fast?"

"What's this?" Marc inquired.

He wasn't answered immediately because Lillian, Sophie, and Ted poked their heads around the dining room archway.

"Welcome!" Ted boomed while Lillian smiled in greeting.

Dark-haired, twenty-five-year-old Sophie chimed, "Hi, Betsy! Long time no see..." Her voice trailed into thin air as her gaze stretched the length of Elizabeth's maternity smock. Her teeth sunk uncertainly into her lower lip and she hastily ducked back into the dining room.

That morning, when Elizabeth decided to wear the pants and smock Marc purchased for her, she was very pleased by the way they concealed her pregnancy. Now, however, she realized the style alone blatantly revealed her condition. One hand unconsciously fell to protectively cover her unborn child. In the next second, she was once again enveloped in Aggie's overwhelming embrace.

"I hear there's gonna be a weddin' next week!" she boomed.

"Yes," Elizabeth managed to reply.

"And we're all invited?"

The question stunned Elizabeth to her core.

"If you want to come..." she replied uncertainly.

Agnes shook Elizabeth as if she was naughty to consider otherwise.

"Of course I want to come! Betsy, honey, I've known you since you wore diapers. Lili is the best friend I ever had in my life! Your weddin' day will be as special to me as my own girls' weddin' days were!" She patted Elizabeth's abdomen meaningfully as she added, "I also expect to be invited to the precious littl' one's Christenin'."

Elizabeth wanted to hug the woman again, but Agnes immediately launched into her version of the day Ted's eyebrows were singed. Marc was doubling over with laughter while Ted indignantly declared it was not funny.

Christmas dinner consisted of a roasted wild turkey that Ted proudly (and repeatedly) proclaimed he killed during the fall hunting season. There were candied yams, green bean casserole, raisin and sage dressing, mashed

potatoes, gravy, jelled cranberries, home-baked bread, and applesauce made from the apples in Aggie's orchard.

Marc declared he'd not seen such a feast since his family reunion. When he and Elizabeth exchanged mutual smiles, they were bombarded with demands for an explanation. So Elizabeth told them all about meeting Marc's family on their second date and encountering nearly three hundred people with the surname of 'Grenwald'.

The conversation turned to center on Sophie when Lillian asked how soon she would receive her master's degree in biotechnologies. Elizabeth was interested in the changes to the campus she had attended. She and Sophie were making comparisons when Edwin wandered in to slouch on the vacant chair across the table from Elizabeth. He spoke to no one but began filling his plate with whatever food was within his reach. Ted and Sophie ignored him. Only, Aggie, who sat at the head of the table beside him, chose to pass food he could not reach.

Over pumpkin pie generously topped with whipped cream, Aggie asked where Elizabeth and Marc planned to live after they married.

"On the farm..." Elizabeth looked at Marc for confirmation.

He smiled as he replied, "I grew up on a farm in southern Illinois. I like it here and Elizabeth has always called the farm 'home'. In fact, we've tossed around the idea of buying the place." He looked at Lillian, who sat on his other side.

"I would love to discuss that," she replied as she sampled her slice of pie and immediately declared her pleasure. "Yummm....this is delicious. Is it the one you baked, Sophie?"

Before Sophie could answer, Aggie addressed another question to Marc.

"Do you plan to keep your job? Ted says you're a member of the Chicago police force."

Not the least perturbed by Aggie's pertinent questions, Marc explained, "I've taken leave until after the first of the year. Actually, I talked to the Sheriff yesterday, and he seems to think, with a letter of recommendation from my supervisor, I have a good chance of being hired onto the local force in Carsonville. He has a couple men retiring in the next few months."

"You didn't tell me that!" Elizabeth cried.

"That's because you were too preoccupied with your Christmas present to pay any attention to me," he teased, tapping her engagement ring with a meaningful finger.

"Marc!" she protested.

He was right. The engagement ring did enhance her enthusiasm. She was hardly able to take her eyes off it all evening. But, he didn't attempt to tell her this news. Shortly after he gave her the rings, she gave him the blue plaid flannel shirt he was wearing and became upset because her gift to him seemed so cheap compared to the diamonds he gave her. He spent the remainder of the evening trying to convince her otherwise.

Their conversation had finally attracted Edwin's attention. He stared across the table at Marc with an expression of pure malice as he sneered, "Thought you smelled like a goddamned cop."

Silence was instant. But Aggie would have none of it.

"Now, Ed," she chided in a no-nonsense tone of voice. "I won't have you ruinin' our meal with your rantin'. We already know how you feel about law enforcement, so just keep your sentiments to yourself." She faced Marc again to ask, "Will you live in the old house or maybe build a new one?"

"I was thinkin' we could try to do some work on the old house, at least for now," Marc answered. His gaze remained centered on Edwin.

Aggie's command appeared to have subdued Edwin. At least, it calmed him enough he returned to eating while his shifty gaze roved around everyone sitting at that table.

"What kind of work?" Lillian asked.

Marc smiled as he turned to face her. "I thought we could blow insulation into the walls and renovate the kitchen."

"Oh, but I want to keep Granny's cupboards!" Elizabeth protested.

Marc turned back to her, now sporting a tender smile.

"You can, honey, but how about a new stove and refrigerator and an *automatic* wash machine and dryer?"

"Don't poke fun at that wringer wash machine," Elizabeth warned. "It's the only appliance in that house that works!"

"That's the truth!" Lillian agreed. "I always thought it would be nice to turn the back porch into a utility room. It catches the morning sun so well. You could put an automatic washer and dryer out there, Betsy. You could build a better entrance into the basement, too."

"Basement?" Marc asked, seeming confused.

"Haven't you noticed the trap door in the floor out there?" Elizabeth asked in return. "The basement runs under the front rooms of the house. but I haven't gone down there. Ted did." She glanced his way, and then back around Marc to Lillian, "Is there anything down there beside the water heater, Mom?"

The instant the familiar address slipped from her lips, Elizabeth wanted to crawl beneath the table. A quick glance at Aggie told her Aggie knew about her parentage because the woman went on eating without interruption.

Sophie appeared startled, but delved into her pie, saying nothing.

Marc and Ted exchanged looks, but Ted—proving he was capable of using discretion—remained silent.

Across the table, Edwin's glare now included Elizabeth.

Marc gave her knee a reassuring squeeze beneath the table.

Lillian smiled as if the term of endearment was as familiar to her as Elizabeth's face.

"Nothing important, dear," she answered. "Just the shelves I used to keep canned goods on. But I emptied them a long time ago."

"Is there a concrete floor?" Marc asked.

Ted answered. "Yeah, good floor. The walls are sound. Harley and I checked that out when we sealed off the cistern and put new gutters on the

house. I was pretty surprised that cistern hadn't begun to leak into the basement."

"Great!" Marc cheered. "We can put in central heat too!"

"Must make a lot a money as a cop," Edwin sneered.

Marc eyed him up and down for a moment before calmly replying, "I've managed some savings over the years."

Apparently, Edwin thought better of arguing because he didn't speak again.

The conversation moved on to other topics. Laughter soon returned, but Edwin remained alert. His shifty gaze continually moved over his family and their guests.

Aggie, Sophie, and Ted didn't appear upset by his crude manner. Perhaps, they were used to it. Lillian ignored him while Marc reverted to the 'cop mode' Elizabeth had often seen him use in *The Plaza*. He took part in the conversation. He laughed as much as anyone, but his gaze kept straying back to Edwin. It was as if his mental radar had been triggered.

Edwin made Elizabeth exceedingly uneasy. She didn't like sitting directly across the table from him, and she was glad Marc was there. She wondered what had passed between the two men that Marc had not told her. What caused Edwin to display such blatant malice toward someone he didn't know? Was it more than because Marc was a cop? More than Marc ordering the man from her property because he'd tried to kill Muffin?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As the New Year approached Elizabeth grew more and more apprehensive. Not that she didn't want to marry Marc, or didn't look forward to a lifetime of being his wife. It was to be her one and only wedding, and it seemed everyone else was doing the planning!

When she asked Jenny if she knew anyone who would marry them on New Year's Eve, Jenny eagerly volunteered her Uncle Nathan who—of course—just happened to be the local Justice of the Peace. When Marc telephoned him to request an appointment, the Justice was already informed, and gave a short list of instructions for Marc and Elizabeth to follow in preparation! He expected them to contribute their wedding vows. Marc was delighted. Elizabeth—not so much.

Elizabeth didn't have to worry about a dress. Marc had purchased one for her. Jenny said she also had a dress. What about their hair? Did she want Jenny to make an appointment with a local hairdresser? Elizabeth didn't believe it was possible to get an appointment at this late date. Couldn't Jenny help her do something with her hair...or Lillian used to braid it...

Why yes, of course Lillian would love to help her prepare for her wedding! In fact, since tradition dictated the bride and groom be separated the night before, and not see each other the day of the ceremony, until the ceremony, Elizabeth and Jenny should just spend the night in Lillian's apartment. They'd have a 'bachelorette party'! Aggie and Sophie were invited as well. They excitedly accepted.

Marc just grinned. Even the prospect of spending a night alone at the farm with no company but Muffin didn't deter him. Ted decided Marc shouldn't be alone; and so, crashed on the sleigh bed until noon of the wedding day, out cold from an extra beer or two. How the two of them managed to get it all together was beyond Elizabeth. But, they did. Ted even changed into a suit.

Marc had packed a suit with his clothes, causing Elizabeth to wonder what he was thinking when he arrived that snowy day before Christmas. He told her he came straight from Illinois where he'd been visiting his family. That didn't explain why he'd packed a suit...She half expected him to produce his dress uniform from the Chicago P.D...but he didn't...and she didn't possess the nerve to question him.

Elizabeth was determined not to admit it out loud; but, that 'bachelorette party' the night before her wedding, was the most 'girl fun' she ever experienced. The next day, Jenny and Lillian collaborated styling everyone's hair while Aggie 'took care of details' no one wanted to share with Elizabeth.

The details—Elizabeth discovered when they arrived at the Justice of the Peace's Office—was a bridal bouquet of red roses and ivory gardenias.

Jenny was given a smaller bouquet of gardenias and baby's breath which were a lovely match to her burgundy maternity gown (she confessed to Elizabeth she'd purchased it hoping she and Kenny would 'go out' on New Year's Eve).

Marc and Ted were given boutonnieres of baby red rosebuds.

Lillian, as the bride's mother, was provided a corsage of a single gardenia.

Lillian, while apparently aware of the 'details' Aggie was arranging, did not expect to also be given a corsage. When a tear slid down her cheek, Aggie hugged her, whispering far too loud, "You have suffered your love for your beautiful daughter in silence too long. It's past time people know just who you are. Be proud, Lilli! You've done so well!"

Elizabeth nodded her head in agreement. She was too overwhelmed to speak.

She and Marc were married in an atrium near the Justice's Office. The courthouse was closed for the day and the atrium (a somewhat secluded side entrance) provided a sunny atmosphere and more room for their guests. The Justice's wife provided music from a portable tape recorder. The ceremony was fairly simple; their spoken vows short and sweet.

Marc held Elizabeth's hands, smiling tremulously as he said, "You know how I feel. I've already told you..." At the meaningful arch of one eyebrow, Elizabeth had to duck her head to hide a smile. Muffled twitters circulated the area. Marc continued, "I tried to think of something romantic, someone to quote, but nothing says it like plain words. I love you, Elizabeth Anne. I love everything about you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. No one else can share what we have, or experience what we will, the way we will."

Elizabeth began by quoting Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "*How do I love thee, Let me count the ways...*" If I do that we will be here forever, Marc Grenwald, because I discover something new in my feelings for you every day. You've become my life, my world, my reason to live. I look forward to the excitement of spending all of my tomorrows with you as your wife and mother of our child."

It was the first time Elizabeth verbally addressed her pregnancy in public. She was startled that there were no gasps, no meaningful looks, even from the Justice and his wife. It appeared, everyone accepted her pregnancy far more easily than she.

And the surprises kept coming.

After the ceremony, Lillian explained the reception room had been reserved in Carsonville's most swanky restaurant "*Natalie's Vintage Cuisine*" where the bride and groom, their attendants (Jenny and Ted) and guests (Lillian, Aggie, Sophie, Kenny Lohman, Justice Nathan and his wife, Donna) were expected to dine. A wedding cake, with a ceramic bride and groom balanced in the center of the top tier, graced a long narrow table adorned with white napkins and individual place settings, each with a name card on the plate.

When she saw the preparation, Elizabeth teared up, facing her mother.

"You planned this?"

"Yes," Lillian admitted, sniffing back a tear. "I wanted you to have the wedding I never had...or as close to it as I can provide."

"Oh, Mom!" The tears overflowed. She gathered Lillian in a hug such as neither had shared in their lifetime.

Marc stepped up, displaying mild alarm.

"What's this? You're both crying? Is something wrong?"

"No." Elizabeth wiped her tears. "I was just thanking Mom for making this day so beautiful."

"Yes," Marc agreed, facing Lillian. "I appreciate all you've done for us."

"I'm just sorry your family couldn't be here," Lillian replied.

"It wasn't possible for them to travel such a distance and find room to stay overnight so close to this holiday," Marc explained. He smiled. "Trust me, they'll make us suffer through a huge celebration when we visit them."

"Marc..."

Elizabeth's chiding protest was interrupted by Jenny, who drew them around to stand in front of the table near the cake.

"One more gift from Kenny and me." She indicated her husband and his tall brother-in-law waiting patiently. The brother-in-law, Ronny Lohman, held an expensive-looking camera.

"You have to have wedding photos," Jenny explained. "Ronny freelances in photography and wasn't booked this evening. We told him we would feed him if he took wedding photos for you."

The newlyweds were speechless. Grateful beyond words, but also rather embarrassed that they had dismissed so many traditional details in their haste to marry.

The wedding dinner consisted of whatever the guests wished to order from Natalie's menu, washed down with a local wine Aggie said her late husband preferred. The wedding cake, a two-tier chiffon splendor, was sliced and eaten. The top layer safely preserved in a small bakery box to be frozen until the newlyweds' first anniversary. A number of photos were taken of the happy couple separately and with their attendants and guests. The time was nearing 9 p.m. when the 'older generation' began to express wishes to retire for the evening, and Ted announced that he 'had a date'.

It took no persuasion to convince Elizabeth, Marc, Jenny and Kenny, Sophie and Ronny to meet him at the *Riverfront* in an hour. Aggie decided to spend another night with Lillian at her apartment; so, the two older women followed the Justice and his wife from the restaurant, giggling like a couple of school girls.

It would appear half the community was celebrating New Year's Eve at the *Riverfront*. A 'live' band had even been hired to replace the usual jukebox.

The three waiting couples managed somewhat intelligent conversation despite the loud, celebrating commotion while they anxiously waited, speculating who Ted's date might be. Another hour passed before he entered with a flashy redhead clinging to his arm.

"Not Nancy Larsen!" Sophie gasped in dismay.

Elizabeth was dumbstruck. Nancy was the last woman she expected Ted to date after the way he'd snubbed her in October.

Jenny was not startled at all. She leaned across the table to confide in Elizabeth and Sophie.

"Don't you remember they were a thing years ago? It wasn't until after they split that Ted enlisted and Nancy started all her running around."

"Sleeping around, you mean," Sophie corrected. "She may be older than me, but that didn't stop the boys my age from talking about her! I don't care if my brother was the first! There've been far too many since for me to like seeing him with her again!"

"She's changed," Jenny insisted. "Since she and Ted are dating again, she's not chasing around anymore. I think she's been in love with him all along."

"How do you know so much?"

Jenny blinked and faced her husband with a startled expression, just realizing all three men had been listening to the women gossip.

"Well, I..." she stammered then pursed her lips in defiance. "Oh, none of your business, Kenny Lohman! I just know!"

Sporting a huge grin, Kenny leaned to address Marc. "Take some advice, man. That sayin' about keepin' 'em barefoot and pregnant is a load of crap. The more kids they have, the sassier they get."

"I kind'a figured that." Marc grinned as he laid a possessive arm across the back of Elizabeth's chair. "Sometimes I wonder if Cinderella, here, isn't the wicked witch in disguise."

"Marc!" Elizabeth gasped, but he cut her protest short by planting a lingering kiss on her mouth in front of everyone.

"Can't you two wait till you're alone to start that mushy stuff?"

Ted had finally managed to push his way through the crowd to their table, and now stood over them pretending disgust.

"What the hell?" Marc drawled. "It's legal now."

Elizabeth felt like slapping both of them. Nancy not only appeared to be taking everything in with her usual cynicism, she was also sizing Marc as if he were a likely prospect. Elizabeth wanted to slap her too.

"Nan, I believe the only person you don't know in this bunch is Marc," Ted boomed, pounding Marc on the back for emphasis. "This poor chap here is Betsy's new husband. Got married this evenin', in fact. Just in the nick of time."

Elizabeth's secret was loudly revealed to everyone within hearing. It took all of her willpower not to bolt from the room. To make matters worse, a knowing sneer spread across Nancy's face while her gaze traveled the length of Elizabeth's wool wedding dress. Silence dropped around the table like a curtain.

Speaking something low that caused Ted to give a careless shrug, Nancy led him around the table to sit beside Ronny—much to Sophie's annoyance. Several minutes passed before the conversation continued with its former enthusiasm.

In a very short time after Ted arrived, everyone in the building knew Elizabeth and Marc had just gotten married. Ted even requested a dance in their

honor. The melody was one of Elizabeth's favorites. She supposed she should have been flattered that Ted remembered well enough to request the song, but she was too devastated. Never in her life had she been singled out in such a manner. She cowered in Marc's arms, burrowing her face against his shoulder as they glided slowly around the dancefloor.

Several faces registered. Many clapped or offered congratulations as they passed by. Everyone had respectfully cleared the area to allow Elizabeth and Marc to have this solo dance.

"I'm so embarrassed," she whispered.

"Relax!" he replied. "They're just wishing us well."

"Everyone is staring," she protested.

"So? They're just realizing how beautiful you are and how lucky I am."

A frown creased Marc's brow as it registered that her embarrassment centered on her pregnancy. He soberly instructed her to "Listen to the song lyrics."

The band soloist's silvery voice was offering a fair imitation of Juice Newton's major hit, *The Sweetest Thing (I've Ever Known is Loving You)*.

"It's true," he declared solemnly.

"Oh, Marc! For me too!" Elizabeth's voice caught on a sob.

"Forget them then," he said. "Tonight is ours."

She hurt him again. The realization cut far deeper than her embarrassment. As soon as the opportunity arose, she beat a hasty retreat to the ladies' lounge.

"You're taking it all too seriously, Betsy!" Jenny scolded.

"I feel as if we're broadcasting my pregnancy to the whole world."

Elizabeth smoothed the front of her dress as an excuse not to meet Jenny's eye. The style was full from neck to hem and she thought it did well to conceal her condition. Once again, she realized, the style alone, blatantly stated just the opposite.

"I felt that way too," Jenny quietly confided. When Elizabeth looked up in surprise, she confessed, "I was several months pregnant when Kenny and I got married. My parents insisted we have a huge wedding, dance and all. They invited most of the community. It was their way of saying they accepted the situation. We had one heck of a time finding a white gown that covered my bulging belly. I felt like a fool!"

"But you seem so happy!" Elizabeth exclaimed.

"We are," Jenny agreed with a confident smile. "The baby I was pregnant with is in middle school now. We've had two more, and now we have this surprise on the way." She patted her bulging belly meaningfully. "We aren't rich and life sure isn't simple; but, Kenny and I are more in love now than when we were teenagers. Don't you see? That baby is a symbol of the love you and Marc share. He adores you! And you love him just as much. It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks about it. You certainly don't have to hide or prove anything to anyone. It's your love...your baby...your life."

"You're certainly being a lot smarter handling things this way than getting rid of it and making the baby's father hate you."

Neither Elizabeth, nor Jenny, realized Nancy and Sophie had followed them.

Once Nancy decided to share confidences she was determined to spill it all. Pursing her lips, she bit back tears.

"That's what I did without telling Ted, and it's taken all these years for him to forgive me. I will never forgive myself."

"Why didn't you tell him?" Jenny gasped.

Nancy shrugged. "My parents were so embarrassed, they ushered me off to the first abortion place they heard of, and let me suffer the consequences alone."

"I almost didn't tell Marc I'm pregnant," Elizabeth confessed.

"Why on earth not?" Jenny demanded, more incredulously than before.

"I was afraid," Elizabeth explained. "You see, I left him before I knew. I was terrified he would think I was using the baby to get him back."

"*You left him?*" Sophie could no longer contain herself. "Jeez! You girls have me so confused I never want to get involved with any man!"

All four women burst into laughter. Elizabeth softly chided, "Yes, you do. You would miss too much without knowing this kind of love at least once in your life."

Nancy hesitantly drew Sophie's attention with an unexpected apology.

"Sophie, I know you don't like me because of...of my reputation. But...I love Ted. I always have."

Sophie's equally hesitant reply displayed a great deal of skepticism. "I guess we all make mistakes, Nancy. Everyone is entitled to a second chance." She shrugged as if not wanting to discuss it further.

Nancy turned to Elizabeth, "I owe you an apology too, Betsy."

"Whatever for?" Elizabeth exclaimed.

"I've spent a lot of time hating you since the night I saw you here with Ted. I heard Jenny tell Kenny you were recovering from a broken love affair and I thought you were using Ted...you know, on the rebound." She glanced at Elizabeth's abdomen and her face colored with embarrassment. "I never thought... I'm so ashamed."

"Don't be." Elizabeth bubbled with laughter. "I did try that."

"What?" Nancy retreated a couple indignant steps.

"No...oh no...I didn't realize it at the time." Elizabeth glanced at Jenny, who concealed her amusement behind the palm of one hand. "Ted realized what I was doing before I did. He gave me hell for it. I was mortified and...He's been a good friend these past months. But, I have to say, there are times when I'd like to put a clamp on his mouth." At the last sentence, Elizabeth's eyes sparked furiously.

"Oh, but I love him in spite of his uncouth remarks," Nancy crooned. "Most of the time."

So Elizabeth emerged from that revealing ladies' room conversation viewing Nancy, and the entire community, with a different frame of mind.

She understood, now, that Nancy's reaction to her pregnancy must have been more shock than disdain. Nancy drew Ted away rather than the other way around. Time and again throughout the evening, she watched Nancy quietly caution Ted, or just lead him off to dance when he thoughtlessly blurted something. Elizabeth considered that proof of Nancy's love. She would have exploded in rage at some of Ted's thoughtless remarks.

As for Marc. She wondered where she would be if he had not followed her when he did. Would she have turned to the lonely life of a spinster her mother lived? Or, would she have gone seeking love from any male who would spend a little time with her as Nancy did?

She vowed a private New Year's resolution. Never again would she allow her selfish insecurities to upset Marc as they had tonight and so many times before.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The ride home was slow and tedious. Even when turned on full force, the Bronco heater could not shut out the freezing cold. Elizabeth fell asleep curled inside her heavy winter coat with her feet tucked up on the seat beneath her. Throughout most of the ride, Marc was immersed in his own thoughts and did not disturb her.

"His bride," he thought.

She had not said anything, but he sensed something occurred during the evening. Perhaps their dance. Perhaps because they were married now. Maybe it was something those women talked about when they all had their heads together. Whatever it was, Elizabeth's attitude had changed. She wasn't being so shy about her pregnancy, their situation, anymore. He was glad because the pregnancy was becoming more obvious by the day. Why, she'd be feeling life pretty soon! He wondered if she would tell him when that happened.

Elizabeth was so reticent about intimate matters, he doubted she had ever confided anything of a personal nature to anyone. During the past month, he succeeded in drawing her out of her shell a little. One day, he vowed, he would shatter that shell so completely the whole world would discover what a treasure she was.

The lane to the house was even slower going as the bladed lanes were encrusted with ice. Marc was infinitely grateful when he finally steered the Bronco to a halt beside the front gate without mishap. He turned off the lights and ignition, and stretched his arms as far as possible above his head, before laying one arm across the back of the seat.

"Hey, Cinderella babe, we're home!" he said softly.

Elizabeth stirred and stretched her legs. "My feet are so cold!" she complained, showing her bare feet.

"Where are your boots? Put them on." He reached down to the floor for the boots she vowed to put on when they left *The Riverfront*. "Here. I'll help you."

The boots slid on her feet relatively easily, but she still slumped in the seat.

"I'm so tired. We have to carry all this stuff into the house."

Marc glanced at the clutter of boxes and suitcases scattered in the back.

"Is there anything you have to have tonight? Anything that might freeze?"

Elizabeth thought a moment. "Mom took my bouquet and the top cake layer with her. I threw my heels back there, didn't I?" At Marc's nod, she decided. "No...make-up case maybe..."

"Okay. I'll come back and get it later. We need to get in the house. We'll freeze if we sit out here much longer."

Muffin began to bark the moment they entered the porch. When they entered the kitchen, she danced excitedly around their feet, sitting back on her haunches a split second before racing back and forth into the living room several times.

"Does she want us to follow her?" Elizabeth asked.

"Nah! She's too young for that," Marc scoffed. He stepped into the living room, switched on the ceiling light, and began to curse. "Damn you, Muffin!"

Muffin tucked her tail between her legs and scurried behind the sleigh bed.

Curious to see what Muffin had done, Elizabeth followed Marc only to wish she had not. The Christmas tree was turned over and broken ornaments littered the floor. The lower half of the hall door was ruined with scratch marks. Ironically, Muffin's rug was curled in its usual nesting knot near the fireplace, and in the far corner, on the designated newspaper, lay a pile of puppy leavings.

Marc rolled up a magazine and advanced toward Muffin, who instantly scampered between his legs to safety behind the wood heat stove in the kitchen.

"You better hide, you little rascal!" He gave the magazine a threatening shake. "When I catch you, you won't be able to sit for a week!"

"Don't hurt her, Marc," Elizabeth pleaded.

"If I don't punish her now we'll never be able to go anywhere without coming home to a mess," he disagreed.

"I know, but I can't stand to see you hurt her," Elizabeth said. "When the weather gets warmer, she'll be outside most of the time anyway."

"Oh, all right," Marc grumbled. He pitched the rolled magazine onto the sleigh bed. "Let's go to bed. It's too late to clean up this mess tonight."

An icy breeze struck them the moment they opened the door entering the hall. The outer front door stood ajar. Someone had jimmied the lock.

"Someone's broken in!" Elizabeth gasped.

Marc raised one arm to keep her behind him.

"Quiet, hon," he whispered. "Whoever it was might still be here."

He crept across the hall to the bedroom, motioning Elizabeth to stand next to the wall behind him before, after gingerly testing the knob, he flung the door wide. The door slammed against the bedroom wall; and then, everything instantly returned to eerie silence. Marc peered around the jamb before he reached for the switch beside the door to turn on the ceiling light.

Oddly enough, it appeared little was out of place. The bed was rumpled where someone had pushed the feather mattress around. Clothes had been shoved back and forth in the closet. Elizabeth's hairbrush had been knocked from the top of the dresser to the floor. Nothing appeared broken or stolen.

"Let's check the bathroom," Marc said.

Without waiting for her to answer, he grabbed her arm and drew her along behind him, opening the bathroom door at the back of the hall in the same manner he had the bedroom. Only the door of the medicine cabinet hung ajar.

Everything upstairs also remained undisturbed. Once downstairs again, in the warmth of the living room, Elizabeth said, "Now we know why Muffin acted up."

"Yup," Marc grunted shamefully as he hunkered down and emitted a low whistle. When Muffin cautiously peeked around the corner of the heat stove, he patted his thigh, and entreated, "Come here, girl. I'm sorry. Really, I am."

Muffin crept toward him with her tail tucked between her legs, prepared to bolt back to safety at the first threat. When she was within reach, Marc gathered her in his arms, crooning softly, until she began to cover his face with puppy kisses.

After a few kisses, however, he set her down again, protesting, "Enough already," even though he continued to pet her. To Elizabeth, he said, "She's one smart dog. She knew someone was out there. I guess she was just trying to get to them."

"What do they want?" Elizabeth wondered aloud.

"It wasn't a thief because nothing was stolen," Marc decided. "I think they just want to harass us."

"Why?"

He stood again, and drew her into his arms. "I don't know. It had to have been someone who knew we wouldn't be home this evening."

After a moment, he set her back and retrieved the flashlight kept in the kitchen cabinets.

"You and Muffin stay in here," he commanded. "I'm going to check around outside."

"Don't, Marc, please," Elizabeth pleaded. "Someone could still be out there. What if they jump you?"

"I don't think that will happen," he replied. "Whoever it was, was gone when we drove up. Muffin didn't bark until we entered the porch. Remember?"

"Take her with you, then," Elizabeth insisted. "She'll warn you if there are any intruders around. I'll stay right here while you're gone."

Muffin's nose never rose more than an inch from the ground while Marc investigated the immediate area around the house. She followed scent because any obvious tracks had been rubbed out of the snow. Chipped mortar littered the ground where someone had tested the chimney as if looking for a vacancy of some kind between the bricks. The telephone wire dangled uselessly once again.

When he returned inside, Marc voiced his confusion.

"Nothing's been touched but the chimney and the telephone wires. I even looked in the basement. Not a footprint anywhere. Here's your stuff. I got it all out of the Bronco and locked its doors, just in case." He set her suitcase and clothing bags down and began to remove his heavy coat.

"I heard you," Elizabeth replied in a shaky voice.

He dropped his coat on the sleigh bed and drew her into his arms.

"Sure gave us one helluva spooky wedding present, didn't they?"

"I'm scared, Marc," she whimpered. "What do we do now?"

"Do you feel like going back to town tonight? We could go to your mother's."

"We'd just scare her." Elizabeth gave her head a negative shake.

"Well, there is nothing we can do now, then. Try not to touch anything more than necessary. I'll nail the front door shut for the night, and we'll keep Muffin in the bedroom with us. She'll let us know if anyone comes around. In the morning, we'll report this break-in to the local law enforcement. Are you all right?"

No, she wasn't all right. Why deny it?

She clutched him that much closer as she admitted, "I don't know what I'd do if you weren't here with me, Marc."

"If I wasn't here, you would have been home tonight instead of getting married. You might be facing a much worse fate than sleeping with a front door that won't lock."

"At least, I'd know who was after me and why."

"And probably wish you didn't." He caught her face between his hands to make her look him in the eye. "Now, do you understand why I don't want you staying here alone when I go to Chicago?"

"I won't argue with you anymore...about that..." Elizabeth promised.

The latter two words were an afterthought Marc would not consider until ten days into the future.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

January the eleventh was destined to become the coldest day of the year. However, Elizabeth was not concerned with the temperature. She stared blankly out the window of Lillian's apartment thinking that a week had passed since Marc left for Chicago. He promised he would return in a few days, but she believed it would take much longer to sublet his apartment, acquire a job recommendation, and tie up a dozen other loose ends.

So far, during his absence, she managed to keep busy taking Muffin for daily romps in the park and sewing maternity clothes on Lillian's sewing machine. She'd borrowed some patterns from Jenny and bought material in a little sewing shop downtown.

She visited Jenny, but the preparatory chaos in Jenny's home only served to fill Elizabeth's apprehension. She also brought along the unfinished painting of the barn, her easel, and painting supplies. She had yet to touch them. Her sketched musings kept involving the rooms of her home, or people's faces, as she mentally searched for whatever attracted their unknown intruder on New Year's Eve.

Sheriff Wittman had not taken kindly to being roused from his day off on New Year's Day. He did show more concern when he saw the damage to their front door, the telephone wires, and the chimney, but he didn't find any finger, or footprints, anywhere. Even after a thorough search, it seemed nothing was stolen, indoors or out.

"About all we can call it is breaking and entering," he said while bracing his hands on his hips, and looking around the hall. "Looks, like some kind'a prank to me. They could'a just be tryin' to harass your dog by poking at the chimney like that. I doubt you'll ever discover who did it."

Marc was not impressed with what he termed 'the sheriff's country logic'. In fact, throughout the weekend, he began to wonder aloud if he could cope as a 'country cop'. He suggested that it might be a good idea for him to try another kind of employment altogether.

His change of attitude upset Elizabeth that much more. There were no other kinds of employment available. As for farming, why, Ted was barely making ends meet even though he rented several properties besides farming his own.

The predicted blizzard struck with a vengeance on the second of January. They remained on the farm while sleet and freezing rain pelted the windows and roof like a summer hailstorm. Marc carried in a large load of firewood and banked the fires for the night before he gave Muffin food and water. At Elizabeth's request, he double-checked to make certain all the doors were locked and the front door tightly boarded over.

Elizabeth huddled beneath her grandmother's eiderdown comforter, staring non-blinking at the ice pelting the windowpanes. The moment he entered

the bedroom, Marc yanked the draperies shut. Elizabeth burrowed so deeply beneath the comforter only her face above her nose was visible.

"It's slick out there," he commented.

"I figured that," she muttered.

"Temperature's dropping too."

"What if we can't get to town tomorrow?"

"Guess we'll stay here."

After he undressed down to his underwear, Marc turned the light out and crawled beneath the covers, wrapping his arms around her.

"Think you can stand being cooped up alone with me for a few more days?"

"After this weekend, I wonder," she retorted.

Marc rubbed his chin against her forehead, chuckling as he asked, "Been pretty bad, hasn't it?"

"It was supposed to be our honeymoon."

"I've heard honeymoons really shouldn't be all that perfect. Maybe it's good we got some things out in the open."

"Like your job?" Elizabeth pulled away to peer at his face in the darkness.

"I'm standing my ground on that," he insisted. "We're not going back to live in Chicago. Only time will tell whether I get on the local force here. If not, I will eventually find something else. In the meantime, we can live on my savings. We'll just have to put off plans to renovate this house."

"Maybe I can sell some of my art pieces."

"Not that painting of the barn."

"That painting isn't even finished!" Elizabeth grumbled irritably. "It's giving me as much trouble as you do!"

"Maybe that's why I like it." His voice was muffled because he'd begun trailing kisses along her face and throat. "Do you realize we're not really married yet?"

"What?"

She struggled to sit upright, but only succeeded in making Marc laugh as he grasped her tighter.

"I think there's something called 'consummating the marriage'..."

Elizabeth was more than happy to comply.

The front door was boarded shut and Marc promised he would replace the entire door and frame when he returned. Still, Elizabeth remained fearful. During the three nights they stayed in the house she hardly slept at all. The strain was showing so, by January fourth, Marc refused to remain there one more night, regardless of the weather. They argued because he didn't want her to return to the farm at all during his absence.

Over and over, she asked, "What if someone breaks in again while we're gone?"

Each time, he gruffly replied, "The house can be repaired and most of our belongings replaced. Your life cannot. That's why I forbid you to stay alone while I'm gone. Understand? It's you I'm concerned about much more than the house."

He probably should not have said the word 'forbid'. That irritated her, even though she was grateful for his concern. She loved him with all her heart and told him so. Still, he left for Chicago in an angry mood—because he had to leave her for even one day, let alone a week—because they had not yet faced their mysterious assailant.

"I don't care what Marc said, Mom. I just can't stand being cooped up in this apartment any longer. I keep wondering about the house, the water pipes, and all my things," Elizabeth complained.

"All the more reason you should stay away," Lillian replied.

"Doesn't it bother you? Don't you wonder if someone has been searching your home?"

"This apartment is my home, Betsy. Besides, how would you get there?" Lillian thought surely this would curtail her daughter's anxiety. Her car was still at the farm. Unfortunately, Lillian's hopes were dashed when Elizabeth calmly suggested, "You can drive."

Lillian gave her head a firm negative shake.

"Why not?" Elizabeth pleaded. "Please. The road should be clear by now."

"Not that driveway and you know it." After a moment, Lillian relented somewhat. "How about I call Ted and ask him to check on things for us?"

"I want to make certain things are okay for myself," Elizabeth stubbornly insisted.

Lillian considered another moment or two.

"Well...I could ask Ted to meet us at the end of the driveway. He can tackle the rest of the distance in his truck. That way, we'll be safer if someone has been nosing around."

Elizabeth happily agreed.

As she dialed the telephone, Lillian wondered why she always gave in to her daughter so easily. Several minutes later, after cutting a gossip session short with Aggie, she said, "Ted's out feeding the livestock right now. Aggie said she would send him to the farm as soon as he came back to the house."

"That's fair enough," Elizabeth agreed brightly. "Let's go ahead. We can make an afternoon outing of it."

"I suppose we can..." Lillian agreed aloud. Silently, she wished she hadn't taken off an afternoon from the factory. The days were so short, it would be dark soon. She silently vowed, if Ted was not parked at the end of that farm driveway, she was going to turn around and come right back home! All that talk of intruders in the house, and snares in the woods, unnerved her so she couldn't think straight. She was determined not to get into something she couldn't handle. She didn't care if whoever those people were burned down every building on that farm. But, she didn't speak any of those thoughts to her suddenly happy daughter, who was all too eager to venture out into the sub-zero January afternoon.

"The sun is so bright and clear, I had no idea it was this cold," Elizabeth commented as she shuffled her booted feet beneath Muffin's warm furry body on

the floor of the car. They'd been waiting for Ted approximately ten minutes. "Turn the radio on. Let's listen for a weather report. Maybe they'll tell us how cold it is."

"I told you I've had trouble with the battery. I don't want to risk running it low with the heater, or the radio," Lillian snapped. Why, she wondered, was she always so gullible when it came to her daughter's wishes and whims? Making up her mind that it was time to leave, she pushed the gear shift of the idling car into reverse.

"What are you doing?" Elizabeth gasped as Lillian began to back the car onto the county road.

"Turning around," Lillian answered, still irritably. "I'll drive past the Coopers. If Ted wants to check on the house, you can come back here with him. We should have just gone there in the first place."

"But...Mom..."

Elizabeth's protest trailed off when the wheel of the car caught a patch of ice and slid sideways. Lillian jammed the accelerator, sending the rear end of the driver's side sliding into a deep narrow drainage ditch alongside the road.

Elizabeth screamed.

Muffin barked.

Lillian clutched the steering wheel so tightly her fingernails tore through her leather gloves. All three females slid sideways until they toppled against one another on the driver's side behind the steering wheel.

When the car settled, Lillian's first thought was Elizabeth's safety.

"Are you all right, Betsy? The baby?"

"I'm fine, Mom," Elizabeth replied. Her voice told her exasperation. "That sure was a dumb thing for you to do."

"Well, get off me before you start telling me how stupid I am," Lillian snapped.

Muffin had already hopped on top of the seat and was yipping while she bounced against the window on the passenger side.

Elizabeth managed to push away from her mother enough to catch hold of the passenger door handle. It gave easily and Muffin hopped onto the edge of the county road. But the car held at such a crazy angle, Elizabeth was forced to balance against the edge of the door frame and gradually lower herself to the ground. She dared not jump for fear of slipping and falling on the ice.

"Betsy, what are you doing?" Lillian called.

Her query erupted in a scream as the car pitched deeper into the ditch.

"Mom, please get out of there!" Elizabeth cried. "If the car keeps sliding into the ditch, you could get pinned inside!"

Lillian's head appeared over the edge of the seat. She eyed Elizabeth suspiciously.

"I'm not kidding, Mom!" Elizabeth warned. "You're safer out here on the road."

Lillian began gingerly crawling out of the vehicle in much the same manner as Elizabeth had. Inch by inch, at first. Then, with lightning speed she didn't know she possessed, when the car abruptly slid into the ditch so completely the driver's side rested against the bottom. The sound of crunching

metal and breaking glass was thunderous. Through it all, the steady hum of the motor continued.

“Didn’t you turn off the ignition?” Elizabeth gasped incredulously.

“No,” Lillian answered. “Does it make any difference? The car can’t go anywhere.”

Elizabeth gave her shoulders a speculating shrug. “Maybe not. On the other hand, lying sideways like that could spill oil or gas on something and catch the whole works to fire.”

“Oh, dear...” Lillian murmured. She backed several feet from the car.

Giving her mother an annoyed look, Elizabeth decided, “We have to get away from here.”

“We can wait for Ted,” Lillian decided just as firmly.

“Mom!” Elizabeth had reached the peak of her exasperation. “I am not going to stand out here in subzero temperature waiting for Ted while my toes freeze or the car catches fire! I am going to the house!”

“You can’t walk that far!” Lillian gasped.

“I walked farther than that when I took Muffin to the park! Are you coming with me or not?”

“I shouldn’t,” Lillian angrily declared. “I should just let you take the chance of slipping on those ruts and losing your baby all alone. Ted will be along any minute. We can just wait for him!”

“If Ted was coming right away he would have been here by now!”

Elizabeth stubbornly insisted. “At least, there is firewood at the house. We’ll build a fire and be warm while we wait for him. C’mon, Muffin.”

Elizabeth turned and stalked off with Muffin at her heels. It didn’t take Lillian long to decide to follow them.

CHAPTER TWENTY

It wasn't as difficult to walk in the ruts embedded in the frozen lane as it was to breathe. Late afternoon shadows were falling along with a steadily declining temperature. By the time they reached the house, Muffin was having difficulty manipulating her ice-encrusted paws. Lillian was breathing harshly and growing pale. Elizabeth was so worried about her mother she didn't even glance at the front windows of the house as they stepped through the open yard gate. That the gate was opened, puzzled her. It was always closed. Maybe the wind had forced the latch.

No time to worry about that now. Lillian needed warmth and rest.

Elizabeth did not see the figure of a man watching them through her bedroom window, or the slight open edge of the front door.

Muffin noticed.

Muffin bombarded the front porch with the full force of her thirty-pound body; but, once again, her excitement was misunderstood.

Elizabeth, believing the dog was just excited to be home, called her along to the back porch.

When Elizabeth began to unlock the kitchen door, Muffin, growling threateningly, pitched her furry body between her mistress and the kitchen door.

"Muffin! What is wrong with you?" Elizabeth scolded. "Get back now!"

Muffin was temporarily subdued, and Elizabeth turned her attention to her mother.

"You go inside to rest," she said. "I'm going to get some dry kindling from the shed to build a fire with."

She'd only taken a few steps when Lillian's scream pierced the chilling silence surrounding them.

Muffin began to bark again.

Elizabeth raced back to the kitchen to see what had frightened her mother.

The kitchen was in shambles. The wooden hinges of the antique oak cupboards were sprung and hanging open. Someone had prodded the wood interior and doors with a pointed object as if looking for a cubbyhole or hiding place. Dishes, jars of jelly, and canned foods were strewn everywhere. The ancient refrigerator door stood ajar while its old motor made a steady humming racket. Both stoves had been shoved around and the faint odor of gas from the cooking stove permeated the air. Soot spilled in a steady stream from a loose pipe above the heat stove.

"Oh my God!" Elizabeth gasped. "I knew someone had broken in!"

She tiptoed to the living room and bit back tears of indignation. The upholstery covering the sleigh bed and the armchair was ripped to ribbons. Her

record collection was scattered everywhere. The speakers of her stereo had been torn loose of the wiring and the screens ripped from the front. The television toppled from its cabinet. The screen was shattered and the magazines piled inside the lower section of the stand now littered the floor. Plaster fell from the walls. Soot fell from the chimney. Someone struck them with a blunt object. Her paintings were carelessly strewn about the room, some torn and ruined beyond repair.

Muffin scratched at the still-closed hall door. Elizabeth opened that door only to wish she had not.

The boards Marc carefully nailed over the front door were ripped from one end of the jamb to the other. The badly damaged door hung precariously from an upper hinge. Cold air swept in, through and around, the open door frame.

A glance toward the open bedroom door revealed her clothes were torn from the closet and scattered around the room. The walls, especially those inside the closet, were in the same condition as the living room walls. The featherbed was destroyed. Goose down littered everything. Her cardboard box of precious memories had been torn open and its contents spread across the floor.

The open bathroom door revealed it was in no better condition. From where she stood, she could see the contents of the medicine chest and linen closet littering the floor.

Elizabeth was so shocked, she barely noticed Muffin make a beeline up the stair, until the dog's continual snarl became a howl of pain. Muffin rolled down the stair head over heels.

"Muffin!" Elizabeth screamed.

The stunned dog applied very little weight to her previously injured foreleg. While Elizabeth was still examining her, she began to growl and struggle toward the stair.

Glancing in that direction, Elizabeth bristled with fury much like her dog.

"You!" she spat.

"You shut that goddamned cur up and git in the other room," Edwin Hexle commanded as he strolled lazily down the stair, swinging his usual club in one hand, and carrying a shotgun in the other.

"You get out of my house!" Elizabeth commanded, undaunted by the man's threatening demeanor.

He brandished the club at her.

Muffin jumped toward him, but a swipe of the club flung the dog into the living room.

"I said git in the other room! Shut that cur up before I kill her!"

"Muffin..." Elizabeth whimpered, scurrying to kneel beside her pet.

Marc had warned her. Why didn't she listen to him?

Tears trickled from her eyes. Still, she dared to face Edwin Hexle and demand, "Why have you ransacked my home and ruined my possessions like this? What did I ever do to you?"

Ignoring her, he bellowed, "Lillian! I saw you come inside with your bastard kid! Git your skinny carcass in here! You and me got some settlin' up to do!"

Pale as death, Lillian stumbled through the kitchen door, wringing her hands as she whimpered, "Edwin, what has gotten into you? We've never done you any harm!"

"Ha!" Edwin snorted. "I want my share of that money."

"What money?"

At Lillian's and Elizabeth's gasps of astonishment, Edwin's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"I rotted thirty years because your lover hid my half—more'n a hundred grand someplace on this here farm. He laughed when he told me about it. Said I'd never find it. He thought he had one over on me...until I struck him from behind, and left him to burn in the old junk heap Evie stole for getaway wheels when we broke out of the slammer."

Wide-eyed with sudden realization, Lillian gasped. "Evelyn told the truth!"

Elizabeth stared at Edwin and then Lillian.

"What are the two of you yelling at each other about?"

Lillian whirled to stare at Elizabeth as if only just remembering her presence.

"Is Muffin injured?" she asked in a dazed tone of voice.

Glancing down at the furry heap she continued to stroke, Elizabeth replied, "She's only stunned, I think."

"Throw the goddamned cur outside!"

"What?"

Unable to comprehend the depth of such cruelty, Elizabeth stared blankly at Edwin.

"Throw that goddamned cur out! I don't want it sneakin' up on me again!"

"No!" Elizabeth cried, clutching the suddenly squirming animal to her breast.

"Throw it out, or I'll kill it in front of you!" Edwin bellowed, striding forward with his club raised.

Believing her mistress to be in danger, Muffin flung herself free of Elizabeth's grasp. Snapping and snarling, she hurtled her thirty-pound body at Edwin, and this time managed to sink her teeth into his forearm securely enough to tear his flesh to the bone.

He screamed in pain, flinging the club and the dog into the wall. He followed them, landing several hefty kicks that sent Muffin through the mangled front door, across the concrete stoop into the snowdrift piled against the front wall of the house.

Heaving a satisfied grunt, Edwin hastily pushed some boards over the lower side of the door to prevent Muffin from returning. After examining the bleeding dog bite on his forearm, he strode into the bathroom and snatched up a towel he wrapped around the wound. Continuing to hold his shotgun in one hand, after retrieving his club, he returned to the living room.

During that time, neither Lillian nor Elizabeth possessed the presence of mind to try to escape this mad man through the kitchen and back door.

Lillian stared blankly into space as if she wasn't quite capable of thinking at all.

Elizabeth knelt on the window-seat, clutching at the window frame as she sobbed Muffin's name over and over.

Eventually, the furry, sable lump began to twitch, and finally to try to stand.

"What are you doing over there, Betsy?" Lillian inquired.

"Muffin, Momma!" Elizabeth gasped irritably as if she couldn't believe her mother had forgotten Muffin was injured. "She's moving!" Through the window, she began to implore, "C'mon, baby. You can do it. Stand up."

As if she heard...and perhaps she did...Muffin hobbled toward the window.

"That's right, baby," Elizabeth urged softly. "You're safe now. Go find Ted. Get help, Muffin. Go back to the car. Find Ted."

"I'm gonna kill that goddamned cur for certain now!" Edwin roared.

Whether Muffin understood Elizabeth, or the fact that Edwin Hexle meant to do her more harm, by the time he shoved the board away from the front door and stepped outside, Muffin had disappeared.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Ted stood beside the wrecked car bewilderedly scratching his head. He glanced up and down the county road as he muttered, "How in the hell did them women do that? Where did they wander off to?"

The only logical answer was the farmhouse.

"Coldest day in the whole goddamn year and I got two women wanderin' around like they ain't got the sense of the south end of a northbound jackass!"

Shaking his head in exasperation, he returned to his pickup and began easing it carefully along the ice-packed lane to the farmhouse. If not for Muffin's sable coloring, he might have run over her. She had collapsed on the snow heaped in the middle of the road between the frozen tracks.

Ted braked and carefully got out of the truck, not recognizing the dog until he stood over her.

"What happened to you, pup?" he inquired as he hunkered down beside her.

Muffin managed to wag her tail a time or two, proving to Ted's profound relief that she was still alive. Lifting her head in his broad hands, he was horrified to discover one side of her face covered in blood. Immediate examination revealed several large welts around her shoulders and a broken foreleg.

"Say, you been in quite a battle, haven't you, little one?" Ted crooned softly. "Well, let me take you to your lady now. Wonder what's she gonna say about this."

Muffin managed to lick his hand before he lifted her off the frozen ground and carried her to the warm safety of his pickup truck.

Believing Muffin had been injured when the car slid into the ditch, Ted could not understand why Elizabeth left the dog alone. He had no idea of the danger he was about to encounter.

Even from the short distance of his truck parked in front of the house, Ted realized something was gravely amiss with the front door, but Marc told him about the break-in. After all, that was why Elizabeth was staying in town while Marc went to Chicago. He didn't give the door any more thought as he hopped out of the truck and ambled toward the porch entrance in the rear. Then, suddenly out of the corner of his eye, he saw a shotgun slide along the unhinged door. He whirled in astonishment, believing, surely, he was seeing things.

A growling voice behind that door told him who held that familiar-looking gun.

"Nephew! You get your ass on out 'a here right now! Me and these women are havin' a discussion about how I get what's mine. You ain't got no part in it. So, go on home! Git!"

Ted blinked his confusion. He realized his uncle must be holding Lillian and Elizabeth captive at gunpoint. But why? He decided to try to humor the man.

"Hey, Ed! What you doin' in there? I was supposed to meet Betsy and Lilli here cause Bets is worried about her house in all this freezin' weather. Everything okay in there?"

"I done took care'a the house and the women! I'll take care'a you just like I done the dog, if'n you don't get out 'a here!"

The shotgun pointed menacingly in his direction.

Ted thrust both arms high in the air. "All right! Hey! I'm goin' now! See?"

He swiftly returned to his truck.

"Jeez," Ted whistled as he carefully turned the truck around and headed back across the frozen creek. "Ed's done lost what few marbles he had."

It perturbed Ted that his uncle would dare reveal himself with such confidence. Did he believe Ted didn't have enough nerve to report him to the county sheriff?

Frowning, Ted made sure he was out of sight from the house before he carefully braked to a stop and turned to study the dog lying on the seat beside him. Edwin's final statement recycled through his brain causing him to whistle his astonishment.

"My God!" Reaching one work-worn hand to pet Muffin, he found still another welt. "Did he do that to you, pup? What the hell kind of a man is he, beatin' dogs and kidnappin' pregnant women? Looks like we got us a heap'a trouble, pup."

Checking once again to make certain his truck was well out of sight of the house and beyond shooting range, Ted picked up his C.B. microphone.

"Sheriff Whitman, you got your ears on? This is Teddy-boy out on Old Crick Road. Come back, Sheriff." He paused, listening a moment before he switched to a broader channel, and continued, "Anyone listenin, out there? This here's an emergency. Teddy-boy on Old Crick Road needs to jaw with the local bear. Bring it on back. Anyone got a handle on the local bear? This is an emergency."

As he traveled from Chicago, Marc listened idly to the continual jabber generating from the Citizen's Ban Radio in his Ford Bronco. Most of the jargon went in one ear and out the other.

Marc was in a jovial mood. He'd tied up all the loose ends in Chicago in record time, and was given a letter of recommendation from Captain Morgan. He'd had doubts about getting that letter, but once the Captain, learned he and Elizabeth had gotten married, the man proved to be a steadfast ally.

As he approached the five-mile marker outside of Carsonville, he thought, "Home," and decided it was wise to detour past the farm so he could tell Elizabeth all was well out there. Abruptly, a familiar voice brought his attention to the C.B.

"Anyone listenin' out there? Emergency call, emergency! Teddy-boy out on Old Crick Road needs to jaw with the local bear. Bring it on back. Anyone got a handle on the local bear?"

The plea crackled with static, but Marc knew there was only one 'Teddy-boy' connected to Old Crick Road. He grabbed up the microphone and switched from 'receiving'.

"Ten-four, Ted. Marc Grenwald here. What the hell's goin' on? Come back."

"Ten-four, Marc. Glad you're back." Ted's voice crackled through the receiver. "Your house's been broke into again and the man's holdin' Lilli and Betsy captive with a shotgun. Where you at? You need to high-tail it out here and bring the sheriff. Come back."

"I'm on the way," Marc replied in both alarm and anger. "But, I don't have a handle on the local bear."

"I do," a strange voice crackled through the receiver. "My wife's got his office on the telephone right now. That's the Cooper place out on Old Crick Road? Come back."

"Negatory!" Ted bellowed. "Tell the bear the trouble's out at the old Bannerman farm! Come back!"

"Gotcha! Joe Bannerman's home-place," crackled the voice. "Sheriff's on his way."

Ten minutes later Marc sprang from his Bronco, leaped across the county road, and flung open the door of Ted's pickup, only to be confronted with Muffin's startled yip.

"My God!" he breathed, taking the dog's head between his hands. After quick examination, he glared accusingly at Ted. "What happened? You run over her with your truck?"

"Almost," Ted answered with no trace of his usual humor. "I guess she got in the way of that no good uncle of mine. She was collapsed down the road a ways when I found her."

"Elizabeth?"

"Dunno, man." Ted gave his head a slow, dismal shake. "All I can tell you is, the bastard run me off with my own shotgun. Must be mine. Don't know where else he could'a got one. He said he's got both women. So, that means Lilli too. I was supposed to meet them to check on the house..."

"You let them come out here alone?" Marc's voice rose a higher grade of fury with each syllable.

"I didn't *let* them do nothin'!" Ted shot back defensively. "I was out feedin' the livestock when they called. Mom talked to Lilli; but, when I tried to call them back, they didn't answer the phone. I decided to come out and have a look around anyway. I didn't know they were here at all till I saw that!"

He pointed at the car lying sideways in the ditch.

Marc considered Ted's explanation for a single second before another, deeper fear, struck him. He raced back to his Bronco loudly declaring over one shoulder, "If that son-of-a-bitch lays a hand on my wife, I'll kill him!"

Halfway to the Bronco, his stride was halted by an obstacle equal to his size.

Ted grabbed Marc's shoulder and spun him around. "You crazy, man? You wanna get your wife and baby killed? Maybe Lilli too? I tell ya Ed's done cracked up! I never did trust that bastard and I sure wouldn't put nothin' past him now! Dammit! He's got a shotgun! If he can beat a half-grown dog near to death, he can do the same to Betsy!"

"All the more reason why I have to stop him," Marc insisted.

"All the more reason why you have to wait for the sheriff to get here with more help! You're a cop, man! Think! If you go bargain' in there like a maniac, Ed's liable to shoot everyone in sight!"

Marc knew Ted was right. Still, it was difficult to admit he had to wait.

"All right," he muttered between clenched teeth. "But not very long."

Elizabeth and Lillian huddled together on the torn cushions of the sleigh bed. Edwin pranced back and forth in front of them, all the while rubbing his injured forearm. It had stopped bleeding, but the pain it caused added to his resentful meanness. He continually thrust the club or the shotgun at the women. Sometimes he badgered them with both, while he insisted they answer questions neither was able to understand.

Elizabeth began to wonder why time passed so slowly. It was late afternoon by the time they entered the house, but it seemed daylight, itself, was lingering, reluctant to descend to frozen darkness. Maybe that was a good thing.

When the world was in one's command, time flew by, but when one wallowed in despair, time crept at their heels.

Such had been when she and Marc fell in love. Life was so wonderful. The days passed so swiftly, she could hardly distinguish one from the other. Then, in a twinkling, her dream-world shattered causing her to plunge into a bottomless pit of loneliness and confusion. Longer than the days were the lonely nights. Sleep was often interrupted by nightmares. Even the labor of making this old farmhouse livable again could not diminish the memories her mind continued to recall.

And then, true to his promise, when Elizabeth failed to return to Chicago by Christmas, Marc followed her. Had it really been a month since that fateful December afternoon he stood at the front door consumed with anger; yet, so determined to make her admit the truth?

Once again, her life became dominated by Marc's presence. Her nightmares ceased the day she realized she was not whole without his love. She felt as if she had just merely existed before Marc entered her life. With him, life was something to cherish. And now, they were given immortality in the form of a new life created by the love they shared.

A small flutter crossed Elizabeth's abdomen, causing her to instinctively press one hand there. She heard Edwin expel a nasty snigger and knew he saw her protective movement. She ignored him. Physically, she supposed, he could cause her a great deal of harm. Otherwise, he was not man enough to destroy her relationship with Marc or their future dreams.

Elizabeth glanced at her mother. It was evident Lillian teetered on the verge of mental collapse, thanks to Edwin's grueling interrogation. She sensed her mother was finally coming face to face with facts she had long forced from her mind. Unfortunately, she feared Lillian was not stable enough to withstand the realization that the man she loved was a common criminal.

When that mysterious flutter crossed her abdomen again, Elizabeth frowned in wonder. Was she feeling life? This was not the first time she noticed that peculiar sensation, so she knew it was not a result of their present traumatic situation. She sighed in relief.

What if this was Marc's first son?

The thought brought a wistful smile to her lips. Her gaze wandered to the mangled pile of magazines spilled from the lower shelf on the T.V. stand, now trampled upon and scattered. Most of them contained articles and tips about baby care.

One day when Marc caught her reading one of them, she confessed, "I don't know anything about babies."

"Don't you think that's instinctive?" he replied. "I would think understanding our baby's needs would be as natural to you as the way you care for me."

"I'm not sure I care for you all that well," she protested.

"Oh but you do," he assured her with a low chuckle. "Sometimes I believe you can even read my mind."

How strange. It had taken them so long to understand and to accept the depth of their love for each other. They came awfully close to destroying the natural affection they shared. Never again. Elizabeth vowed she would never allow doubt and suspicion to cause her to mistrust Marc. And, she was going to escape Edwin Hexle somehow...some way...

By dusk, the temperature had dropped well below zero. Edwin didn't bother to build a fire. His prancing kept him warm, and he wasn't concerned with the women's needs. It was just as well. The faint odor of gas drifting from the kitchen warned them a lighted match might well reduce the house to instant ash and cinders. So, neither woman spoke their discomfort aloud.

"Where's the money, Lillian!" Edwin roared. His eyes bulged in his thin face. His lips turned purple from rage.

"What money?" Lillian whimpered and wrung her hands. "I've told you and told you, I don't have any money!"

"You always were so goddamned stupid, Lillian!" Edwin gave the club an impatient swing through the air. "I ain't interested in *your* money! I want that hunnert grand Miller stole from me!"

"Stole from you!" Lillian gasped indignantly.

"Ya! Me! I was head of accounting at Handly Products. Remember? I'd been jugglin' those books for two years before Miller came along with his hifalutin ideas. He was a smooth talker, all right. Said he knew how to get twice the cash and neither one of us get caught."

"That's not true!" Lillian swore with an emphatic shake of her head. "You threatened Dusty because you found out about us! Dusty went along with your schemes to keep you quiet!"

"Is that what he told you?" Edwin roared with malicious laughter. "You fool!" The laughter dissolved into a sneer. "Do you believe I wanted *you*? It was your sister I wanted..." His voice trailed off dreamily. "That Evie sure had some fire in her. At least, until Miller got her under his thumb..."

"No!" Lillian beat her clenched fists on her thighs. "No! No! No! Evelyn didn't want Dusty! She kept us apart when she wouldn't give him a divorce!"

"They were never married!" Edwin sneered.

"She lied against you on her deathbed!" Lillian cried.

"She told the truth! I knocked Miller in the head with the bumper jack and sent the car rolling over the side of the bluff!"

"But he didn't die!"

"*WHAT!*" Edwin dropped his weapons and charged across the room to grab Lillian by her shoulders, shaking her as if he was trying to eject the answers he wanted to hear from her. "What the hell are you bawlin about? Miller burned up in that car!"

Edwin's demands remain unanswered. Lillian had fainted.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Minutes crawled by like hours. Too apprehensive to sit in one of the trucks, Marc paced back and forth across the county road.

Ted watched sympathetically for a while. Eventually, his patience wore thin and he yelled through the open window of his pickup.

"You better relax, man, or you ain't gonna be fit to help Betsy any way at all!"

Marc glared at him, accusing, "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ted inquired uneasily.

"Just what I said," Marc answered. "It'd suit you just fine if I was out of the picture altogether, wouldn't it?"

Ted ran his fingers through his unruly hair. There was a time when he anticipated such a confrontation with Marc, but found it difficult to believe it was happening now. He replaced his dog-eared hunter's cap back on his head before he cautiously emerged from his truck, and took measured, but determined steps toward Marc. He tried to explain, "Look, I've known Bets since we were kids but..."

"How many times you try to lay her?"

"*Of all the....!*" Ted bellowed in angry indignation. "What the hell's the matter with you? Bets is like another sister to me!"

"Sure she is."

Marc's sarcasm almost cost Ted his last shred of calm composure.

"You know, for a cop, you sure are one helluva stupid jackass! Anyone can see Betsy ain't interested in no man but you! What the hell makes you think otherwise?"

Marc's accusing gaze suddenly dropped to the ground between them. He scuffed one boot over the ice-covered gravel. His sheepish reply was measured and evasive.

"It's a long story. You don't know the half of it."

"I know the two of you ran into some kind of trouble that she couldn't handle. That's why she came back to the farm. You think you're the only one ever got dumped on? At least the two of you had guts enough to try to work it out."

"Only because of the baby," Marc muttered.

"Like hell!" Ted bellowed. "If the baby is all you two got goin', how come Bets didn't do nothin' last fall but sit around and draw pictures of you? How come she got ice cold the one time I...?"

"*What?*" Marc grabbed Ted's coat front. "You did sleep with her! I suspected it all along!"

Ted heaved a deep sigh. Sometimes even he wished someone would put a gag on his mouth. It was going to take some talking to correct this blunder.

Slowly, with a good deal of difficulty, because Marc was as strong as he was, he loosened Marc's hands from his coat and stepped back.

"Nothing happened," he declared carefully. "There's only one woman I ever loved and she ain't Betsy."

"Still you..."

"Look. My Ma and Lilli been hoping' Bets and me would get together since we was kids. When she came home, they started encouraging me, and it was obvious she needed a friend. Hell! She's one damned good lookin' woman! Sweet too! I took her out one night and things got a little out of hand. She was using me to forget you...and I..."

"Just took advantage of the situation," Marc growled and slammed one fist squarely into Ted's jaw.

Ted sprawled backward across the frozen road. His cap flew off as he landed. Searching around for it allowed him a moment to distill his fury.

He dusted the dirt and ice off the top of the cap and adjusted the ear flaps so they stood out just enough to flop on either side of his head. They were handy that way, and loose, so he could pull them down when the wind threatened his ears.

Placing the cap back on his head, he confronted Marc one more time.

"Listen to me. I said it didn't work. That woman loves you so much she couldn't even kiss me without whispering your name."

Marc was stunned. The mental image of Elizabeth in Ted's arms was not pleasant, but the prospect of her whispering his name placed comical insight to it. He stood his ground while one dark eyebrow rose, stating his thoughts all too clearly.

"Yup," Ted sniggered. "She don't know to this day that she said it either." He struggled to get to his feet.

Marc offered a hand to steady him, and Ted continued to explain while he planted his feet beneath his brawny frame.

"She brought me to my senses, too. I guess, I realized what she was doing because I've done it so often myself. That's when I decided to set things right with Nancy. She haunted me all these years—just like you must've haunted Betsy. I owe that little lady. That's why...oh, damn it all to hell anyway! Why did that bastard uncle have to come back here? My uncle with my shotgun! He's got my mom's best friend and her daughter down there holding them captive with my gun! Do you have any idea how that makes me feel?"

Ted swung one arm down in a helpless gesture and turned back to his pickup.

Realizing what his foolish jealous outburst had done, Marc began to feel like the fool he'd acted. Ted had become a good friend in recent weeks, and he did watch over Elizabeth as one would a sister. Marc felt deeply ashamed of his jealous nature. There was no excuse for it, and there was only one way to rectify it. He sprang after Ted, catching hold of his shoulder.

"Hey, man, I'm sorry," he apologized. "I had no right to act like that. None of this is your fault."

Ted whirled around to face him. "Bets and Lilli are more like my own flesh and blood than Ed ever was! If he hurts either one of them it's my fault for letting him come back here! The bastard's no good! Never was! My dad sure was right when he claimed that!"

"But it wasn't all Hexle," Marc tried to explain. "Elizabeth's father had a hand in everything that ever went wrong in her life. He caused all the trouble between the two of us."

"Ah, he died before she ever knew him," Ted scoffed.

"No, he didn't," Marc said

"You want to explain that?" Ted inquired skeptically.

At that moment, a police siren pierced the air. Both men faced that direction and Ted began to grumble.

"It's about damned time! I got Whitman on his private C.B. channel while ago before you got here. Told him what was goin' on. He knows me well enough to take my word..."

"Looks like he brought back up..." Marc commented drily.

He watched several cars traveling behind the sheriff's bubble-lit, headlight-flashing vehicle with the county logo painted on its doors.

"Damned good thing Ed can't see that from the house..." Ted grumbled, causing Marc to snigger. Ted gave him a sidelong glance. "You still got some explainin'..."

"Sure," Marc agreed. Ted deserved that much. "But it'll have to wait. Hopefully, Elizabeth will be able to help me explain it to you in a little while."

Edwin struck Lillian's face once. He raised a hand to strike her again; but, Elizabeth grabbed his injured forearm so roughly he yelped in pain.

"You leave my mother alone!" Elizabeth commanded with a good deal more courage than she felt. "She can't answer your questions now."

"What the hell is she talkin' about?" Edwin demanded. He stepped back, then squatted down with shotgun and club braced across his bent knees. "What makes her believe Miller got out'a that wreck alive?"

"Because he did," Elizabeth answered.

Edwin thrust the club forward threateningly. "Yer lyin' to me, girl! There ain't no way Miller could've escaped that fire! I seen it!"

Elizabeth refused to be intimidated.

"I don't know anything about the car accident, or what caused it," she said. "I do know that the man you knew as Dusty Miller did not die until about six months ago. He was a successful businessman, living in Chicago."

Edwin stared at her in total disbelief. His mouth gaped.

Encouraged by his silence, she continued, "I didn't know he was my father then, but I knew him as a father. I was manager of an art gallery he owned stock in. He took great pains to keep his true identity secret from everyone, including the fact that he was dealing heavily in narcotics. My husband, Marc, was the policeman who arrested him. Rather than face prison, Neville Drastin—Dusty

Miller—as you knew him, shot Marc’s colleague, Chuck Willows. Chuck shot and killed Neville in return just before he died. Chuck saved Marc’s life in that incident.”

Edwin rose to his feet and began to impatiently pace the room, all the while continuing to eye Elizabeth with suspicion.

“How do you know this....what did you call him?”

“Neville Drastin,” Elizabeth answered confidently. She realized Edwin was hoping to confuse her.

“How do you know him and Miller are the same person?”

“Were,” Elizabeth corrected without batting a lash. “That is one of the reasons Marc returned to Chicago. I didn’t know until I moved back here that Dusty Miller and Neville Drastin were the same person. When Mom told me, I was content to take her word for it. Marc is not. If there is proof one way or the other, he will find it.”

“You sound mighty certain of your hubby,” Edwin sneered.

“I am,” Elizabeth replied.

“Maybe he went back to Chicago for good.”

“Mr. Hexle, I’m pregnant with Marc’s child. No self-respecting man would leave his child behind. Not even Dusty Miller.”

“But he did...” Edwin sneered, believing he’d scored that one.

“He did not,” Elizabeth flatly denied. “When I was little, he returned here in secret. He brought gifts. He paid for my education, and he gave me employment. He even left me a kind of legacy.”

“What’s that?”

“Those watercolor paintings you’ve been trampling on all afternoon, and that one hanging above the mantle.”

Edwin dashed across the room to fling the painting of Lillian as a young girl from the wall. As it struck the floor, a tinkling sound vibrated through the stillness and a small piece of metal rolled away from the frame.

Edwin scurried after it, scooping up the tiny object in his boney fingers.

“A key,” he sang, waving it excitedly. “What’s it unlock?”

Elizabeth was so stunned she could barely answer. “I don’t know.”

“It was hidden behind your precious painting!” he snarled in accusation.

“That watercolor hung in my mother’s bedroom for years,” she answered.

“You’ll have to ask her what that key unlocks...if anything...”

“Bring her around then! If you don’t, I will!” Edwin took a step forward, brandishing the club in a threatening gesture.

Determined not to be intimidated, Elizabeth glared at him until he lowered the club. Only then, did she lean over to gently pat her mother’s cheek.

“Momma?”

Lillian irritably batted Elizabeth’s hand away as she sat up, shaking her head in disgust.

“I’ve been listening to your tale, Betsy. You should be ashamed of yourself! Telling such lies! Accusing your father of murder, of all things.”

“It’s true, Mom,” Elizabeth patiently insisted. “I was there. Remember?”

"If Dusty did anything illegal, it was because he could no longer endure being used!" Lillian declared. Her pinched expression spoke her anger loud and clear.

A derisive snort brought Lillian's attention to Edwin, who continued to turn the key over and over in his hand.

"That key belongs to an old trunk in the attic upstairs," Lillian tersely informed him.

"That trunk is empty. It used to hold those paintings."

"No, no, no..." Lillian waved aside Elizabeth's explanation with an impatient gesture. "There's a secret compartment in the lid. Dusty used it for personal papers and such."

Edwin's shifty gaze suddenly widened with excitement. He danced across the room as he demanded, "Where is it? Where's that goddamned trunk?"

"I told you. In the attic," Lillian snapped in exasperation.

"Go get it!" Edwin roared, brandishing his club.

"I can't carry that big old trunk down here!" Lillian cried.

Edwin's movements were extremely agile for someone who appeared so emaciated. He dropped his club with such force, it rolled across the floor and smacked against the north wall beneath a window seat. Before it hit the wall, he shoved the key into his pants pocket and grabbed a handful of Elizabeth's hair, wrenching her to her feet as, with the other hand, he aimed the shotgun at her face.

"You git that trunk down here or kiss your daughter good-bye!" he bellowed.

Lillian stumbled to her feet and scurried to the hallway. Her distraught mumblings could be heard all the way up the stair.

"Oh, dear....how do I....Oh, dear, dear..."

"Ain't got much guts, that one," Edwin commented disgustedly. "I guess that's what ole Miller saw in'er. He could tell her any little ole lie and still have her in bed."

"Regardless of what you think, my father loved my mother," Elizabeth replied.

They stood nose to nose. Elizabeth refused to blink or flinch. After a moment, Edwin's foul breath expelled into her face as he let out a roar of delight.

"You're the spunky one! Miller's daughter, all right!"

Then, he lifted his voice toward the ceiling.

"Lillian! Git your skinny carcass down here with that there trunk, or your daughter's gonna die!"

He yelled so loud, so close, Elizabeth thought her eardrum would burst.

Lillian's distraught voice was a high-pitched wail drifting down the stair.

"I'm coming! I'm coming! This old trunk is heavy!"

Her last words were drowned out by a repeated thunk, thunk, thunk as the trunk rolled down the stair, end over end. Lillian stumbled along behind it.

When the trunk rolled to a stop at the foot of the stair, Edwin released Elizabeth with a shove that sent her stumbling into the open door jamb. He eagerly loosened the catch on the front of the trunk.

The interior was empty just as Elizabeth said.

"You lyin' bitch!" Edwin rasped, taking a menacing step toward Lillian.

"I told you the key unlocks a secret compartment in the top!" Lillian screeched, raising her arms with fists clenched before her face in a gesture of self-defense.

Edwin retrieved the key from his pocket and thrust it at her, commanding, "Unlock it, then!"

Lillian's hands shook uncontrollably. Still, she managed the task with little difficulty. The roll-away lid fell aside, revealing a narrow compartment containing several rolls of bills and a hefty sheaf of papers tied together with twine.

"Hot damn! Here it is!" Edwin fell to his knees, gathering up the straying bills in frantic attempt to count them.

The naked eye could see the total sum of all those bills did not amount to a third of the money he expected to find.

Edwin turned on Lillian again, demanding, "What the hell did that bastard do with the rest of it?"

"I never knew that was in there!" Lillian cried. "Dusty told me he was keeping a little nest egg for emergencies! He...he always looked into the trunk when he came home, but I never questioned him about it."

Suddenly Edwin's maniacal ravings, and Evelyn's deathbed confession, made more sense than the numerous tales Dusty Miller led Lillian to believe. After three decades of blind, loving trust, Lillian finally realized her home was a criminal's hideout.

Out of mere curiosity, Elizabeth picked up the sheaf of papers. After scanning several of them, wished she could destroy them before anyone else saw them.

They were letters and documents, proof of Neville Drastin's criminal connections. A great many of them held his signature. She, too, realized the frequent trips he made to this farm were for the purpose of concealing these documents where they were unlikely to ever be found. The same held for the money. No doubt, the total sum varied immensely over the years.

Edwin dropped to his knees in despair.

"All these years, I waited," he sobbed. "That bitch, Evie, told me if I killed Miller the money would be ours together. Then, she turned on me to protect him on her deathbed! I knew it would all be mine if I could find it. How did he git out'a that car? I knocked him out cold, and watched that car roll over the bluff, and burn to cinders!"

He crumpled a meager wad of bills in his boney fingers.

"All I get is a couple thousand dollars? It ain't fair! I'm the one who suffered, waiting and waiting..."

While she listened to Edwin's hysterical ranting, a demented look crept into Lillian's eyes. Suddenly, she grabbed up the shotgun he'd discarded in haste to retrieve those straying bills, and began striking him on the head with the butt.

“I hate you!” she screamed. “Dusty’s gone and you’ve destroyed all I have left of him! All those precious memories...you destroyed them! They’re gone...gone...gone!”

“Mom! Stop!” Elizabeth tried to grab the gun from her mother. They struggled while Lillian continued to insist, “He must pay! He must pay!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Eight men crept stealthily forward from several vehicles parked in the shadows of the brace of cedars across the creek opposite the farmhouse.

When the sound of shotgun fire roared through the frozen acres, a cry of terror erupted from the tall, dark-haired man leading the group. He leaped ahead, heedless of the treacherous ground, despite the cautious warning from another tall, dark-haired, bearded man who dashed after him. The other six men wore badges of authority and immediately followed, all cocking their firearms at the ready, prepared for any kind of imaginable battle...

Marc reached the back porch in a matter of minutes. Crossing it with giant strides, he flung the kitchen door wide with such force it smacked against the bracing wall.

He was greeted by silence. Absolute stillness in the shambles that remained of the kitchen.

He glanced warily toward Ted, who followed steps behind him.

Then, they heard it...a woman's mournful wail.

With quickened pace, hastily but cautiously, they crept through the living room to find Elizabeth and Lillian seated at the foot of the stair sobbing into each other's arms.

A few feet away, Edwin Hexle slumped over an open antique roll-top trunk.

Very near the dangling front door, half-way up the wall, a gaping hole allowed twilight to peep through. On the floor, near the living room door, lay a discarded shotgun.

Ted quickly picked up the gun, examining the damaged and bloody butt end before he placed it out of sight in the living room.

"It's true, isn't it?" Lillian sobbed. "All those years, I refused to believe what everyone else knew. Pop...Evie too...they tried to warn me. I spoke to Evie before she died, you know. She asked to see me alone and she...she said Dusty was better off dead. That...that he was evil. That you and I were lucky to live without him. I hated her for that. All these years, I hated her so much I wished I'd killed her instead of Edwin."

Lillian's mouth turned down at the corners in an expression of pure hatred as she glared at Edwin.

Edwin struggled to sit upright, attempting to return Lillian's glare while he pressed one hand to his bleeding scalp. It was a wonder he had not passed out from Lillian's assault. The butt of the shotgun left serious wounds on his head.

His hair was matted. Blood seeped through his fingers into his eyes. Yet, he retained enough of his composure to snarl in defense.

"I didn't kill Evie! Miller did! He said it was the only way he could be rid of her. He hit her and threw her into the ditch alongside the road. That's when I snuck up on him from behind!"

Attempting to take advantage of their audience, Edwin pushed himself to his knees as he continued to wail, "Lillian hit me with that gun! She..."

Ted cut him off with a sarcastic retort. "Peers you had it commin', Ed."

At that moment, Sheriff Whitman pushed aside the front door and stepped in, announcing his presence with a low whistle as he viewed the shambles of the interior of the farmhouse. He lifted his hat and scratched his balding head as he faced Edwin.

"Well, what have we got on you this time, Hexle? Breakin' and enterin', vandalism along with holdin' two captives at gunpoint. Where the hell did you get hold of a shotgun, anyway? Guess we'll have to add theft to the charges. I hear you even beat the snot out of a dog. So, that adds animal cruelty. You're gonna be locked in the slammer for a few more years, I reckon. Think you'll learn your lesson by then?"

Edwin slumped forward, mumbling, "All I wanted was my fair share!"

"But, it wasn't your money!" Lillian cried. "It was stolen money and it...it didn't belong to Dusty either..." Her voice trailed off to a dismal whisper as she faced her daughter through a haze of tears. "I believed Dusty, but he lied to me. He used me just like he did everyone else. I was such a fool! He never loved me at all!"

"Yes, he did love you, Momma!" Elizabeth softly entreated. Her voice was choked with tears. "He loved both of us. Don't you see? He took care of us in his way. Think of the pains he must have taken to keep us from knowing how he really earned a living. And...and think too...the money, those documents, all were very important to him. Where else does a man hide such things, but the place he considers home? Edwin just said Dusty tried to kill Evelyn because he believed it was the only way he could be rid of her. Why else would he want that; but, so he could be free to love us?"

"She knew how he was. Why didn't she divorce him...or just leave him if they weren't married?" Lillian shook her head in an attempt to make sense of it all.

"You told me she and Dusty argued all the time," Elizabeth said. "Have you ever considered that she was trying to protect you? Perhaps she really did believe he destroyed her life, and she was determined not to let him destroy your life too."

"But...she made me hate her! She was my sister and I hated her..."

Lillian burst into tears again. Her wrathful gaze fell on Edwin. One deputy was reciting his Miranda Rights while another helped him to stand and clasped his hands behind his back with metal cuffs. A third deputy produced makeshift bandages to cover his wounds. He continued to mumble incoherently as they led him away.

Marc reached out to help Elizabeth stand. She collapsed in his arms, sobbing with relief.

"Oh Marc, I'm so glad you're home!"

Ted helped Lillian.

"I'm a foolish old woman," she told him.

"No, you ain't, Lilli," Ted firmly disagreed. He slipped a strong arm around her slim waist to support her. "You are one caring, loving woman. I'm not certain I understand all I heard here, but I'll tell you one thing. If Dusty Miller kept coming back all these years, he knew what he had. You ask me, the sucker had the best of both worlds right in the palm of his hand."

"Do you really think so?" Lillian inquired hopefully.

Elizabeth watched Ted lead Lillian to find a more comfortable place to sit in the living room. She began to frown in concern as she faced the sheriff.

"What will happen to my mother now?"

"Why...nothin..." Sheriff Whitman seemed startled by her question. "Looks like a clear case of self-defense to me."

Marc lifted Elizabeth's face between the palms of his hands as he inquired, "Are you all right? The baby?"

"We're fine...but...Muffin!" Elizabeth gasped, suddenly remembering her pet. "Muffin's out there somewhere. She's hurt!"

"Ted found her," Marc replied. "She's in his truck."

Heaving a deep sigh, Elizabeth leaned into Marc's embrace.

"I sent her to find him."

Marc hugged Elizabeth hard, but his gruff reply grated against her ear.

"Are you ever going to listen to me, Elizabeth Anne?"

"From now on. I promise," she solemnly swore.

Sheriff Whitman drew their attention when he expelled a low whistle. He had retrieved the sheaf of documents from the floor, and leafed through it disinterestedly until one document drew his attention. He glanced up, eyeing Elizabeth suspiciously.

"Did you know about this?"

"About what?" She accepted the document the sheriff handed to her.

"It appears you and your momma are two rich ladies. You are Elizabeth Anne Miller, by your maiden name, aren't you?"

"Yes...but..."

The document in question was a will signed by Neville Drastin—which by all indications appeared to be his legal name, not Dusty Miller. Elizabeth was named his daughter and heir to all of his holdings. Lillian was to be provided with a trust that would support her in comfort for the remainder of her life.

"Marc?" Elizabeth entreated in a voice filled with disbelief and shock. "He really did love us, didn't he?"

"It sure looks like it," Marc agreed as he drew her close again.

Sheriff Whitman watched the couple for a moment while he weighed all of the events of the afternoon. After a moment, he spoke his consternation.

"I sure never thought anything like this would come out of spliced telephone wires and a broken lock."

"It's the end of an old, old conflict," Elizabeth explained.

"Well, let's hope it's a happy ending." Sheriff Whitman smiled before he turned to Marc. "Aren't you the fellow who put in an application at my headquarters the other week?"

"Yes, sir, I am," Marc answered.

"Thought you looked familiar New Year's Day. You all plannin' to live here now? After this?"

"That's up to my wife," Marc replied, glancing at Elizabeth with a smile.

She made a face, then gave a careless shrug.

"It's home. We were planning to redecorate anyway."

EPILOGUE

Elizabeth stood in her flannel nightgown brushing her hair in front of the dressing table in the spare bedroom of Lillian's apartment.

"You're supposed to be in bed."

She whirled to face Marc, whose stance—legs astride, hands firmly planted on hips—loudly spoke his annoyance.

Her lower lip trembled. "I miss Muffin," she whispered hoarsely.

"Elizabeth Anne..." Marc sighed, giving his head a tolerant shake.

What was he going to do with her?

Going to the farm during his absence against his wishes was defiance enough. She and her mother refused to accept Neville Drastin's inheritance. "Blood Money" they called it with no consideration to the fact that a great deal of the fortune was obtained from legal stock in *The Plaza*.

Lillian could be excused, Marc supposed. At this point, she was too distraught to think in any kind of rational sense.

Elizabeth possessed a much more stable frame of mind, and under the circumstances, he didn't blame her for her immediate sentiments. There were bound to be repercussions of all sorts, legal and public, once word got out surrounding discovery of the will. Still, he believed Elizabeth was being just plain bullheaded for not wanting to hire an attorney to investigate her holdings before she flatly declined access to them.

On top of that, here she was, in clear defiance of the doctor's orders to get immediate bed rest, *standing* in front of a mirror worrying about her dog!

"Are you really so mad about the money?"

Elizabeth's ability to read Marc's thoughts caused a grin to tug one corner of his mouth. He shook his head again before answering.

"I believe you should think about it. Hire an attorney to investigate what all is involved before you make any permanent decisions...tomorrow."

"I was waiting for you." A sob caught in her throat and two great tears rolled down her face.

"Honey..." Marc groaned, closing the space between them to gather her in his arms.

"It's just so much to comprehend," she whispered. "How long was Edwin Hexle waiting to get into my house believing thousands of dollars of extortion money was hidden in there? You suspected him all along, didn't you?"

"I was afraid some of Drastin's men had followed you here. But, I didn't like Hexle either."

"I know. Especially after what he did to Muffin." Elizabeth sniffed convulsively. "It's not fair. She shouldn't suffer more than anyone else. She's just a helpless puppy."

"One helluva smart puppy!" Marc corrected gruffly. "The vet is only keeping her a day or two for observation. She'll be good as new in no time."

"I miss her." Elizabeth rubbed her tears into the front of his shirt. After a moment, she asked, "Is Mom asleep?"

"Out like a light," Marc declared. "That sedative the doc gave her did its work. Did you take the one he gave you?"

"No. I don't need a sedative. I just need you."

A low groan escaped Marc as he hugged Elizabeth hard.

"Do you have any idea how many times I've wanted to hear you tell me you needed me?"

"Probably as many times as I want to say so, but was afraid to." She sighed. "I'm so dumb."

"You are not dumb, Elizabeth Anne. You're bullheaded stubborn."

"I really haven't been so unlucky," she decided. "I did have two parents who loved me, even though they never told me so. That's what hurts, you know. That they never told me who they were. Mom and I can make up for that now...Maybe keeping it a secret was for my own good. It still hurts."

After another hug, Marc set her at arms' length and commanded, "Time you got in bed, woman."

He moved over to the bed to pull back the covers.

Elizabeth took a step to follow but stopped, clutching her abdomen.

"Elizabeth!" Marc cried, quickly retracing his steps to her side.

She grabbed his hand and pressed it against her belly. A wistful smile covered her face.

"Feel the baby?" she asked. "He's moved several times only I didn't know what it was. I asked the doctor while ago and he said...Marc? What's wrong?"

A peculiar expression covered Marc's face. His jaw trembled so, his voice shook as he spoke.

"I wondered if you would tell me when you started feeling life."

"Of course I plan to tell you every development! He's your baby too!"

"That's the second time you've said 'he'."

"I'm pretty certain our baby is a boy. Can we name him after my grandfather? Joseph Marcus or Marcus Joseph. Whichever you prefer?"

"Either one is fine if it's a boy. Now, will you get in bed?"

He firmly guided her there and tucked her beneath the covers as if she was a small child. Once settled with the blanket snuggled beneath her chin, she said, "I love you, Marc. More than I ever thought it was possible for one human to love another. I have always loved you."

He smiled and pressed a kiss against her forehead. "I fell in love with you the first time I saw you."

Elizabeth smothered a giggle. Her eyes danced with merriment.

"Just like Prince Charming?" she asked.

"Yeah, Cinderella babe," he grinned.

"Now, we can live happily ever after."

"Well...soon..." He chuckled as he playfully tugged her earlobe. "Our castle needs a bit of redecorating first."

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Mary Elizabeth Fricke has lived her entire life within five miles of the Missouri River. She and her husband of 40 years have lived 38 of those years on a farm that has been consistently owned and operated by his family for five generations. They have two grown sons married to wonderful women and two beautiful grandchildren.

A graduate of the Writer's Institute of America and a member of the Heartland Writers Guild, she has published a number of articles in various forums and magazines. She is also a prolific ghostwriter.

Her stories, based in rural mid-western areas, concern the unique but quickly vanishing way of life on the family farm as well as other mysterious intricacies that evolve life from generation to generation. Romance is her preferred genre.

To learn more about Mary, visit her website at: <http://www.mefororiginals.com>

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