

MILLS & BOON



Vintage *Cherish*

When I Dream of You

LAURIE PAIGE

Laurie Paige

When I Dream Of You

«HarperCollins»

Paige L.

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MY ENEMY...MY LOVE?For generations, a lake shimmering with sinister, scandalous secrets divided the rival ranching families of Megan Windom and Kyle Herriot. So how could one waltz sweep them into a treacherous whirlpool of primal, unthinkable desire? Why did Kyle's husky whispers begin unveiling Megan's lost memories? Why did quiet Megan haunt Kyle's dreams? What drew them inexorably toward betraying their own kin? Family loyalties and a flood of suspicions threatened to swamp the fierce yet fragile bond that throbbed between them like a thousand ravens' wings. Yet, come hell or high water, their forbidden passion could not be forever denied....

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Why her? Why now? Kyle asked himself.

It was a mystery, part of the larger one he was trying to solve—about his father and her mother, her grandfather and his grandmother.

Danger swirled around him like a fatal cloud of poison. But Megan didn't taste like poison; she tasted like honey, sweet and tempting.

He touched her and felt flames leap, part of him suddenly aching for things he couldn't name. He felt a tremor run through her, and he shuddered, lost to reason, as desire flamed higher for this woman, this lovely enemy who made him forget the past and ignore the future.

"It's hell," he heard himself say, "this wanting."

"Yes, I know," Megan answered feverishly. "To find this now, with you..."

"The enemy," he whispered, finishing the unthinkable thought.

Dear Reader,

International bestselling author Diana Palmer needs no introduction. Widely known for her sensual and emotional storytelling, and with more than forty million copies of her books in print, she is one of the genre's most treasured authors. And this month, Special Edition is proud to bring you the exciting conclusion to her SOLDIERS OF FORTUNE series. The Last Mercenary is the thrilling tale of a mercenary hero risking it all for love. Between the covers is the passion and adventure you've come to expect from Diana Palmer!

Speaking of passion and adventure, don't miss *To Catch a Thief* by Sherryl Woods in which trouble—in the form of attorney Rafe O'Donnell—follows Gina Petrillo home for her high school reunion and sparks fly.... Things are hotter than the Hatfields and McCoys in Laurie Paige's *When I Dream of You*—when heat turns to passion between two families that have been feuding for three generations!

Is a heroine's love strong enough to heal a hero scarred inside and out? Find out in *Another Man's Children* by Christine Flynn. And when an interior designer pretends to be a millionaire's lover, will *Her Secret Affair* lead to a public proposal? Don't miss *An Abundance of Babies* by Marie Ferrarella—in which double the babies and double the love could be just what an estranged couple needs to bring them back together.

This is the last month to enter our *Silhouette Makes You a Star* contest, so be sure to look inside for details. And as always, enjoy these fantastic stories celebrating life, love and family.

Best,

Karen Taylor Richman

Senior Editor

When I Dream of You

Laurie Paige

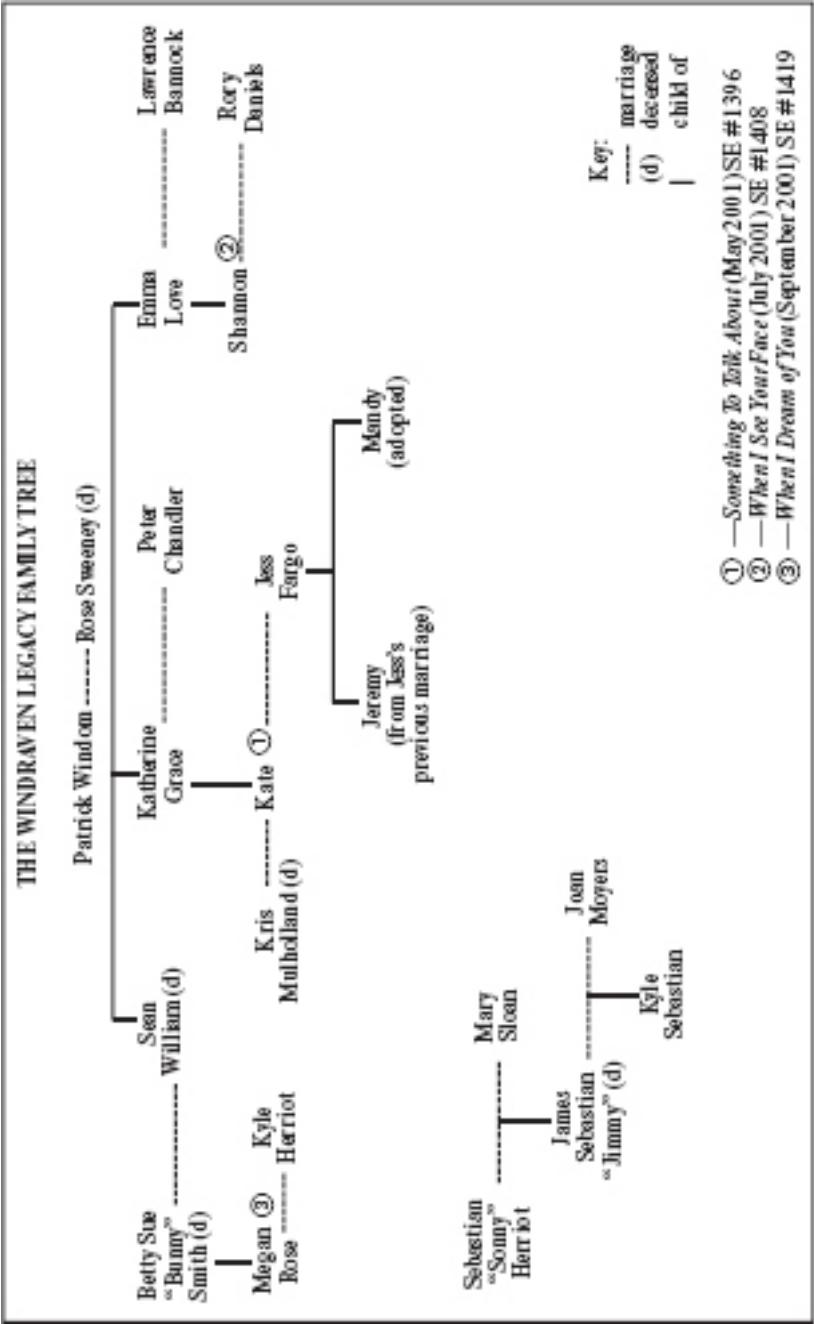


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To my family (both in-laws and out-laws)
for help with “best-laid plans.” See you at the reunion!

LAURIE PAIGE

says, “In the interest of authenticity, most writers will try anything...once.” Along with her writing adventures, Laurie has been a NASA engineer, a past president of the Romance Writers of America, a mother and a grandmother. She was twice a Romance Writers of America RITA finalist for Best Traditional Romance and has won awards from Romantic Times Magazine for Best Silhouette Special Edition and Best Silhouette. Recently resettled in Northern California, Laurie is looking forward to what-ever experiences her next novel will send her on.



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Chapter One

Megan Windom kept the smile on her face as she and her partner dipped and swayed to the rhythm of the first waltz of the wedding reception. Tears pressed close to the surface and she didn't know why. It was a happy occasion—the wedding of her cousin, Shannon, who was also her best friend, to Rory Daniels, another lifelong friend.

Turning her head, she quickly slid her gaze past her partner's angular, unsmiling face. Kyle Herriot, her enemy, son of the man who had caused her mother's death, met her brief look without a flicker of emotion in his eyes.

The fact that Kyle's father had also died in the sailing accident didn't mitigate the mystery of why Bunny Windom had been on his yacht or how and why she'd been knocked unconscious so that she hadn't had a chance to survive when the boat went down.

Sighing, Megan admitted that wasn't the only mystery in her life. At twenty-six, she had no memory of her first eleven years. It was as if her life had started the day of her mother's funeral.

That terrible day she recalled in vivid detail. The tears. The flowers. The overcast sky with lightning and thunder rumbling among the peaks of the Wind River Mountains. The terror and uncertainty as she watched them lower her mother into the ground—

"Bear up," Kyle advised. "The mandatory waltz of the maid of honor and best man will be over in another minute. It can't come soon enough for me, either."

He had a wonderful voice, husky and deep and resonant, like twilight and campfire smoke, like distant mountains and the wind through the cottonwoods. A lover's voice—warm and honey-smooth, with an undercurrent of intimacy shaded into the masculine tones.

But none of that was for her, because she was his enemy, too. Like the Hatfields and the McCoys, their families had been hostile even before the boating incident.

"I beg your pardon?" she said as if she had no idea what he meant. Her tone was calm, not at all in sync with the haunting melancholy inside her.

His lips curled up ever so little at the corners in a knowing smile filled with the acid sting of disdain. "Being forced into my arms appears to be your idea of hell. You've sighed three times in the last minute."

"You overestimate your influence," she informed him with cool regard. "My sighs have nothing to do with you, only with...life."

She hated the hesitant note as she searched for a word that sounded innocuous, yet meaningful enough to account for her uncharacteristic moodiness.

Her enemy studied her, his thoughts unreadable in the depths of his gray eyes. A year ahead of her in high school, he'd treated her as if she hardly existed on the occasions they couldn't avoid each other, such as the Honor Society meetings. Kyle Herriot, football captain, had been vice president, then president when she'd been the treasurer.

Smart. Athletic. All-around hero.

A shiver raced through her, a sinister warning of something she couldn't name.

Tonight he was incredibly handsome in a white dinner jacket and black pants, a boutonniere of pink-edged golden roses attached to the lapel. His black hair gleamed in the multiple lights of the candles spaced about the patio and rolling lawn.

June in Wind River, Wyoming, was unpredictable, but Mother Nature had chosen to be kind this year, so that the wedding reception could be outdoors rather than in the formal dining hall, cleared for the occasion. The night sky was star-spangled, the air crisp but warm enough for Megan to wear only a silk shawl draped over her long evening gown of golden silk.

Around them, other couples took to the floor, urged by the bride, who called out happy greetings to friends and family members as she danced with her new husband.

The tension eased from Megan's shoulders as skin-prickling stares shifted to other couples. A Windom in the arms of a Herriot was news in this part of the world.

Kyle led her in an intricate step. He was a wonderful dancer, as firm and decisive as a professional. Once he'd found out she could follow him easily, he'd surprised her with his skill. How odd, to know they clicked effortlessly on the dance floor when their chance meetings were filled with silent accusations and distrust.

Inhaling deeply, she caught the scent of his cologne and the clean smell of balsam shampoo and soap mixed with pine and cedar from the mountains. The aroma of the light floral perfume she wore wafted around them, too.

Confusing sensations swept through her. She was surrounded, surfeited by it all—the evening, the first stars, the beauty of the wedding, the happiness of the bride and groom, the complex emotions of the day coupled with the memories she couldn't erase and those she couldn't recall—

“Easy,” the velvet-smooth voice murmured in her ear.

Kyle caught her close as her feet stopped moving, causing them to stumble. She thanked him and tried, really tried, to smile, but her lips trembled with the effort.

“What troubles you?” he asked.

Surprised by the question, she answered honestly. “My father sat out here and cried the night of my mother's funeral. That was in June, too. Fifteen years ago.”

The words tumbled out, startling her. She hadn't been consciously aware of them in her mind.

Kyle's expression hardened, but he said nothing.

“My room is up there.” She nodded toward the window overlooking the patio. “I sat on the window seat and watched him, each of us alone and hurting, but I didn't go to him. I couldn't; it was too frightening, listening to my father weep. I've always regretted that.”

“You were a child, what, nine, ten?” His tone was rough, not exactly sympathetic, but not hostile toward that child, either.

“Eleven. I'd just turned eleven in May.”

A week ago she'd looked at the pictures of her eleventh birthday party. Cake. Ice cream. Friends. Her face lit with joy as she prepared to blow out the candles. A little over three weeks before her mother would go down in a sailing yacht belonging to this man's father.

“He should have comforted you.”

“No.” She understood her father's grief, the depth of it, the terrible, terrible pain of loss. He'd loved Bunny Windom with all his heart and soul. She was sure of it.

Her partner said nothing else.

The dance ended in a grand flourish. Kyle swept her into a graceful dip, then twirled her around three times, stopping on the last beat of the music.

“Thank you. That was lovely,” she automatically said.

His lips curled at the corners. “My pleasure.”

After escorting her to the table where the wedding party had been seated, he deftly removed the bride from her new husband's arm and guided her onto the cleared dancing area. Shannon, looking as radiant as a dewdrop in sunlight, laughed as he executed a dramatic tango step with her.

The musicians immediately took up the tempo. Everyone stopped and watched the couple.

“Every woman's dream—a man who can dance really well,” Kate, Megan's other cousin, remarked, taking the seat next to her husband.

“Hey, I didn't think I was too bad,” Jess complained with good-natured complacency.

Jess was Megan's uncle, a virtual stranger who'd showed up last summer looking for clues to his sister's death. Bunny had lost track of her young brother—her stepfather had been a drifter—after she married and had always worried about his well-being.

“Well, for a cop with a limp, you're okay,” Kate conceded, her blue eyes—the envy of every woman in the county—sparkling with love and humor.

A vise clamped around Megan's heart as she listened to the teasing between two of the people she loved best in the world. She really was emotional today.

Why? Because she was the only one left of the three cousins who hadn't found her true love? Was she so petty as to be envious of their happiness?

No. She really was pleased that Kate and now Shannon had found their soul mates. She approved of their husbands, Jess Fargo and Rory Daniels. She adored Jess's son from his first marriage and the couple's recently adopted daughter.

Hearing herself sigh again, she admitted it was her own low spirits, and a past she couldn't recall that bothered her today. She couldn't figure out why.

"Wanna dance?" thirteen-year-old Jeremy Fargo asked.

"Now that's an offer I can't refuse," she said with a warm smile. She was teaching him to ride and handle horses. They'd become good friends in the process.

For the rest of the evening, she danced and toasted the bridal pair with an enthusiasm that was sincere. Later, as she tired, her emotions became unreliable again.

She managed to stave off the odd and irritating nostalgia or whatever it was by refilling platters and keeping an eye on the caterers. When the food was replenished, she looked around for something else to do.

Seeing that everything was in order and the guests happy, she relaxed and leaned against the wall, content to watch rather than take part.

"It's time," a deep, quiet masculine voice told her.

She glanced at Kyle with a question in her eyes.

"Rory wants to take Shannon home now. She has a headache, and he's worried. He doesn't want her to get overtired."

Shannon, a local cop, had received a head injury at Christmas and been temporarily blinded. Her vision had gradually come back, not all the way, but she could see.

The annoying, insistent tears pushed against Megan's control at Rory's consideration for his bride. "He's been so good for her," she murmured. Then, to her embarrassment, her eyes filled with tears, too many to simply blink away.

Kyle moved in front of her, concealing her from other curious eyes. His warmth surrounded her, oddly comforting but disturbing, too. She was aware of him, deep in her bones, in a way she didn't recall being aware of a man. It added to the welter of emotions that ruffled the even tenor of the evening.

"Does that bother you?" he asked, his harsh tones at odds with his kind actions.

Megan stared up at him.

"Did you want Rory for yourself?"

Her mouth dropped open, then she shook her head and managed a true smile. "I want the bride and groom to have all the happiness they deserve. I wish them the best."

He looked skeptical for a second, then shrugged. "How do we announce their departure?"

"We pass out the bags of birdseed." She slipped around his tall, lithe frame and pointed to a side table.

He helped her make sure each guest had a little net bag of seed to send the wedded couple off in a shower of blessings. When the bride and groom were gone, others began to take their leave.

Later, when all the guests had left, except for Kate, who'd stayed to help with the cleanup, Megan kicked off her shoes with relief.

"You don't have to do that," she scolded Kate, who was washing up a crystal bowl.

"This is the last piece. The caterers did a good job, didn't they?"

"Lovely." Lifting her left foot, Megan wiggled her toes. She was much more used to boots than heels—and preferred the more casual wear. Training horses and giving riding lessons was how she made her living. Horses were somewhat predictable. People weren't.

Kate dried the bowl and put it away. She hung up the dishtowel. "I hate to leave you here alone."
"I'll be fine." Megan managed another smile.

Her cousin wasn't fooled. Kate was seven years older. As a teenager, she'd often baby-sat Megan and Shannon. She'd been there when Bunny had drowned. Kate had been the rock that held steadfast for Megan then and five years later when her father had died in an automobile accident.

Their grandfather'd had a stroke shortly after his son died and lived the rest of his life in a wheelchair, hardly able to speak. It was all so sad—

Hot tears filled her eyes, startling her.

"Megan?" Kate said, concerned.

Megan grabbed a tissue and mopped her eyes. "I'm feeling terribly sentimental today. The wedding and all. Wasn't Shannon lovely?"

"Yes. Rory has been good for her."

Megan nodded.

"I can spend the night," Kate offered. "Jess took the children home. I have my car here."

Kate had brought over the roses that filled every vase in the house. The family green thumb belonged to her.

"Actually I prefer the quiet. It's been so hectic lately, I'm looking forward to not feeling compelled to talk to anyone or be social. Besides, I'm going out to check on a mare as soon as I change. If she's foaling, I'll be in the stable the rest of the night. You go home and take care of your family. You've done enough here today. Shoo."

"Okay," Kate agreed. "Come over for dinner tomorrow night. The guys have promised us fresh fish."

Megan had to decline. "I have late classes on Mondays." She walked her cousin to the driveway and waved her off.

It wasn't until Kate's taillights disappeared that she felt the loneliness close in on her once more. She stood at the top of the stairs, on the way to her bedroom, and listened to the silence of the old mansion that had sheltered several generations of Windoms.

Their grandfather, the family patriarch, had died during the spring, which was why Shannon had postponed the wedding until June. Now Megan was totally alone in the family homestead. It gave her an odd, unsettled feeling.

Like being the last of her kind.

Which wasn't true in the least. She had her two cousins, who'd been her friends and mentors all her life. She had her uncle, plus the two new cousins, Jeremy and Amanda. She knew everyone in Wind River, population one thousand, and the county. Besides her cousins and their families, other ranchers lived around the lake and along the county road. She wasn't alone, not at all.

After changing to a shirt, jeans and boots, she did go to the stable. The light flickered when she turned it on. If the electricity was going to go out, she'd better check the flashlight and fill the oil lantern. After doing so, she looked in on the mother-to-be.

The mare slept peacefully, waking only when Megan leaned over the stall. The horse rose and came to Megan, blowing gently into her ear and reminding her of the way a lover might tease during their lovemaking.

An image formed in her inner vision. Kyle Herriot. Now that her cousin was wed to his best friend, would she be forced to endure his company often?

Rather than recoiling from the idea, she studied it from several angles, trying to assess her own reactions.

The past wasn't his fault. Nor was it hers. It was just there, a barrier as big as a boulder field laid down by the glaciers that had moved through these parts thousands of years ago.

Her grandfather had hated the Herriots because his fiancée had run away from him only days before the wedding and eloped with Sebastian “Sonny” Herriot instead. Megan wondered what had caused the flight.

A neighboring woman had once said her grandfather’d had a terrible temper during his youth, that he and his fiancée had had a fierce quarrel over her brother, who was in jail for cattle-rustling and needed a lawyer. Grandfather had refused to help. Megan supposed Kyle’s grandfather had supplied the necessary funds.

Sad, what people do to their lives.

The hot rush of tears assailed her again. She hugged the mare and pressed her face into the rough mane, then drew away. “Go back to sleep, love.”

Honestly, if weddings affected her this much, she was going to have to swear off attending them. She smiled, but the odd tumult inside didn’t let up.

A warm, furry body wrapped itself around Megan’s legs. Tabby dropped a mouse at Megan’s feet.

“Thanks,” she said wryly, bending down to pat the cat. “I think I’ll let you keep the mouse. I hope this was the only one.”

Satisfied that all was well here, she flicked out the light and headed for the house. On the deserted patio, she paused, feeling the rush of overwhelming emotion again.

Her father had wept here, alone in the night, for the wife he’d lost.

Megan sensed, if not his presence, then his grief, terrifying to the child she’d been at the time, utterly sad to the adult she was now. The soul of Sean Windom had died that night, although his body hadn’t gone until five years later, when he’d had an automobile accident.

Drunk again, people had whispered. Driving too fast.

A sixteen-year-old at the time, she had vehemently denied he’d wanted to die. Now...now she wasn’t so sure.

The thought seemed a betrayal of her father’s memory. Pushing it out of her consciousness, she wondered why the past weighed so heavily of late. Since her grandfather’s death in March, it had preyed on her mind and emotions.

The specter of cleaning out drawers and closets loomed over her. It was something she should do, but she dreaded it. Kate and Shannon would help, but she wasn’t ready to face that task just yet.

Another shiver chased down her spine. Glancing once more around the patio, she slowly entered the house and felt its haunting emptiness. She walked upstairs, but instead of going to her bedroom, she went to the suite that had belonged to her parents.

She hadn’t been back in here since she and her cousins had gone through and disposed of the clothing and personal items. Jess had searched the room last summer, sure he would find a clue to his sister’s death. They had found only the usual things—photo albums, mementos from anniversary dinners, birthdays and the few vacations they’d had.

Gazing at the portrait of her mother, Megan was overwhelmed with love and despair and questions.

“Why?” she whispered, staring into green eyes that were so like her own. “Why were you out on that lake? Why were you with a man hated by our family? Why?”

The woman in the portrait returned her stare, the rose-petal lips caught forever in a soft, dreamy smile of perfect happiness, her belly flagrantly rounded with child.

The painting had been commissioned by her father for the couple’s first anniversary. The unborn child was a girl. Herself. Megan Rose Windom, her parents’ only child.

Closing her eyes, she tried to recall those early years. The happy times, she termed them. She had dozens of pictures of picnics, horseback rides and birthday parties to prove it. Her mother had been radiant in each of the early snapshots. When had their lives changed?

The past haunted her like a ghost at a banquet, demanding attention but refusing to show itself fully. Sometimes she got flickers of memories, but not enough...never enough to put the pieces together....

Turning abruptly, she fled down the hall to her room.

Dressed for bed, instead of climbing in the four-poster, she lingered with one knee on the window seat as she observed the moonstruck landscape sweeping down the pasture to the lake. Its surface was unnaturally still, splashed with pewter by the brilliant moon, reflecting the scattered clouds that drifted over the peaks to the west of the ranch.

The lake.

It looked beautiful, lying in a glacier-carved bowl, mysterious...treacherous.

The lake.

The place where a sailing yacht had crashed upon the rocks, and her mother, unconscious from a blow on the head, had drowned. An accident? The police report said so.

The lake.

It pulled at her as if the deep, cool water was a magnet of liquid metal, calling to her in nightmares that made her wake with cries of despair, fear eating her soul.

She blinked the sting of unwelcome tears from her eyes, her body tensed as if to run for her life.

The silvery surface of the water winked back at her, ruffled by a sudden wind blowing down from the mountain. From the cottonwoods by the creek, she heard the harsh caw of the ravens.

The ravens. Once they'd frightened her, too. The birds had cawed the night before her mother's death, or so it was rumored. She didn't remember.

What would it take, she wondered, to gather all the pieces of the past and put them in order?

Fear shuddered through her, but she ignored it. She wouldn't give in to terror like a child locked in a dark closet. The light of truth was what she needed to dispel the horror of her nightmares.

She would start in her grandfather's quarters. Soon. Next week. She would start next week.

It was a promise to the child who lived in the dreams that troubled her.

Chapter Two

Kyle Herriot held the door for his mother, closed and locked it, then set the alarm to go off if the door was opened again during the night. His mother'd had the security system installed fifteen years ago...shortly after his father's death.

"I'm glad that's over," she said, setting her purse on the marble-topped foyer table. "There's only the Windom girl left. When she marries, the name will be gone."

"Unless she chooses to stick with her maiden name." He followed his mother into the study. After pouring her a cordial of Riesling late harvest, he splashed an inch of brandy into a snifter and gazed out the windows that lined the western wall of the house.

The French doors opened onto a covered patio that looked out upon the mirror-smooth lake. One by one, the lights clicked off in the Windom mansion. He watched as headlights came on and the last vehicle in the circular drive sped away into the night.

Through the reflection in the glass, he saw his mother sit in her favorite chair, her eyes also drawn to the night scene beyond the windows.

"I've hated looking at that house," she said in musing tones. "For fifteen years. Since your father died."

He remembered the day as if it were yesterday. He'd been eleven, determined to go sailing with his dad, although he was on restriction due to some infraction of the rules. However, someone else had been with his father when he'd arrived at the boathouse on the lake.

Hearing an odd sound, he'd sneaked around the corner of the building and heard a woman crying. Sensing it would be unwise to butt in, he'd returned home, resentful that his plans had been interrupted due to adult problems.

"I wish I knew what happened that day," Joan Herriot continued, a thread of bitterness in her tone as always when discussing her husband's death.

"It was a long time ago."

She sighed. "I know."

They sat in silence for a while. Kyle saw the last light in the Windom house go off. Megan's bedroom, he assumed, from which she'd watched her father weep over the loss of the wife who had died with another man.

He resisted a stirring of pity for her, shaking his head slightly, denying the emotion. Like his mother, he had no sympathy for the Windoms.

His grandfather had hated them. He'd called Megan's grandfather an autocratic tyrant with an uncontrollable temper, a man who'd ruled the 5000-acre Windraven Ranch with an iron hand and little patience.

All that had changed after the old man's stroke, of course. It turned out the ranch had been in trouble. The three cousins had pooled their resources and saved the family homestead. He had to admire them for that.

Megan actually owned the house due to some convoluted inheritance from her grandmother—the woman Patrick Windom had married three months after Mary Sloan ran away from him and married Sonny Herriot, thus becoming his grandmother.

Now there was a tangled web, indeed. As far as he knew, no one had ever really known what had caused her flight.

"Are you all packed?" he asked his mother, trying to change the direction of his own thoughts.

"Yes," she said in a happier tone. "I'm not sure whether I'm growing more excited as the trip draws closer or more apprehensive. I keep thinking of a million things I should do here before I leave in the morning."

He laughed. “You’ve left a list of to-do’s that will keep me busy for the next two years. Enjoy your vacation. You’ve earned it.”

She finished her nightcap and stood. “I can’t wait to see all the plays I’ve read about. I need to get to bed if I’m going to be fresh in the morning for the trip.”

After she kissed him on the cheek and left, Kyle turned back to the house across the lake, his mood dark and thoughtful. Perhaps while his mother was on the month-long New York trip with a friend he would unravel some of the mystery surrounding his father’s death.

With old man Windom’s death back in March, there’d be no one to object if he nosed around on their side of the lake. Since he would have some time to himself, without having to worry about his mother’s feelings, this would be the perfect opportunity to check out the sailing yacht that had never been brought to the surface.

Hmm, how hard would it be to bring it up?

That was something he could look into. Going to his office, he flipped on the computer, then went on the Net with instructions for the search engine to find information on boat salvaging.

Three hours later, he had most of the salient facts. Now all he needed was a bit of luck. And no interference from the ranch across the way.

Why should Megan object? The sailboat was abandoned. The insurance company had paid off and left the yacht on the bottom of the lake. According to what he’d read, it belonged to anyone who could bring it up. That’s exactly what he wanted to do.

Climbing into bed in the wee hours of the morning, he heard the wind pick up, blowing down the mountain into the long valley of ranches and summer homes to the tiny town tucked into the far end. From across the lake came the sound of the ravens, crying out harshly from the cottonwoods by the creek.

There was a legend about the cawing of the ravens, something about true love going awry. But then, legends were always about lost loves or lost treasures or both.

He idly wondered if his grandmother had regretted her rash marriage to his grandfather and had wished she’d made up with Megan’s grandfather. He knew his mother had never gotten over the hurt and humiliation of his father’s being with another woman when he died, the two of them alone when the sailboat went down.

Or was scuttled.

He considered the possibility. Would an examination reveal what had really happened that day in June fifteen years ago? Or would it increase the mystery?

Tongues would wag if word got out about what he was doing, or attempting to do. While the site was at the other end of the lake, his neighbor across the way might get suspicious if she saw him going that way regularly, especially since he’d need to bring a compressor and a hundred feet of hose with him if he decided there was a chance of raising the yacht.

One comforting thought—it wouldn’t be as difficult as raising the Titanic. He gave a cynical snort of laughter.

In his room, stripped and ready to climb between the sheets, he paused at the window, drawn again to the lake and the house on the hill beyond. Bathed in moonlight, the scene looked eerie and surreal, the house a gothic mansion of mystery and danger.

His body stirred as it had while he held Megan in his arms during the one dance they had shared. A horse trainer and breeder, she was slender, strong and lithe as a willow twig. The small calluses on her palms at the base of each finger said she was no stranger to work. He liked that in a person, man or woman.

Her hair was light auburn with lots of sun streaks, all acquired naturally. She had a few freckles on her nose. Her eyes were a mossy green outlined with charcoal gray, as inviting to a man as a patch of shade in a hidden glen.

Hunger pinged through him, reminding him of the feel of her in his arms—all bright warmth and feminine delight, enough to tempt a man into foolishness. He'd been surprised at the strength of the hunger she'd aroused. With an effort, he brought his thoughts and libido under control.

The expression in the verdant depths of her eyes had bothered him. Her smile had been forced. Something was definitely bothering the last single Windom cousin.

Perhaps she was jealous that Shannon had snagged Rory Daniels instead of her. After all, the vet was her business partner in the breeding program. And Rory was “drop-dead gorgeous,” according to all the women in the county.

Kyle was suddenly glad his old friend was safely married and out of the way. With a curse, he turned his back on the night scene and hurried to bed. He had no designs on Megan Windom. After all, they were mortal enemies.

That was a bit over-dramatic, but their grandfathers had definitely been enemies. He wasn't sure what had happened between their parents; however, he was positive his father hadn't been carrying on with another woman. It just wasn't in the man's makeup to be deceptive.

Or was he viewing the world through the rose-colored lens of youth? His own life had been happy and confident before the accident and underscored with bitterness and questions afterward.

What had happened that day on the lake? It was something he'd like to find out.

Megan woke to a chorus of chirrups just as the sun came over the far eastern peak. Snuggled under the comforter, she stayed in the warm bed and let her mind drift aimlessly.

No matter how warm the day, when night fell in the mountains, the temperature dropped into the chilly zone, sometimes near freezing. She'd always loved that early-morning crispness.

But today she was tired. Five hours of sleep hadn't been enough to restore her body. Or her spirits, she admitted as a fresh wave of melancholy rolled over her.

However, Monday was a busy day. She had riding classes late that afternoon, plus the usual chores of feeding the stock and checking them over for parasites and pinkeye.

She threw the covers back. Only one way to deal with low spirits, she'd found. Get up and get busy!

After a breakfast of scrambled eggs, toast, cherry tomatoes and cantaloupe, she took an insulated mug of coffee to the barn with her. She was just in time.

The mare lay in the straw, her sides heaving in and out like a bellows in a blacksmith shop. Her water burst and spewed a geyser of salty fluid over the straw. The tiny hooves of the forefeet appeared.

Good. No breech birth to worry about. She wouldn't have to call out her partner and the local vet, Rory, who was now on the first day of his honeymoon. Although he and Shannon had decided not to travel, Megan would have felt terrible about asking for help.

Everything proceeded according to nature, though, and she chuckled as a very new filly tried to get her wobbly legs to cooperate so she could find her very first meal.

Megan and the mare helped, then Megan hung her jacket on a nail and set about cleaning up. After mucking out the stall, she spread fresh straw around and tossed a scoop of oats in the bin. Mother and daughter ate, then lay down for their first nap together. Megan got all choked up.

Pulling on the coat and grabbing the mug, she went outside to check the rest of her charges. She had three horses to train for recreation riding and one to correct for bad habits, such as biting a person on the leg when anyone tried to mount him. In addition, she was working with four yearlings to prepare them for the show ring.

She pulled in a deep breath. This was the life she loved. What more could one ask for?

The answer came swiftly. Her early memories, for starters. Contentment for another. With a wry grimace, she added wealth, happiness and Prince Charming. There, that should cover everything. Where was that genie in the bottle when a gal needed him?

Across the lake, she heard the drone of an engine. Glancing that way, she watched Kyle Herriot maneuver a small powerboat onto the placid water. He sped off toward the other end of the lake. Fishing, probably.

She recalled his mother was to have left early that morning for a vacation with one of her schoolteacher friends, another widow, so Kyle was on his own, too. She idly wondered if he could cook, a task she had little patience with.

Which reminded her, she needed to make a grocery list. The last month had been given over to wedding preparations and the refrigerator had gradually filled with special dishes as the big day drew near. She'd eaten whatever was on hand and easy to fix, usually frozen entrées heated in the microwave oven.

She checked all the horses, repaired a fence, then headed back to the house. The temperature was rising rapidly. The afternoons were hot due to a high-pressure system sitting over this part of the state. She'd welcome a thundershower to settle the dust.

After freshening up, she took off for town in the ranch wagon, a list of chores in her pocket. The first person she saw at the feed store was Kyle. His fishing expedition hadn't lasted long.

Her insides clenched up.

She didn't like that a bit. He neither frightened nor attracted her, so why the emotional twinge?

"Good morning," he said when he saw her. He held open the door. No smile graced the planes and ridges of his face.

"Good morning. Did your mother get off on her trip okay?" she asked, pleased with the polite distance in her tone that gave nothing of her restless emotions away.

Her dreams had been filled with scenes she couldn't interpret—him and her, running from something, then her running from him while ghostly figures hovered ominously on the sidelines.

"Yes, considering she was afraid the ranch would fall apart without her watchful eye on things."

His rueful answer took her by surprise. So did the amusement in his eyes, which looked more silver than gray in the morning light.

"Mothers," she said, smiling with genuine warmth.

He seemed to stare at her mouth for a long minute before nodding. She turned down the first aisle of the store to escape him, then rubbed her lips to see if she had egg on her face.

She yanked out her list and hurried to the huge bags of feed. She might have known—Kyle was already there. He moved over so she could make her selections.

"Who's first?" the proprietor asked when he came to wait on them.

"He was."

"She was."

Megan glanced at Kyle in annoyance. "He was," she said firmly.

He shrugged. "I'm getting a hundred pounds of the special mix. I can handle it."

Megan watched him hoist a bag of feed as if it weighed no more than a five-pound bag of sugar. Muscles rippled in his arms and shoulders while others bunched in his thighs as he rose and slung the bag over his shoulder in one smooth movement. The owner dumped her order onto a wheelbarrow with a grunt, then headed out to her vehicle.

She gathered the rest of the ranch items on her list and went to the cash register. Kyle was there, asking about an air compressor. The store rented equipment to the locals as well as supplying them with crop seeds, stock feed and various medicines and liniments.

"You two have got to quit meeting this way," the owner told them, laughing heartily at his joke.

Megan's smile was automatic, but her heart went into fast mode as she glanced at her enemy. His gaze locked on her mouth again and she recalled the way his eyes had roamed her face while they danced last night. His expression had been cold, but there had been something in those silvery depths....

Right. Dislike and suspicion.

She licked her lips and turned to Harry, glad to finish her business and get out of the store. After having her hair trimmed, she did the grocery shopping. By then, it was time for lunch. A meal at the local diner was the one treat she allowed herself when she had to come to town.

By rushing, she got a table just before a busload of senior citizens tramped inside. She watched them settle in, asking questions about the cooking methods of various dishes and the fat content, then ordering hamburgers and fries. The waitress, who had worked there just about forever, was the soul of patience, but she winked at Megan as she pivoted toward the pass-through to the kitchen.

Watching a frail old man, who looked to be around ninety, help his equally fragile wife to a seat, Megan wondered what memories they shared, the births and deaths, the unexpected joys, the deep sorrows—

“You expecting anyone?” a male voice asked.

She stared up at Kyle.

“Okay if I join you? The place seems to be full.”

“Oh. Yes, that’s fine.”

He removed his Stetson and hung it on the back of a chair before taking a seat opposite her. He checked out the lunch special listed on the chalk-board. “You ordered?”

“Not yet. I’m going for the special.”

The waitress came over and plopped down two glasses of water from a tray. “You know what you want?”

“The special with iced tea. Cornbread instead of dinner rolls,” he said after she ordered the same thing but with the homemade yeast rolls.

“Got it.” The waitress hurried off.

Their table was an island of silence surrounded by a sea of babble, Megan realized. No conversational tidbits came to mind.

He had no such problem. “It’s going to be hot this afternoon. Again.”

“Yes.” She recalled the store. “You must have plans for some hard work.”

Kyle looked a question at her. He watched the way the light picked out the red-gold tones of her hair and glistened like dew on her lips, which were outlined in a subtle color, then filled in with gloss.

She pressed her lips together.

“Sorry,” he said, not meaning it. If he made her uncomfortable, tough.

“For what?” She looked truly perplexed.

“For staring. You have a tempting mouth.”

He heard the hardness in his voice, but also the huskiness, the lover-like intonations. The tightening in his gut served as a warning; there was an attraction here...and it wasn’t all on his side. There was awareness in her eyes, too. It made him angry, this unexpected hunger that throbbed in him.

What the hell was it about the Windom women that proved so irresistible to the Herriot men?

She ignored his statement. Looking straight at him as if he hadn’t mentioned her mouth at all, she said, “But then, ranches always have lots of hard chores, don’t they?”

“Usually,” he agreed.

“Did you catch any fish this morning? You were out on the lake. I saw you,” she added at his sharp look.

“Are you keeping track of my comings and goings?”

“Hardly. I was outside. I heard the motor. Sound carries across water.”

He debated telling her what the compressor was for. The wreckage was on her side of the lake. Each landholder owned a section of the water that bordered their place. The Windoms, with the longest stretch along the waterfront, laid claim to the largest portion. But what he did was none of her business, he decided.

“No, no fish.”

“That’s too bad.”

“I enjoyed the ride,” he said, keeping his tone casual while he wondered if she’d seen where he went.

“My father always said that, too. He said sometimes catching a fish was an annoyance when all he wanted to do was relax and not have to work.”

Her laughter was unexpected, a gift like a perfect sunset after a hot, tiring day. It spiraled around inside him, then dipped into a secret, sensitive place.

Forcing his way past the strange sensations, he reminded himself it was her mother who had lured his father to his death. He wasn’t sure how it had happened, but he would find out. He’d bring the sailboat up and maybe discover the truth....

The light in her eyes died. He watched her chest lift and drop in a sigh as the laughter faded.

“You’re sad again,” he said, feeling it in that secret place, “the way you were last night.”

Her hand jerked, splashing several drops of water on the table as she lifted her glass. “I’ve been thinking about the past. I don’t remember—”

She stopped abruptly, her eyes darting to his, then away. He recalled adults whispering about the tragedy and shutting up when he came near. The sheriff had questioned him, of course, but he really hadn’t known anything, except that he was the last person to see his father and Megan’s mother alive.

For a second, he felt as he had last night when tears had suddenly filled her eyes, as if he needed to protect her. He wanted to gather her close and dispel the lost look in those beautiful eyes. He wanted to know this lovely, complex woman in a way he hadn’t with other females. Odd.

“You don’t remember what?” he questioned.

“Anything. Nothing of my past before my mother’s funeral.”

He’d heard the rumors about her amnesia. If that’s what it was. “Does your uncle know about this?”

“Of course.”

“It isn’t generally known.”

“My grandfather ordered my cousins and me not to discuss the incident with anyone.”

“Did you and your father talk about it?”

“Some. Later. He told me not to worry about my memory, that losing my mother was a traumatic experience, and I shouldn’t be surprised that my mind had blocked it out.”

“Huh,” Kyle muttered.

The hair prickled on the back of his neck. A lot of secrecy had gone on about this case. His mother, because she thought her husband was cheating on her. Megan’s grandfather, because he was a proud, stubborn old man who wouldn’t allow a hint of scandal to touch his family. And Megan’s father, because...

Because he’d killed them and made it look like an accident?

It was a thought that had occurred to Kyle before now. But not one he wanted to discuss with the woman across the table from him.

The waitress brought the two specials. She plunked a basket of rolls and cornbread muffins on the table between them. Kyle wondered what other things he and Megan Windom would share before this adventure he was contemplating was finished. He had a feeling their lives would become entangled, and that was a dangerous thing.

The blood throbbed through his body, making him tense and heavy in certain areas, lighting fires he wasn’t sure he could control. The path ahead was murky, an adventure into the unknown, but he was going to pursue it to the bitter end, wherever that turned out to be.

Chapter Three

Megan went through the usual rigors of the week. Horse-training actually meant training the owners, which was a lot harder than dealing with their mounts. On Friday, she controlled her impatience with an effort as she guided seven girls and three boys through their paces.

Kyle was on the lake. She'd heard the powerboat shortly after three and seen him heading out from the boathouse toward the narrow end of the lake.

It wasn't the first time she'd noticed him out in his boat. He'd been fishing every day that week, having acquired a great enthusiasm for the sport, it seemed. And he always went toward the narrows, the place where dangerous boulders and rocky outcroppings barred the way of easy cruising.

The place where the sailboat had gone down.

Suspicion sliced into the low spirits that plagued her. It crossed her mind that he might be exploring the wrecked sailboat. Why, after all this time?

Thinking of the tragedy reminded her she still had tasks to perform. Tomorrow she would definitely go through Grandfather's things and clean out his closet.

Or tonight.

Why put it off? This afternoon, as soon as the class was over. Yes, that's what she would do.

"Head him straight, Kathy," she called to one of her students, who couldn't seem to get any commands across to her horse. "Let up. You're holding him in too much."

The girl was afraid of all animals, yet her parents insisted she not only learn to ride, but to train for show-jumping. Megan worried about the twelve-year-old who was trying so hard to please the two most important people in her life.

The sadness hit her again as she thought of parents and what they did to their kids. However, her father had been wonderful after her mother died. He'd held her each time she woke from the terrible nightmares, confused about what was real and what wasn't. Each time, he'd assured her it was only a bad dream and that it would soon go away.

Shaking off the useless emotions, Megan headed inside as soon as the last lesson was over. After eating a quick sandwich and downing a glass of tea, she went to her grandfather's quarters, which had been a butler's pantry, herb-drying room and back parlor in the early years of the house.

The musky scent of closed rooms assailed her when she entered. She pulled back the drapes and threw open all the windows to let the fresh air roam through.

The parlor had been turned into a bedroom. The wall between the pantry and herb room had been removed, creating a combination office and library for her grandfather after he'd had the stroke and could no longer walk upstairs.

Megan paused, then went to the bedroom closet. Few clothes remained. Patrick Windom had stubbornly worn his ranch clothing until the jeans and work shirts had worn out, then he'd gone through the dress shirts and pants. The suit jackets had been donated to charity long ago. There was little to do but place the remaining items in bags for the dump or the church emergency supply.

The drawers and shelves took little time, and she was soon finished with the task. She stood at the office door, staring at the massive desk that had served several family patriarchs through the years.

Tomorrow, right after the chores, she would go through this room. Unexplained dread wafted through her. She didn't know what she was afraid of, but it was time to face those fears. She knew Jess would be interested, but she didn't intend to ask for his help. This was something she needed to do on her own.

If she discovered anything, she wanted to evaluate the information first, then...then she'd make a decision.

The next morning, Megan woke at dawn as usual. She put on a pot of coffee, then, munching on an English muffin, headed out to start the chores. Saturday was livestock auction day, but she

decided not to go. She didn't want to take on any more training chores just yet, although she made part of her living buying, training and selling Western riding horses.

In a field near the house, she waved to the farmer who leased their land. He was cutting hay, which would be stored for winter feed.

After feeding the mare, she let mother and daughter into the pasture next to the barn. Cattle roamed the meadows and rocky hillsides with their young ones. The sky was clear. The lake was still. All of nature looked peaceful.

Sitting on the rail fence, she studied the tranquil waters and wondered if Kyle was out in his boat again.

Probably not. The sun was barely up. She'd have heard the engine in the quiet of early morning. Gazing toward the section where the lake narrowed to a point and a creek flowed into it from the high mountain peaks, bringing down snow melt and glacial runoff, she considered an idea that had been running through her mind all week.

Why not investigate the wrecked sailboat?

Surely no one had a better right. Besides, she'd read the police reports. She knew exactly where the wreck was.

Once she'd gone out there by herself and, with her snorkeling mask on, had been able to make out the lines of the craft on the rocky shelf beside a huge block of granite pushed into the lake by a glacier long ago.

Excitement pulsed through her. The water was icy cold in the depths, but it was bearable near the surface in the summer. She could stand the temperature long enough to dive down to the wreck and look it over, see what there was to see. Maybe she would discover something.

Or maybe seeing the boat would trigger her memory. That's what she wanted more than anything, to simply remember, to find the child she'd been and put her and the memories to rest.

The troubling sadness struck her again. It was as if her adult self felt sorry for the child she'd once been. She didn't understand it at all.

Leaping from the rail fence, she jogged to the house. There, she called Kate's number and asked for Jess.

"He isn't home," Kate said. "He and the kids have gone to Medicine Bow for the auction. They'll be gone all day."

"Darn."

She thought for a minute. Her two female cousins lived along a creek that ran into a shallow finger of the lake. Jess and Kate often took their kids for a cruise in the evening. They would surely notice any activity, even if it was at the opposite end of the long, narrow lake.

"Can I take a message?" Kate asked.

Megan took a deep breath. "I want copies of all the information he has on the sailboat that went down, all the photos and police reports. I'm going to—"

She tried to think of an explanation.

"Check it out?" Kate finished on a curious note.

"Yes."

"Sometimes," Kate said slowly, "it's better to let sleeping dogs lie."

A chill crept up Megan's neck. "I may remember," she reminded her older cousin. "Seeing the sailboat could trigger my memories of the past."

"The memories might not be pleasant, not all of them."

Kate was the nurturer in the family. She always considered the impact of events and worried about the consequences. Her concern warmed Megan.

"I know, but...I want to know."

"Even if you remember everything that ever happened to you, even if we discover all the facts, we still might not understand the why of it."

“It’s something we all have to face,” Megan said, resolute in her quest. “I’d just like to know what happened. The whys and wherefores I’ll leave to those who want to speculate on them.”

“It’ll stir up old gossip, that’s for sure.”

“That’s why I want to keep it quiet. Mrs. Herriot has gone on vacation for a month, so there won’t be anyone around to notice. That should be enough time. I thought Jess should know what I’m doing.”

“Of course. He’d be upset if you left him out. Looking for clues to his sister’s death was what brought him here in the first place.” Kate paused, then said, “Aunt Bunny was a wonderful swimmer. If she’d been conscious, she could surely have saved herself.”

The chill entered Megan’s heart. “That’s what I’m thinking, too. I’ll need to use the boat for a while. Is that okay?”

“I’m sure it is. Jess can bring it up to your dock when he gets in this evening, along with the police file.”

“Great. Thanks. Why don’t you and the kids come up, too? We have a ton of stuff left over from the reception still in the freezer. I can drive you home later.”

“Okay. See you around six, maybe seven.”

After Megan hung up, she showered and changed to shorts and T-shirt. Going to her grandfather’s study, she started on the bookcases first.

The ranch ledgers were stored there, dating from a hundred years ago and detailing the life of the ranch in terms of cattle sold or lost to storms, predators and disease, crops raised, including costs and selling price per bushel. Every penny earned and spent was recorded.

The records from the prior hundred years had been lost due to fire, her grandfather had once told her. The house had been rebuilt at that time.

Pausing, she studied the tatter of memory. She was sure the information had come from her grandfather before his stroke, but she didn’t know when.

She went methodically through every ledger right up to the present and found nothing unusual. No notes tucked inside any. No confessions or incriminating information. She dusted the shelves and returned the cloth-bound records to their place. By late afternoon, she’d gone through the three glass-fronted bookcases.

Surveying the massive rolltop desk with its many nooks and crannies, she really doubted she’d find anything in it that might jog her memory of the past.

The sailboat was the key. She didn’t know why she thought that, but she kept coming back to it.

Tired and dusty, she quit for the day. After washing up, she checked the time. Surprised at the lateness of the hour, she thawed wedding leftovers, little two-bite sandwiches of chicken and ham salad, which she ate along with string cheese and an apple for her supper. She put out some frozen pastry swans filled with whipped cream and several fruit tarts for Kate and her family, then put on a pot of coffee.

Hearing a boat motor on the lake, she looked out in time to see Kyle pull up to his dock and disappear into the attached boathouse. She frowned in his direction, wondering what the heck he was doing and how she could avoid him while she searched for clues.

Fear and anticipation ran through her as she thought of unlocking the door to her past. Kate worried that she would be hurt, but it was a chance she had to take.

A few minutes later, the old fishing dory that Jess and Jeremy had rescued from the barn and restored to running condition pulled up to the Windom pier. Amanda jumped out before anyone could help her, her brother hot on her heels.

“Mandy,” he said sternly, “you wait up or else I’m going to pound you.”

“You won’t really,” the five-year-old informed him with irrepressible humor. “Mom won’t let you.”

Jeremy grabbed her hand. “You’re not supposed to run on the dock. You might fall in.”

“I can swim,” she said with righteous indignation.

“Yeah, and the Loch Ness monster might eat you, too.”

“Ha.”

Amanda obviously didn't believe in monsters. Megan smiled even as the unpredictable tears crowded her throat at the affectionate teasing. She wished their lives could always be as happy and carefree as they were at this moment.

Foreboding hummed through her, a never-forgotten melody that hinted at death and unspeakable grief.

“Hey, Megan, guess what?” Amanda demanded. “Larry Leighson lost his front two teeth. He looks yucky.”

Larry had been Amanda's man of the moment prior to this misfortune. “It happens,” Megan said sympathetically. “Next year your teeth will start falling out, too.”

“I bet the tooth fairy leaves me a whole dollar. Larry only got two quarters and a book.”

“Wow. That was pretty nice. I never got more than one quarter.”

“Oh.” Amanda paused, checked her front two teeth and looked disappointed that neither was loose.

Megan hid a smile as Jeremy rolled his eyes. She greeted Jess and Kate. “Thanks for bringing the boat.”

“Here's the folder,” he said, handing over the information she'd requested. “So you want to check over the sailboat? Are you going to try to bring it up?”

“Well, I'm not sure about that. I mean, how would you go about it?”

Jess pushed a lock of unruly hair off his forehead. “Use a compressor to blow air into the hull and force out the water. That's what we did on marine rescue.”

Megan was startled by this information. “Kyle Herriot was asking about a compressor at the feed store last week.”

Jess looked more than a little interested. “Hmm, maybe he's going to try to float her to the top. With two boats, you could probably pull her in to the dock if you get her up, even if the hole is below the waterline.”

“Oh, really?”

This possibility hadn't occurred to Megan. However, it obviously had to her close-mouthed neighbor. Now all his “fishing” trips made sense. He was after the wreck, too, and she didn't like his sneaky way of going about it.

But, in all fairness, his father had been involved. If he was searching, too, then maybe they should join forces. Later, when they found out the truth, or all that they could about the tragedy, then they could part ways and forget each other's existence.

Uneasiness washed over her. Kyle Herriot might be a hard man to forget. Their lives were entangled on an elemental level that involved their families over two generations. Maybe it was unwise to add a third generation to the mix.

For the next hour, she and Jess and Kate discussed the known facts concerning the sailing incident, plus ways and means to bring the vessel to the surface so they could study it up close. Jess wanted to be in on the latter part.

Megan promised him that if she succeeded, he would be the first to know. After all, Bunny had been his beloved older sister, the one who had practically raised him while his mom had had to work to support the family. His father had been an alcoholic and drifter.

After driving them home in the old station wagon, Megan returned to her house. Its loneliness rushed out to greet her when she entered the door to the mud room off the kitchen. Seeing the envelope on the counter, she picked it up and hid it in a kitchen drawer.

The key to her past might lie in that envelope. She realized she was ready to face it, whatever it might be.

The air was hot and listless on Sunday afternoon when Kyle turned the key on the powerboat. The engine caught, and he eased out on the mirror-smooth surface of the lake. With the engine at half throttle—because he hoped not to attract his neighbor’s attention—he pointed the bow toward the far end of the cool waters.

He wasn’t having much luck in finding the wreck. He’d searched the dark depths in a grid pattern, but a whole week had been spent in futile exploration.

Had he known who’d done the original diving, he would look them up, but he didn’t. He could ask the sheriff, who had been the investigating officer on the case at the time, but the sheriff might mention it to Shannon, a former cop, who would surely mention it to her cousin, Megan.

He didn’t want any interference from the Windom side of the lake.

Following his grid plan, he slowed when he came to the boundary of the last search area.

“What the hell?” he muttered.

Another boat was three hundred yards away, anchored next to a huge slab of granite that jutted from the water like a monolith to some ancient god. Angling around, he glided over to it.

“Hey,” he called.

His voice echoed off the cliffs at the edge of the lake and came back to him. With an irritated curse, he pulled alongside the slab. He tossed the anchor out, then tied a line around a handy boulder. He climbed out of the boat and walked along the granite slab to the other boat that had a small motor mounted on the recently replaced transom.

Looking over the old dory for clues to its ownership, he spied a cooler and a backpack. Sneakers and socks lay on the bottom of the fishing boat. A long-sleeved shirt lay on the plank seat. They were on the small side.

Probably a boy exploring on his own. What was Kate’s stepson’s name? Jeremy. Yeah. Jeremy Fargo. But he’d never seen the boy out without other members of his family.

Where the hell was the person?

Bubbles preceded an answer to that question. A head broke the surface of the water. Through a snorkeling mask, Megan Windom’s eyes locked with his.

She removed the mask. “Speak of the devil,” she murmured, “and look who’s here.”

“What are you doing?” he asked, ignoring her snide attempt at humor.

Without answering, she kicked her way over to the slab, then tossed the mask and flippers out before climbing up on the granite. “Mm, this feels good. The rock is warm.”

Heat pulsed through him when she stretched out and closed her eyes against the sun. She was dressed in a one-piece swimsuit, high-cut on the sides. Her legs went from here to forever, long, lean and shapely. There were faint tan lines at her ankles and high on her thighs.

The heat became an inferno. He was aware of the tight discomfort of his swim trunks under his jeans. The reaction increased his annoyance.

“You didn’t answer the question.”

She opened her eyes a slit. Shading them with an arm over her forehead, she studied him for a long minute. “I’m doing what you suspect,” she said coolly.

He wondered if that was true. Without admitting anything, he drawled, “Then we’re both out for a leisurely cruise of the lake.”

“Right. The way you’ve been all week.”

So she’d known of his prior trips. Damn. Looking into her frank and somewhat hostile gaze, he made an instant decision. “I’m looking for the wreck.”

“The sailboat?” she said with only a slight questioning inflection.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “To reclaim what once belonged to my family. I’m thinking of restoring it.”

“You want to study it,” she corrected, her tone as icy as a winter wind off the mountains. Her gaze challenged him to deny it.

There was an honesty in her that he hadn’t expected. It forced him to answer just as candidly. “The thought had occurred to me.”

Instead of objecting, she became introspective. “Jess is interested, too. Bunny was his sister.”

“Jimmy was my father. The boat was his.” He figured that gave him first priority.

“Bunny was my mother.”

“There is that,” he conceded.

She was silent for a long minute, then said, “Okay, I’ll work with you.”

This was a development he hadn’t foreseen. He didn’t want any interference. “No way.”

“It’ll save you time.”

“How?”

She smiled. “I know where the wreck is.”

Glancing at the water, he returned the smile. “So do I...now. What brings you out here at this late date?”

“Curiosity,” she said easily. “I want to see whatever there is to see.”

He realized the same feelings drove her that drove him. But to work together? It was a volatile mixture in more ways than one.

“Why are you searching now?” she asked. “It’s been a long time.”

He decided on maximum honesty. “Your grandfather is gone. My mother’s on a trip. I figured no one else would care or object to my prowling around.”

“What are your plans?”

“Do some diving, locate the wreck and see what the chances are of bringing it up. The water is deepest here, around a hundred feet.”

“The boat is on a shelf. It didn’t go to the bottom.”

That was news to him. He gave her a sharp perusal. “How do you know so much?”

“Jess and I studied all the reports. The sheriff’s divers took some photos. Shannon got us copies.”

“I see.”

What he saw was more complications. He hadn’t planned on anyone else horning in. He wished he hadn’t been quite so open with his attractive neighbor. Working with her, if she really did insist on participating, was another twist he didn’t need in his life.

“I’ll get the photos to you.”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

Her eyebrows rose.

“I want to look the wreckage over first. Before we bring in anyone else.”

Megan didn’t tell him she already had the information, or that Jess already knew about Kyle’s suspicious fishing trips. “Compressors are dangerous for a lone diver. You can inhale carbon monoxide and pass out, if that’s how you’re going to get air while you’re underwater.”

He was surprised at her knowledge. “I have air tanks. I used to dive a lot during my college days.”

“Oh.”

“I’d rather not broadcast what we’re doing until we know more about it. I don’t want my mother upset if I can prevent it.”

“Were you going to hide the sailboat, assuming you bring it up?”

“We still have the boathouse. I’d put it there until I had a chance to talk to her upon her return. I don’t want to shock her...or the community,” he added, warning her that he wanted to keep the quest strictly between them.

“I see.” She stood and went to the dory. After pulling on the shirt, she turned to him. “You’ll need a wet suit to stay down any length of time. The water’s too cold to stay in for more than fifteen or twenty minutes.”

He’d figured he could stand the cold long enough to do what he needed. However he had a buddy in California who would ship him a wet suit, if he needed one.

“So, do we work together and pool resources?” she asked.

He couldn’t figure out an argument to dissuade her. There was also the fact that she could observe his every move. Stalling for time, he nodded. “Why not?” he said.

But if he moved fast, he could get what he wanted and get the sailboat to the boathouse before she realized what was happening.

“You’ll call me when you come out here?”

Suspicion was rampant in her expression. He smiled as guilelessly as he could. “Sure. You’re right. Two can work faster than one.” He realized he’d been too cheerful when she frowned in distrust.

“I can hear any boat coming this way,” she warned.

“So can I.” But only if the wind was in the right direction off the lake. She had the advantage of him on that point. Damnation.

Nodding, she untied the dory, tossed the line into the boat and hopped in with a push to start her off. In a minute she had the motor running and was headed toward home.

Releasing a deep breath, he stripped to his trunks and dived into the chilling water. That took care of the rampant hormones that plagued him in her presence.

He made it down to the wreck in a free dive, but couldn’t stay long. She was right; the cold was mind-numbing, too dangerous for a lone diver to attempt.

So, he’d work with her as long as he had to...but whatever they found, the sailboat was his.

On Monday evening, after her last riding class was over and the chores were finished, Megan debated with herself, then picked up the telephone and dialed Kyle’s number, after looking it up in the book. Her scalp prickled as she waited for the call to go through.

He answered on the first ring.

“This is Megan. I have the police photos and the file information, if you’re interested in seeing them,” she told him in formal tones. She was irritated with him.

There was silence on the other end.

“Hello?”

“I’m here,” he said in that smooth voice that reminded her of summer breezes and long summer nights. “That was fast. I thought we’d agreed not to let others in on what we were doing until we knew more.”

“I believe in acting once a decision has been made. As you apparently do, too. I saw you on the lake earlier.”

Another pause. “I see.”

“Did you do any diving this afternoon?” She wanted to let him know she was keeping an eye on him.

“No.” His tone was a chill wind off the mountain. “I was checking out the rocks in the vicinity.”

“I called you when I got information. I expect the same courtesy from you.” She was cool and crisp, businesslike.

“Yeah, sure.” He sounded distracted.

Maybe he had someone there with him and was impatient to get back to her. Feeling slightly guilty for bothering him and further irritated by the fact, she asked, “Do you want to come over tomorrow and see the photos?”

“No. I want to see them tonight. I’ll be right over.”

“Tonight?”

“Yeah. The moon is bright. I’ll be over in the boat in about ten minutes.”

He didn't ask if it was a convenient time for her. He just assumed it would be okay and hung up.

Fuming, she put on some decaf coffee. Although she wasn't feeling particularly neighborly, she still had about twenty pastry swans stuffed with whipped cream in the refrigerator. She'd offer him dessert.

After kicking off her shoes, Megan flicked on the dock lights, then sat at the kitchen table and waited. When she heard the sounds of an engine, blood pounded with unexpected ferocity throughout her body.

That was another concern to add to all the others. Nothing good had ever come of a Windom getting mixed up with a Herriot.

Chapter Four

Megan answered the door on the first knock. “Come on in. I’ve made coffee. Would you like some cream-puff swans?”

“Like those at the wedding?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah, that sounds good. I forgot about dinner.”

That information put her into a dilemma. As a good neighbor, she should offer him something to eat. Well, she certainly wasn’t going to cook for him. With a grimace, she asked if he’d like some leftovers. “There’s about a dozen of those little sandwiches left.”

“Any with the ham spread?”

“Yes.”

She placed all the remainders on a platter on the kitchen table, put out a plate, pointed out the microwave oven and told him to help himself.

He did. When he’d finished, the finger sandwiches were gone, along with the pâté, stuffed olives and some kind of veal loaf, then he polished off the last of the cream-filled swans. He finished off the glass of milk she’d also offered.

“That was good. Thanks.”

“Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“Please.” He put his dishes in the dishwasher while she poured two cups of coffee.

She joined him at the table and removed the folder from the manila envelope. Laying it on the table in front of him, she said, “This is all the information Jess and I have collected from the official files and the newspapers.”

“Nice to have relatives in the sheriff’s office, huh?”

He didn’t cast any particular inflection on the words, so she wasn’t quite sure how to take the statement. Ignoring it, she was silent while he perused the reports. When he came to the photos, he studied each of them in detail.

It was a few minutes after ten when he finished.

“What do you think?” she asked, getting up to refill their cups.

“You were right. The sailboat isn’t as far down as I thought. Maybe it won’t be an impossible task.”

“To float it to the surface?”

He gave her an appraising glance as if reassessing her intelligence. His expression was stony.

“Jess thought maybe that was why you wanted the compressor, to float the Mary Dee to the top. He said with the two motorboats, we could probably pull her in.”

“Oh, he did, did he? Did you discuss this with anyone else that I should know about?”

“Well, Kate was here.”

His lips thinned to a straight line. She returned his scowl with no expression whatsoever. Slowly his frown changed from anger to...she wasn’t sure what.

“You drive me crazy when you do that,” he at last said.

“What?”

“Look at me like that. Your eyes are fathoms deep and mysterious, like a mossy pool hidden in the woods. You’re good at disguising your thoughts.”

She blinked in mild shock at his words. “So are you.”

His gaze continued to move over her, from her eyes downward to her mouth, where he lingered for a long moment, then a quick flick along her shirt, then back to her eyes.

Heat slid gently up her neck and into her face. Her breath went jerky until she forced herself to breathe deeply several times. She stared at him, into eyes that seemed to be charcoal rather than silvery-gray tonight.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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