

MILLS & BOON



Vintage *SUPER ROMANCE*

Just Around The Corner

TARA TAYLOR QUINN

Tara Quinn

Just Around The Corner

«HarperCollins»

Quinn T. T.

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Phyllis Langford is everybody's friend and nobody's lover. Until she succumbs to the unexpected temptation of Matt Sheffield—and soon after, discovers she's pregnant. Matt's a loner, a man who hides from the possibility of love and family. Just as well, in Phyllis's opinion, since she doesn't want or need anything from him. Not one single thing. But Matt can't quite leave it at that....Matt and Phyllis arrive at an agreement—he'll help her out. That's all. He'll drive her to the doctor, take care of her household chores. But this agreement gradually leads them to a bigger involvement in each other's lives, and by New Year's Eve, they're ready for the biggest involvement of all: marriage. Which is a good thing, because as it turns out there are two babies waiting just around the corner. Happy New Year, Phyllis, Matt and twins-to-be!

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“I’m pregnant.”

Matt blinked. He froze inside. “Pardon?”

“I’m pregnant.”

He waited.

“I just thought you should know.” Phyllis Langford looked far too calm sitting there, her honey-colored purse, which matched her honey-colored shoes, still slung over her shoulder.

“I don’t understand why I’m the one you’re telling,” he said carefully. He knew it wasn’t polite to ask a woman who the father of her child was, but what did a guy say when it wasn’t him? He might have lost a good piece of his mind that day, but not so much that he hadn’t protected himself, and her, from any and all consequences.

“Because you’re the only man I’ve had sex with since I divorced my husband four years ago.” As he shook his head, she added softly, “Condoms fail.”

“Not likely.”

“Read the box the next time you pick some up,” she said, still appearing far too calm. “Besides, when I thought about it, I realized the wrapper you took from your wallet didn’t look exactly new.”

Damn, the woman sounded as though they were discussing nothing more earth-shattering than a rained-out game of Little League. Didn’t she get it? They had an untenable situation on their hands.

Matt didn’t even know how to be a friend. There was no way he could be a father.

Dear Reader,

Have you ever found yourself disliked for something, some trait or skill, that’s an integral part of you? Something you can’t change? It’s not an easy position to be in, but a very real one. To be a person deserving of happiness—a good person, a loving person—and yet alone. It was a situation that intrigued me, a situation I couldn’t let go. I needed to know how such a thing could happen. To find the happy ending.

This is Phyllis Langford’s story. If you’ve read any of my previous SHELTER VALLEY books, you’ll remember her. Just Around the Corner is a story about the human spirit, about making the most of what life has given you, about enduring. And about happy endings. I believe there’s a happy ending out there for everyone. It’s just a matter of hanging on. Of not giving up. Eventually it will come knocking.

Each day of my life consists of hanging on, of not giving up—and of answering the door when I hear that knock. It doesn’t come just once. It comes, for me, every day in one form or another. A phone call. A smile. A note. A hug.

I wish you all a lifetime of happy endings—and the ability to hear happiness knocking at your door when it arrives.

Tara Taylor Quinn

P.S. I love to hear from readers. Write me at P.O. Box 15065, Scottsdale, Arizona 85267-5065. Or visit my Web site at <http://members.home.net/ttquinn>.

Just Around the Corner Tara Taylor Quinn



www.millsandboon.co.uk

For Tanya Elizabeth Clayton.

You, like Phyllis, are an amazing young woman.

I truly believe that you will take whatever life gives you and make your own happy endings.

I'm very proud to be part of your life.

MOTHER

by Tanya Clayton

Every time you tell me something

That may help me

I turn the other way.

My pride says I won't listen

But my heart absorbs every word.

I always tell you I'll be a better mother

But I know I won't.

You have taught me lessons

That no one else could.

You have backed me up

When no one else would.

You have been my biggest fan

When everyone had given up.

You are my mother,

The person that I am part of

And the person I am proud of

Being part of every day.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE KISS WAS as powerful as he was. As dangerous.

And beckoning.

Her arms crept around his neck, her lips pressing against his as excitement uncoiled in her belly. This was insane.

And she didn't want it to stop.

Phyllis had spent the entire day with Matt Sheffield. Seen him in action. And still knew absolutely nothing about him.

Because he wanted it that way.

Which made him even more desirable. Because she wanted it that way, too.

Dr. Phyllis Langford didn't need a man in her life—especially this man. Didn't need to know him, to get tangled up in the shadows she'd read in his eyes, the aloofness in his body.

What she needed was exactly what he was giving her. Lips that knew their destination, that didn't hesitate. Hands that touched her lonely body, igniting fires banked too long.

"We shouldn't be doing this," she said, her mind still engaged enough to recognize that much.

"Mm-hmm." The moan tingled against her lips. His tongue penetrated her mouth, and Phyllis thrilled to his aggression. He felt so damn good. And it had been such a long time.... He placed her against the theater's sound-booth console in the performing-arts center at Montford University, where they'd spent the day working on a "Patterns of Abuse" presentation she'd be giving at a "Psychology In the University" seminar in that very theater later that month. The big window in front of them looked out over the dark and empty auditorium. The controls beneath them pushed into her back.

"Not here," he said suddenly, pulling her up and urging her toward the couch at the opposite end of the room.

The couch she'd been eyeing off and on all day, her mind filled with lascivious thoughts.

She'd just never dreamed her inappropriate and completely far-fetched fantasies would ever achieve reality there.

Hadn't really even decided she wanted them to.

His hands skimmed along her sides. Those same hands had been manipulating computer keys and technical equipment all afternoon. His lips left hers only long enough for breathing, and then they were consuming her again. Obliterating thought as he used his body to guide her on another erotic journey.

In spite of the sweet tension building inside her—the kind that made a woman forget she was a nice girl and allow anything as long as she found the satisfaction that was almost within reach—she might still have been able to stop him if he hadn't seemed as completely absorbed as she.

His hands weren't quite steady as they slid beneath her red chenille sweater. His breathing ragged, he kissed her chin, her neck and then was at her lips again.

Phyllis accommodated him. Lifting her mouth to his, she raised her body off the couch to let him slide her sweater up, exposing her belly. Her breasts ached for his touch, ached to be covered by those big capable hands. She arched against him.

God, she needed this. To feel desirable. To know she could drive a man to distraction. Maybe because losing the weight hadn't been enough to give her back the confidence she'd lost. Maybe because all her friends had this. Every single one of them was in love....

For a brief moment, as she lay there with her newly flat belly exposed, Phyllis panicked. Why had she thought of love now? She wasn't going to get involved again. Not like that. Not when hurt was inevitable.

And then she remembered. She wasn't in danger. Matt Sheffield wasn't the type to allow involvement.

Everyone in Shelter Valley respected his “hands off” signals. She’d only lived in the town a little more than a year—nothing like the four years he’d been the Fine Arts Technical Coordinator at Montford—yet she was much more a part of this community than he was. Other than the classes he taught, the events he oversaw, he kept to himself. He seemed to welcome neither personal conversation nor invitations. It didn’t take a psychologist to figure out that the man was off-limits.

His lips burned her neck and then her belly, as his hands finally slid up over her breasts, cupping them, squeezing gently, the sensation excruciating in its intensity.

“Please,” Phyllis was begging before she could stop herself.

“Please what?” he rasped.

“Please make love to me.”

“I intend to, pretty woman.” He took a condom out of his wallet before reaching for the button at the waistband of his jeans. “Believe me, I intend to.”

He’d called her pretty.

They were the last coherent words Phyllis processed for a long time.

The next ones, uttered by her after silent, awkward moments of pulling on clothes that had been hastily discarded, were, “Well, goodbye.”

“We used a condom.” Phyllis looked across at her friend one Monday in the middle of October, her disbelief—and confusion—apparent.

Cassie Tate Montford, happily wearing maternity slacks and a blousy top as she entered her sixth month of pregnancy, looked as if she didn’t know whether to smile or cry.

Phyllis didn’t blame Cassie for her indecision. The two women had several things in common: their interest in pet therapy, their commitment to Shelter Valley...and their red hair. Now, apparently, they shared something else, as well.

Something Phyllis hadn’t planned on at all.

“You’re sure?” Cassie asked.

“I’m sure,” Phyllis said, nodding her head, feeling more like a lost little girl than the Yale graduate she was.

They were in the sitting room at Montford Mansion, sharing cups of homemade hot chocolate, courtesy of Cassie’s mother-in-law, Carol Montford. This was a rare moment of privacy for both of them. Mariah, Cassie and Sam’s adopted daughter, was still at school. And Sam was at work, refurbishing homes, providing better-than-new living conditions for people who occupied the inadequate housing outside Shelter Valley. These places, built in the late 1890s, had fallen into disrepair as subsidized government housing, and Sam was renovating them at a reasonable cost to their current owners.

“So you’re pregnant.... This might not be badnews, you know,” Cassie said slowly, the tremulous smile seeming to win the battle of expressions on her beautiful face. “Babies are such blessings in so many ways. Raising a child is one of the greatest accomplishments possible. And you’ll never be alone....”

Phyllis shook her head. “I’m not alone,” she said, surprised by the sudden ache she felt at Cassie’s pronouncement. “I have plenty of people to love. Plenty of people who love me.”

Cassie was one of them.

“Of course you do,” her friend said, her brow creased in a frown. “But no one who shares the ups and downs of daily life with you.”

Phyllis couldn’t argue with her there. She’d had that once, though. And in her case, being alone was the better option.

“I’m guessing you haven’t told Matt.”

Phyllis shook her head, her short, flyaway red curls the only vibrant thing about her.

“How do you think he’s going to take the news?”

“Not well,” Phyllis said, shrugging.

“Something, somewhere sucked all the love out of that man,” Cassie said, her sweet brown eyes concerned. “He’s been in town four years and has never—not once—accepted an invitation to anything. Not only does he always reject our hospitality, even at Christmas, but he’s never attended any community function when he’s not working. He was probably the only person in town who didn’t attend the Fourth of July celebration last summer.”

“I know,” Phyllis said, wishing the chocolate that was warming her thick ceramic cup could warm her, too. “He’s so...detached, and that’s what made him so safe to begin with. I wanted sex, not involvement.”

Cassie seemed to have more to say, but she sat there staring at Phyllis, instead. Phyllis could only wonder what her friend was thinking. And decided maybe she didn’t want to know.

“It’s not like he can be angry with me,” Phyllis finally said. “It was his condom....”

“So you have every right to be angry with him.”

Tilting her head, Phyllis grimaced. “And what good is that going to do me?”

“Give you the energy to cope,” Cassie said with her customary frankness. The two women had worked together on more than one occasion, counseling abuse victims through Cassie’s pet-therapy program, and they were used to speaking honestly. “Even negative energy is better than none at all.”

Once again, Phyllis couldn’t argue with her. Cassie had learned that particular truth the hard way, Phyllis knew, back when Cassie’s entire life had fallen apart, and she’d disintegrated right along with it. She’d needed years to rebuild what she’d lost, to reshape her existence in a new form.

“I haven’t even thought about coping yet,” she admitted quietly.

Setting down her cup, Cassie said, “And I’m assuming you plan to have the baby when there’s nothing that says you must.”

“Of course I’m having it,” Phyllis said, running her finger along the outer seam of her jeans. “You know me well enough to know that. I only found out this morning, so it’s not like I’ve had time to make a single plan, but not having this baby isn’t even a choice for me.”

“You want it,” Cassie guessed, her brown eyes piercing.

Looking up at her friend, Phyllis smiled. “I guess I do.”

Cassie lifted her cup and sipped carefully from her chocolate. “So,” she said, leaning forward on the couch, her legs spread slightly to accommodate her growing belly. “What kind of cooperation are you hoping to get from Matt Sheffield?”

“Not marriage, that’s for sure,” Phyllis said. That would naturally be one of the first assumptions people would make, but she wasn’t even going to consider it.

“While I have to admit I’m relieved that you aren’t holding out hope that the man’s going to do the right thing by you, do you have to be quite so adamant about being better off single?”

They’d had this discussion before. Phyllis understood that with Cassie’s newfound happiness, and her current state of being head over heels in love, she wanted the same satisfaction for those she cared about. Phyllis got that satisfaction in other ways, but she knew better than to argue with Cassie.

“Financially you’ll be okay, even if he denies all responsibility?” Cassie asked.

“Okay, and then some.”

Elbows on her knees, Cassie rested her chin in her hands, staring down at her bare feet, and then over at the fashionable ankle boots Phyllis was wearing with her size-six jeans.

“You really look great, you know that?”

The words brought a smile to Phyllis’s face. “Thanks.” But then the expression faded as something else hit her. “I’ve lost forty pounds, I’m finally feeling positive about myself, and now I’m going to turn around and get fat again.”

“But only for a while,” Cassie reminded her. “And for a very good cause.” She cradled her own belly, obviously loving every pound, every outward sign that she was truly carrying a baby of her own. She’d been told years ago, after the death of her first born, that she’d never conceive a child again.

“Yeah.” Phyllis nodded, still a bit concerned. Those pounds of hers had not come off easily. Through many long months of struggle, she’d promised herself that she’d never see them again.

“Did you read *Borough Bantam* this week?” Cassie asked suddenly. As a diversion, the tactic was a little rough around the edges, but Phyllis was eager to turn her thoughts away from her own situation, if only for a minute or two. She nodded.

“The little mouse character picked out a boy’s name and a girl’s name in case a new mouse comes to live with her. You’ve obviously been talking to Mariah about the baby.”

Borough Bantam was a nationally syndicated comic strip depicting a village of creatures who, through their daily and often comical adventures, imparted gentle lessons and observations about life. Cassie’s husband, Sam, the creator, had fashioned them after people he’d grown up with in Shelter Valley, his way of keeping in touch with his home and everything he’d left behind during his ten-year exile from the place he loved. The little mouse in the strip represented Mariah, the little girl Sam had adopted when her parents, his best friends, had been killed by terrorists on the other side of the world.

“We have.” Cassie’s smile was tinged with sadness. “She’s insisting we name the baby either Brian or Morning Glory.”

“After her parents?”

“Yeah. Her mother’s name was Moira, but Mariah always says Morning.”

“So are you and Sam going to keep those names?”

“Absolutely. How can we not? Our daughter speaks her mind, we listen.”

For the first few months Mariah had lived with Sam, she’d been mute, a result of the trauma of witnessing her parents’ death. Cassie and her pet therapy had been the way by which Mariah was able to heal. It was also the way Cassie and Sam found each other again.

“So is Sam used to everyone in town thinking he’s a hero for creating *Bantam*?” Phyllis asked. She knew that Cassie’s husband had been more than a little worried about his reception—and that of his comic strip—when he’d returned to town after so many years.

“I don’t know if he’ll ever get used to it,” Cassie said honestly. “He was so sure they’d think he was poking fun at them and hate him for it. But I think he’s getting just a bit tired of everyone trying to help him write it!”

“They all have ideas, huh?” Phyllis commiserated, and Cassie nodded.

“So, back to Sheffield,” Cassie said. “What are your expectations?”

Shaking her head, Phyllis set her cup farther from the edge of the end table. “I’m expecting nothing from him,” she said. “Our being together—it just...happened. Wasn’t planned. Other than when we put on the psychology seminar last week, we haven’t spoken.”

Cassie studied her friend. “And you were happy about that.”

“Absolutely.”

“And now?”

“Now I’m just trying to deal with the ramifications of this pregnancy in my own life. Matt Sheffield doesn’t matter to me at all.”

Sighing, seeming oddly relieved, Cassie sat back. “Can I tell you something then?”

“Of course.”

“If Matt reacts coldly to the news, don’t take it personally. I don’t think the man’s capable of softer feelings.”

Phyllis frowned. “Why do you say that?”

“Last year I had a litter of pups that’d been left at the clinic,” Cassie said. “I took them down to campus one afternoon, offering them to anyone who might want a dog. While I was busy giving care instructions for one of them, another puppy got tangled up in one of the leashes I’d brought along with the stuff I was giving away to the new owners. Sheffield walked by and didn’t even stop. He just left that puppy there, squirming and frightened.”

“Maybe he didn’t see it.”

“He saw it,” Cassie assured her. “He looked right at us. Besides, when he walked by, the puppy started to squeal, which is what alerted me to the whole thing.”

Shrugging, Phyllis looked tired as she laid her head back against the chair. “So maybe he doesn’t like dogs. Probably got bitten by one as a kid.”

“Spoken like a true psychologist. Always looking for the hidden motivations.”

“Everybody has them.”

“Maybe he’s just incapable of caring for anything or anyone,” Cassie said softly.

“Maybe.”

Phyllis didn’t care one way or the other.

“You know,” Cassie said, leaning forward to lay a hand on Phyllis’s arm. “Between Tory and me and Becca and everyone else in Shelter Valley who’s fallen in love with you, we’ll get you through this pregnancy. And we’ll give you whatever help you need for the next eighteen years or more of single motherhood. No sweat. You can count on that.”

Phyllis’s eyes filled. “Thank you.”

“What we can’t do,” Cassie said, her voice taking on a note of warning, “is prevent—or cure—a broken heart.”

Nodding, Phyllis believed her friend. Cassie should know. She’d lived with one for more than ten years. And from the sound of things, there’d been days when the pain had been almost enough to kill her.

“Don’t worry,” she said, “this heart is firmly intact.” And going to remain that way.

AS DAYS WENT, it wasn’t a good one. Matt Sheffield wondered what he’d done to piss off the fates this time. The new gels had come in for the dance show that weekend and they were the wrong colors. The light board—the computer that controlled the lighting—had crashed, so the lights weren’t working. He had a student working for him who could only be described as technically challenged, the kids in his lighting design class had all acted as though they’d rather be someplace else, and his star student, Sophie Curtis, had been missing cues all morning.

And it was a dance show. His least-favorite kind of production to entrust to students. Plays were usually easy to light—a wash, some specials—unless they were going for extravagant effects. Concerts were even easier, symposiums downright boring. But dance—now there, the lighting was part of the art. He could lose himself in creativity and forget about life for a while.

Unless he had butts to wipe every step of the way.

And Sophie... she’d been preoccupied all semester. In the two years he’d known her, Sophie had done nothing but amaze him, with her diligence, her reliability, but mostly her vision. She could make magic out of an empty stage with almost nothing. Whether she was working as lighting designer, stage manager or sound engineer, she was always the glue that held the rest of the students together.

Until this semester. She’d been late, absentminded, short-tempered. She’d lost weight.

Something was wrong.

Not that Matt had any intention of finding out what.

“You busy?”

He glanced up from his desk in the office at the back of the performing-arts center to see who actually had the nerve to interrupt his lunch hour—the one time he could let down his guard and allow free rein to whatever thoughts he felt like having.

Dr. Phyllis Langford was standing there. The psych professor. Matt’s stomach dropped at about the same rate his heart sped up.

The day just kept getting better and better. Not.

“Finishing my lunch,” he said, indicating the empty sandwich wrapper on the desk in front of him. He wadded up the debris, put it and the empty chip bag in the little brown sack he’d brought from home and lobbed the whole package into the trash can beside his desk.

“I knew you had class this afternoon and I wanted to catch you before you went in.”

She hadn't come any farther into the room. Just stood there, not quite meeting his eyes, but not looking around at anything else, either. An odd mixture of confidence and disinterest. Funny, the month before, he'd only noticed the confidence.

Confidence and passion and... No. They'd forgotten that insane lapse in the production room. They were both going to ignore it, both going to act as though it had never happened.

He studied her through narrowed eyes, hoping they had indeed forgotten. He'd sweated for a couple of days after their tumble that afternoon, afraid she'd come calling with expectations he'd never meet.

And had been honestly, greatly relieved—despite a slightly damaged ego—that she hadn't. Apparently he'd lost his touch with women; under the circumstances, that was nothing but a blessing.

"You can come in," he said when she continued to hover. He didn't want her anywhere near him or his office, but she was making him edgy, just standing there silently full of something to say.

That same sexy scent—the one that had lured him to insanity last month—drifted in with her as she took a seat on the other side of his desk. Phyllis Langford didn't perch on the edge of her chair as many women did—at least in his office. There was nothing tentative or uncertain in the way she sat, somehow commanding the space around her with her model-slim body. She'd had on black lycra bell-bottom pants the day he'd spent with her. Today she was wearing a circumspect, honey-colored business suit.

He wasn't sure which he found sexier.

"I'm pregnant."

Matt blinked. Froze inside. "Pardon?"

"I'm pregnant."

He waited.

"I just thought you should know." Dr. Langford, as he preferred to think of her, looked far too calm sitting there, her honey-colored purse, which matched her honey-colored shoes, still slung over her shoulder.

Her hair, a red version of Meg Ryan's stylishly messy do, distracted him.

"I don't understand why I'm the one you're telling," he said carefully, studying that hair. He knew it wasn't polite to ask a woman who the father of her child was, but what did a guy say when it wasn't him? He might have lost a good piece of his mind that Saturday in the theater, but not so much that he hadn't protected himself, and her, from any and all consequences.

"Because you're the only man I've had sex with since I divorced my husband four years ago."

He shook his head, not thinking her a liar, just knowing his stuff. "I pulled on that condom before I got anywhere near you."

"Condoms fail."

"Not likely."

"Read the box next time you pick some up," she said, still appearing far too calm, too undemanding, to be telling him what he thought he was hearing. "They're ninety-seven percent safe. Which leaves three percent for us to fall into."

No.

"Added to the fact that, once I thought back on it, I realized the wrapper you took from your wallet didn't look exactly new."

It hadn't been. But the damn things didn't come with "use by" dates. For a reason.

"How long was it in there?" she asked.

He shrugged, uncomfortable. His private life was off-limits. Period.

Or it had been until last month, when he'd pulled down the zipper on the front of his jeans in the Performing Arts Center. Every swearword he could think of—his time in prison had given him quite a repertoire—passed through his mind. Attached to each one was a barb aimed directly at the guilty part of his anatomy.

“I don’t know,” he finally said. “A year, maybe more.”

Like, maybe three more. It’d been a long, long time since he’d relaxed enough to give in to a sexual urge.

“A year’s worth of being smooshed and sat on could definitely do it,” she said.

Damn, the woman sounded as though they were discussing nothing more earth-shattering than a rained-out game of Little League. Didn’t she get it? They had an untenable situation on their hands.

Matt didn’t even know how to be a friend. There was no way he could be a father.

“I...” He paused, wondering what to say to her, to make her understand.

“Don’t worry.” She jumped into the pause. “I’m not asking anything from you. I don’t want anything. What happened last month was a one-time, no-strings-attached episode. And that hasn’t changed.”

Episode. They’d had some of the most incredible sex of his life. They’d apparently made a baby. And she called it an episode?

Was that all the baby was to her, too? An episode? Easy come, easy go? The thought made him feel a little sick.

He opened his mouth to tell her so.

Whoa. He stopped just in time.

A few minutes ago he’d been looking for a way to bail. He could hardly blame her, a single woman with a prominent position at a prestigious college, for wanting to do the same.

Admittedly, bailing was a little more convenient for him than it would be for her.

“Do you mind if I ask what your plans are?” He’d pay whatever expenses she incurred. Money was the one thing he had to give.

For the first time since taking a seat, she looked down, and he saw the chink in her armor. Was oddly relieved to find it there.

“I haven’t really made any plans yet,” she told him. “I’m still getting used to the idea that I’m going to be a mother.”

Going to be a mother. Why did his mind keep repeating everything she said? You’d think he was dense or something.

“You’re planning to have the baby, then?”

Her head shot back up. “Of course. And before you ask, I’m not even considering the alternative, so you can save your breath.”

“I wasn’t going to ask.”

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS GOING much better than she'd expected. And worse. She'd prepared herself for anger, denial, blame.

What she hadn't prepared for was a thoughtful, concerned man. Inexplicably, his humanness made the whole thing so much harder to get through. He was supposed to be little more than a fly at her picnic. She'd swat him away and get on with it.

He wasn't letting that happen—wasn't letting her discount him as easily as she'd thought.

"So you're definitely going to have the baby." He was fooling with a paper clip on his desk. Bending it into odd shapes with two fingers of his left hand. Did that mean he was left-handed? She hadn't noticed before.

Did that mean her baby might be left-handed, as well?

"Yes, I'm going to have it." She swallowed. Her baby. And this man's.

He looked up, head cocked to one side, eyes narrowed. "I can't be a father."

The sigh of relief escaped Phyllis before she could prevent it. "Who asked you to be?"

Back to his paper clip. She wondered if he was staring at it so intently because he was really trying to create some particular design—or because he didn't want to look at her.

"I'll pay for everything."

"That won't be necessary."

A baby. A baby with her traits and his, all mixed together. Growing inside her body.

He raised his head, frowning. "Of course it's necessary. I'm responsible. I pay."

Two could play that game. "I'm responsible. I pay."

"Well, then, we're both responsible. We split the bills fifty-fifty."

No! That wasn't the plan. She was doing this alone.

But he had her. They were both responsible. She just hadn't figured he'd care. How was she to know he had a streak of responsibility in his reclusive body?

"Have you been to the doctor yet?"

Phyllis shook her head. Don't do this, she silently begged him. Don't confuse me. Don't weaken me by carrying any of my load, or I might not be able to carry it all when you walk away.

"You'll let me know when your appointment is?"

She couldn't breathe. Needed to get outside, let the cool October air chill her skin. Remind herself that she was okay.

"Why?" Somehow her voice sounded almost normal.

He shrugged. "I'm half-responsible. I should know stuff like that."

"Just how much are you counting on here? What exactly will you want to know?"

"Not sure." He'd picked up another paper clip. This one with his right hand. "I'm new at this, too. I guess when something costs money, I should know about it."

That wasn't as bad as she'd begun to think. It wasn't personal. Merely financial.

"I'll see that you get copies of the bills."

His face expressionless, he nodded.

"There's one other thing," she added quickly.

Matt looked up at her, his eyes wary, questioning.

"Cassie Montford knows you're the father—it seemed necessary that someone know in case something happens—but she's been sworn to secrecy. I don't want anyone else knowing."

He seemed to consider that for several moments. "It would probably make things easier on both of us," he said at last.

Phyllis stood, satisfied. "That's what I thought."

"Good."

“Good.”

“Well, send me the bills.” Tossing the paper clip, he stood, too.

“I will.”

“Okay, see ya.” He’d followed her to the door.

“Goodbye.” Phyllis spoke with finality.

If she had her way, they’d never see each other again.

He made her tremble. He made her crazy and just a little angry. She absolutely refused to let him become part of her life.

She didn’t want or need his financial contributions.

This time it was the bills and not the check that would get mysteriously lost in the mail.

THE KICKING BAG went down. And came back up. Then went down again. Turning, Matt caught it with a perfectly placed side kick, knocking it into the corner of the wall. And, with hands properly angled in front of him, he turned and landed another perfect blow with the opposite foot.

Sweat dripped down the sides of his face. He didn’t bother wiping it off. It burned his eyes, but he ignored the pain, which was only the minutest portion of the punishment he deserved.

After more than an hour in his home gym, he wasn’t even close to the worn-out state he was working toward.

How could he have done it? He of all people?

Had life taught him nothing? The time he’d never be able to recapture. The humiliation and abuse. The lost dreams. Lost innocence. Had it all been for nothing?

Another smack on the bag, and the sand-weighted bottom scooted along the floor.

He just couldn’t believe what was happening. Couldn’t have imagined a worse day than the one he’d just had.

He’d made a woman pregnant. A perfectly respectable doctor of psychology was facing a complete and permanent upheaval in her life because of him.

Forgetting himself to the point of lost discipline, Matt hauled off and slugged the kicking bag with both fists, over and over, like a novice and completely unskilled boxer, rather than the Tae Kwon Do black belt he was. Logically he knew he was solving nothing. That he was probably going to hurt himself.

But he couldn’t stop. Couldn’t harness the anger, the despair and disappointment coursing through him. Didn’t know what to do next, except wear himself out, force himself into complete exhaustion. How was he going to live with himself?

He’d just begun to find a measure of internal peace. Maybe even forgiveness. And in the span of a ten-minute office visit, years of hard work, of unrelenting self-control and mental promises, had been shot to hell.

He’d been in Shelter Valley for four years. Pretending to himself that he was building a new life, becoming the man he’d always expected himself to be.

When instead, he was exactly what he’d been before Will Parsons had been kind enough to give him this job, this chance.

A man who’d spent years in prison. He hadn’t been guilty of the statutory rape of which he’d been convicted. But he hadn’t been entirely blameless, either. He’d allowed that girl—a student—to think he found her desirable. He hadn’t intended to; he’d only meant to offer a confused young girl a measure of confidence, a sense of approval. In his own idealistic ignorance, he’d tried to help someone and had only confused her more.

Slumping to the carpet, sweat dripping down his back and chest beneath the soaked T-shirt he was wearing, Matt grabbed his aching head between both fists.

The tears, when they dripped slowly from beneath tightly closed lids, mixed in with the sweat. Fell unnoticed. Forgotten. Allowing no forgiveness for a sin not committed—and then committed six years after the fact.

This was the second time he'd contributed to the ruin of a perfectly lovely woman's life. He deserved to rot in hell.

And that was just what he feared would happen to him. Only it would be a hell of his own making, right here on earth, in this place of shelter where everyone else had family and friends and knew the comforts afforded by love. It was going to be his own private hell. Even in this journey of everlasting destruction, he would be all alone.

IT WAS LATE on the first Tuesday night in November, and Phyllis had just arrived home from Phoenix when the phone rang. She'd been at a pet-therapy session with Cassie and a woman who'd been brutally raped by a colleague while working in a nursing home.

Sighing, she picked up the phone, a portable. "Surely you've seen a doctor by now." The voice didn't bother with introductions or hellos.

She considered lying, but that wasn't her style.

"I have."

"When? Today? Is that where you've been all evening?"

If he'd sounded like someone who was checking up on her—instead of like someone who was driving himself crazy with frustration—Phyllis would've been able to handle the conversation a lot more effectively.

"I went last week," she admitted. "Today I've been in Phoenix with Cassie Montford, helping her with her pet therapy. We went to see a woman in Phoenix who's crawled so deeply inside herself that she'll respond to nothing but one of Cassie's dogs. We're using the dog Angel to help her learn how to trust enough to interact with human beings again. If we don't succeed, she's going to live the rest of her life shut away in an institution."

Phyllis wasn't usually a babbler, but it didn't take a genius to figure out that she didn't want to give Matt a chance to say what he'd called to say. She'd managed to put him out of her mind for hours at a time this past week. She didn't need him back there.

"Have you had any success?" he asked when her words finally stopped.

Sinking into the couch in her tiny living room, Phyllis leaned back and stared at the ceiling. "Yeah, just tonight," she told him, feeling strangely comforted.

Cassie had Sam at home, waiting to hear all about it. Phyllis had no one.

"She's been petting Angel for weeks without reacting at all. Tonight, for the first time, she looked at her and there were tears in her eyes."

"And that's good?"

"It means she's in there—and that she's starting to come out. She's going to need a whole lot of reassurance before that can happen, though."

"She didn't cry before?"

Phyllis said no, started a technical explanation of hysterical amnesia and paralysis, and her own understanding of the things she'd read in the abused woman's eyes, and then abruptly stopped herself. She'd learned long ago that people didn't want to hear any of these things. She must be more tired than she'd thought.

"And you could tell she was searching for reassurance just from that one look at a dog?" he asked.

"Yeah," Phyllis said softly. "Her mind's been protecting her for a long time. She's lived inside a place that exists only in her own head, and she's afraid to come out. She's going to need constant reassurance that when she does, there's a safe, protected environment waiting for her."

"And you can provide that in weekly visits?"

"Of course not." Kicking off her shoes, Phyllis pulled her feet onto the sofa, tucking them beneath her. "We're just the door through which she's going to travel. The environment is right there waiting for her. She has a team of counselors working with her. People who've been around her, speaking with her, for months. At least one of them is with her twenty-four hours a day."

“What about her family? Do they come to see her?”

“Her sister does. Everyday. The two of them lived together before Ella was raped.”

“Isn’t it hard sometimes? Dealing with stuff like this?” He asked a question Phyllis rarely allowed herself to ask. “Seems like it could be...painful.”

“It is,” Phyllis said, remembering the year before, when she’d had Tory Sanders living with her. Under her guidance, Tory had been coming to terms with her abusive past, as well as grieving for her dead sister—Phyllis’s best friend, Christine. “But then the light goes on in someone’s eyes and suddenly I have all the energy in the world,” she continued. “I’ve learned that when I’m feeling discouraged about a patient’s recovery, I need to focus on the eventual appearance of that light, to look for it in the tiniest of signs, and I find myself getting little bursts of energy.”

“Like tonight.”

“Right.”

“You’re amazing.” There was wonderment in his tone, and Phyllis felt an impulse, irrational but overpowering, to dismiss Matt’s approval.

“I also spend most of my working hours in a classroom lecturing to healthy students,” she reminded him. “Cases like this happen much less frequently.”

“So what did the doctor have to say?”

She stiffened. He’d caught her off guard. Again.

“To take my vitamins.”

“Everything’s okay?”

He wasn’t supposed to ask. Or care.

“Yes.”

“I don’t think I saw a bill. An insurance deductible, maybe? Vitamins?”

They both knew he hadn’t.

Sitting up, Phyllis slipped back into her shoes and walked to her bedroom. She was tired. Needed a long soak in a hot tub. Just as soon as she got him off the phone.

“I’m a psychologist, Matt. I know about emotions and relationships, and I’m very sure that this will be much healthier for both of us if we agree to let this situation be mine.”

“I—”

“I don’t need your help. Not financially or in any other way,” she interrupted, lining up her shoes in her closet. She’d been doing this ever since she’d seen her friend Randi do it. Now her shoes were much easier to find. Besides, she found the effect visually pleasing—and any activity that created a sense of order was a good thing, in her view. “As a matter-of-fact, if you want to help me, then rest assured that what would help the most is if you’d just let me get on with my life. There’s no point including you when neither of us want you to be part of either my life or this child’s.”

“But—”

“I promise to call you if anything changes,” she said. “If I get into trouble or have any problems, I won’t hesitate to let you know.”

“You’d better mean that,” he said, his voice rougher than usual.

“I do.”

“Then I guess I’ll be seeing you.”

Not if she could avoid it.

The man confounded her. He jumbled her thoughts—and that was something Phyllis just could not tolerate. Her emotions she couldn’t always dictate, but her mind was the one thing she had to be able to count on. And Matt Sheffield threatened her mental clarity, her ability to analyze, to make rational, informed decisions. She hung up the phone with finality.

“Okay, baby,” she said, her voice several notches higher—and happier—as she bent to run her bath. “Let’s go play in the tub and then I’ll give you a nice long rubdown with the oil the doctor gave us. How does that sound?”

It was still far too early in her pregnancy for any response from the tiny fetus growing inside her, but Phyllis knew that somehow the baby heard her and was learning to recognize his mother's voice.

That might not be a rational belief—more of an intuitive conviction—but Phyllis didn't question it for a second.

MATT HAD NO REASON to be at the faculty meeting. He rarely attended them, preferring to have pressing business at the theater whenever Will Parsons called a meeting with his faculty and staff.

Will had never given him any crap about his inclination to steer clear of large groups—a bit of leftover discomfort from the claustrophobia he'd developed in prison. But he'd always made certain that Matt received whatever information he needed.

Matt suspected that the older man understood the more urgent reason he chose to keep his distance from his colleagues. The more time Matt spent in their company, the more chance they'd ask the kinds of personal questions he didn't want to answer.

He caught Will's raised eyebrow when he slipped into the back of the large lecture hall, where the university president was giving his mid-November faculty address.

If Matt wasn't careful, he was going to be raising other questions he wasn't prepared to answer.

He noticed Phyllis Langford sitting between an English professor and the head of the Psych Department, up near the front of the hall, and slid into the back corner seat. She was the reason he was there, the person he needed to speak to. He had no concrete ideas of what he was going to say to her, no suggestions to present. He only knew that, through her, he had to find some degree of absolution. He had to reach an understanding of his role in this whole baby thing, otherwise he'd never get rid of the guilt.

Will announced all the shows scheduled at the Performing Arts Center during the holidays. Mentally planning his crews, Matt felt a twinge of unease as Sophie Curtis topped the list on every show that mattered. As stage manager of the most recent show she'd worked, the girl had missed several cues, failed to get the props onstage in time, pulled the curtain too soon and left the house lights lowered for the first five minutes of intermission.

Matt couldn't remember when he'd last seen her smile. She barely resembled the vivacious blonde of a year ago.

Will Parsons was speaking about a new promotional video the college was making. Matt would help with the shooting of some of the inside segments—and probably have a hand in the editing process, as well. He'd designed a couple of gobos—metal pieces placed in front of lights to throw shadows for special effect—they'd be using.

He was still finishing a note to himself when the meeting ended and his co-workers started filing past. A few nodded at him politely. The dance director smiled. No one stopped to speak.

He relaxed a bit.

And waited.

Phyllis Langford walked right past him, engrossed in conversation with her department head. She was wearing a navy suit today, with a navy-and-white polka-dot blouse. She looked great.

And not the least bit pregnant.

"Hi," he said, stepping up behind her.

Swinging around, she knocked into him, her purse walloping him in the ribs. "Matt! Hi," she said, smiling at him for a second. He hated how quickly her face sobered. "Did you need something?" she asked much more hesitantly, glancing at her superior.

Matt glanced at the older man, as well, wondering if Phyllis had any interest in him other than a professional one.

Wondering, too, if his baby was going to prevent her from pursuing that interest.

"I'd like to see you for a second, if you've got the time," he said. She was the entire reason he was at the damn Friday-afternoon meeting. A carefully planned, casual running into each other, just to see how she was doing. He hadn't spoken with her in almost two weeks.

Excusing herself to Dr. Ellington, Phyllis followed Matt out into the hall.

“What’s up?” She appeared to be very carefully keeping a distance between them as they walked out of the building and across campus toward the faculty lot where they’d both parked. Matt was grateful to her for that distance.

“Just wanted to make sure there were no problems.”

She frowned. “I told you I’d call if there were.”

“I know.”

“So?”

“I’m just making sure.”

“Matt, the whole idea is that I’m on my own here. That means you don’t check up on me.”

He nodded. Glad to hear she still seemed confident in her decision. And then he remembered the good Dr. Ellington.

“Have dinner with me this weekend,” he said before he could weigh the consequences of his words.

“No.”

“We can go to Phoenix, someplace no one we know will see us together.” Her refusal made him more determined. He was doing this for her. And for him, too, he guessed. Somehow he had to find a way to live with himself. He couldn’t allow the pregnancy to throw her whole social life, her career plans, off course.

“No.”

“I have something to discuss with you,” he said, thinking of ways she could have his child and still date and attend conferences and do all the things she’d done before. He hadn’t thought of one, but maybe together they could come up with something....

“What?”

There was no way she could be pregnant with his child and continue with her life as it had been. He just had to accept that fact—and accept his share of the blame.

“My family medical history,” he said, coming up with the idea at the last minute. “You should know my medical background. Your doctor should have it.”

“She did ask...” Phyllis said, and then stopped. Stopped speaking. Stopped walking. She looked up at Matt, her eyes serious, her lips firm.

“All right, one dinner, but that’s all,” she said. “And then I’m on my own.”

“Agreed.”

Matt meant what he said. But he didn’t feel good about it.

CHAPTER THREE

THINKING IT WOULD BE easier to talk if they weren't facing each other across a table the entire time, Matt suggested he and Phyllis drive up to Tortilla Flat on Saturday, have a late lunch there, and then return to Shelter Valley. That gave them about five hours to reach some kind of accord.

And then get out of each other's lives.

Phyllis surprised him by agreeing immediately to the date that wasn't a date.

Things were awkward at first as she climbed into his Blazer late Saturday morning and they headed out. She was wearing a pair of designer-looking jeans and a thick black velour sweater that only accentuated the slimness of her small-boned frame.

It had been so long since he'd been out with anyone for any kind of social occasion that he'd more or less forgotten how to do it.

"It's a little disturbing to think that we made a baby and know so little about each other, huh?" She broke the awkward silence, apparently reading his mind.

It was disconcerting how she always seemed to know just what to say to get him started. She'd done that in his office the day she'd come to tell him about the pregnancy. And then again on the phone. Hell, she'd probably done it that day they'd worked together in the Performing Arts Center; he'd just been too busy listening to his libido to hear.

He was going to be damn glad when this day was over and he could go back to being the only one privy to the thoughts of Matt Sheffield.

"So how long have you been a professor?" he asked, taking her comment as a cue.

"Eight years, though I didn't start out with a full professorship."

"You like it?" Matt turned the utility vehicle onto the highway that led to Phoenix and beyond.

"I love it," she said, staring out at the road. He caught a glimpse of the smile on her face as he glanced over.

"Me, too," he said. They had something in common. He didn't know if that made the job ahead of them easier—or not.

She turned her head to look at him. "How long have you been teaching?"

This was why he avoided social occasions. And relationships. The questions inevitably led to places that were off-limits.

"Twelve years, on and off."

"Always at a college level?"

He shook his head, reluctant to remember. "I started out teaching theater technology to junior-high and high-school students."

"You said you've been teaching on and off. What did you do in the off parts?"

"Went to school, for one." Matt ran his hand underneath the collar of his open black leather jacket. He wished he could shove a towel down his back to soak up the sweat collecting there. "Got my masters in theater technology with an emphasis on lighting design. I also graduated from a certificate program in videography."

Relieved when there were no further questions, Matt concentrated on getting them through Phoenix and onto the two-lane, winding road that would take them up to Tortilla Flat. Apache Trail, as it had been dubbed more than a hundred years before, was at one time the only wagon trail going up to this part of northern Arizona. Tortilla Flat, though only ten miles up the mountain, was about a forty-five-minute drive. It had been the first stagecoach stopping place on the three-day journey from Phoenix to Roosevelt Dam.

The town, now more a tourist spot than anything, was reminiscent of those days, with most of the six or so buildings preserved in their original state. With its population of six, the town

boasted a small store and ice-cream shop, a post office and well-known restaurant-cum-gift shop. The businesses were all run by the six-member family that resided there.

“I’ve never been up here.” Phyllis broke the silence that had fallen around them, a silence that seemed so persistent Matt had begun to wonder if they’d actually get around to discussing anything that day.

He’d almost convinced himself that he hoped not.

“This scenery is beautiful,” she continued.

Matt glanced around at the cacti and rocks, the dark greens and myriad shades of brown, the mountains rising above him on one side, the mile-long canyon on the other.

“I come up here fairly regularly,” he admitted. Especially when he was feeling his worst. The vast miles of deserted landscape always seemed to put things in perspective for him. Reminded him just how small he was—or just how big the picture.

She turned to look at him, making him uncomfortable. Somehow he’d let too much show again.

“So tell me about your family,” she said as he maneuvered slowly around the curves with their huge drop-offs only a foot away. There was no guardrail between them and those canyons.

Usually Matt liked the sense of danger he felt whenever he drove here. Today he was too aware of the woman beside him—and the baby growing inside her.

“Not much to tell,” he said eventually, shrugging, rubbing a sweaty hand along the leg of his jeans before returning it to the wheel.

“You said you had family history to give me,” she reminded him. “It’s why I’m here.”

He nodded. Took another curve. “Basically we were all healthy,” he said, trying to remember without thinking back.

“We?” she asked. She’d turned again, had drawn up one knee as she faced him. “How many of you were there?”

“Just my brother and sister and me. And my mother and father, of course.” You couldn’t forget them.

“No predisposition to any diseases that you know of? Nothing genetic we need to worry about?”

Matt froze. Nothing. At least not the kind of thing she was referring to. What she wasn’t asking and needed to know about was a different predisposition altogether—the tendency to get oneself thrown in jail that seemed to beset the male Sheffields. There were some basic values missing in the men of his family.

There was a time Matt had believed he’d been spared that particular curse. A time he’d convinced himself that if he did have it, he’d gotten the better of it, risen above it.

He’d been full of shit back then.

“My mother was anemic after she had me and my sister, but that was all.”

“Any cancer you’re aware of?”

“None.”

“Are they all still alive?”

How the hell did he answer that? Glancing over at her, Matt saw the warm interest in her intent green eyes—interest that, regardless of the magnificent scenery, was reserved for him.

It was inevitable that she’d find out. He owed her the chance to raise her kid right in spite of the strikes against him.

“I don’t know,” he said slowly.

He glanced over once more—in time to see the look of surprise that she quickly masked—and then he kept his eyes firmly on the hairpin turns in front of him. There was little traffic on the road, except for the occasional car approaching from the opposite direction.

And some motorcycles he could see in the distance behind him.

He waited for her to say something. For the questions to start. Nothing happened.

The turns kept coming. He continued, somehow, to stay on the road as he tackled them.

“My father died when I was in high school.” Murdered in prison because he’d accosted one too many of the new arrivals. He’d found one who’d managed to smuggle in a weapon.

“I’m sorry.”

She sounded so sincere he almost looked over at her again. But he knew better. Matt Sheffield needed sympathy—caring—from no one. That was his golden rule.

One that had served him well.

“Don’t be,” he said. There was no need for her to waste her sympathy. “We weren’t close.”

“You didn’t live together?”

“Off and on.”

“Your parents were divorced, then?”

“No.”

“You want to tell me about it?”

“No.”

“Do I need to know?”

Probably.

Another turn. And a car passing on the left. Matt slowed down from twenty miles an hour to a crawl.

“The first thing I remember about my father happened when I was about two. The cops came to our door and put handcuffs on him and hauled him away. He wasn’t back the next morning.”

He paused. Waited for her reaction—disgust, contempt, horror. Or maybe pity. The reactions, though varied in strength, were basically all the same.

Phyllis held hers in.

“That was only the first arrest. There were many more.” He paused. “I don’t know how old I was when I realized what my mom did while he was gone—the different men friends she ran around with, the bars. Trying to find forgetfulness, I guess.”

At least that was the justification he’d created for her. The one he could stomach.

“And love,” Phyllis said quietly.

“If that’s what she wanted, she wasn’t looking in the right places.”

“Not everyone is as smart as you.”

He replayed the words a couple of times, searching for the sarcasm. He found only open understanding. From a woman who didn’t know him at all.

A woman who’d spent only one day with him. A day that had resulted in irrevocable consequences. The baby. He couldn’t forget, even for a moment, about his most recent fall from grace.

“Every time my father went to jail, he was gone for a longer period. The last time, he never made it back home.”

“He died in prison.”

“Not from a disease. You don’t have to worry about that,” he assured her, coming up to a one-way bridge. He waited for the approaching car to go first. “He was murdered.”

Stepping lightly on the gas, Matt guided the Blazer over the bridge.

“And your mother?”

“She ran off with her boyfriend.”

“And abandoned you and your brother and sister?”

“Just me. My brother was...gone by then. And she took my sister. Lori was older than me, out of high school, and she and my mom were pals.”

“They just...left you?”

More turns. Matt negotiated them. “I was glad they did,” he told Phyllis. “I wasn’t living with them anymore, hadn’t been since I turned sixteen and got a job at the grocery store. I rented a one-bedroom apartment with my first paycheck.”

“At sixteen?” Her voice had lost its calm.

The warmth was still there. Matt didn't get it.

"Who'd rent to a sixteen-year-old kid?"

"An old lady who'd taught him in the fourth grade and had a room over her garage."

"Are you still in touch with her?"

He shook his head, slowing as he came to the second bridge. The way was free. He could go. "She died ten years ago."

A happy woman. Her star pupil had still been shining.

It had been another year before he would've killed her with disappointment.

"And in all this time, you've never heard from either your mother or your sister?"

"Not a word." They hadn't actually been on speaking terms. Not after that last big fight when he was sixteen and he'd told them what he thought of them and the life they were living. When he'd denounced everything they stood for, refusing to have anything more to do with them.

He'd not only been incredibly young, he'd been foolish. He'd thought that if he distanced himself from his family, he'd lose the stigma of being related to them. He'd thought he'd stop paying for their choices, their actions.

But he'd been judged by his association with them just the same.

He understood that now. He was a Sheffield and he couldn't escape his past.

But that wasn't going to happen to his child. No child of his was going to be judged by his father's sins. Or made to suffer for them.

If he was certain of nothing else in life, he was certain of that. He'd die before he'd allow another generation to be hurt by the stigma of criminal convictions and jail time. Of coming from losers. And going nowhere because of it.

"Did you have any other family? Aunts, uncles, cousins?"

Oh, yeah. "My dad's younger brother."

"He couldn't take you in?"

"At the time he was serving ten years for auto theft..."

THE RESTAURANT WAS amazing. That was the only word Phyllis could think of—amazing. She stared, her eyes darting all over the room. It was a rustic old place, and she could easily believe it had been there for more than a hundred years. A good part of the building hadn't been, Matt had told her, as it had burned in a fire in 1987. But some of the original structure still stood.

There was nothing fancy about the wooden tables and chairs crammed too close together, the cheap tablecloths. Yet it was perfect. They were seated immediately, which Matt said was fortunate since the restaurant didn't take reservations.

At the moment, her stomach was cooperating. She didn't feel even a twinge of the morning sickness that had been causing her such misery over the past few weeks.

"I've never seen so many dollar bills in my life," she said for the third time. Since arriving at Tortilla Flat, all their conversation had centered on the restaurant. Every available inch of the inside walls were covered with bills, mostly American one-dollar bills, but other paper currency, as well. Some foreign. Even some checks.

Though she sensed that their conversation—their real conversation—was far from over, Phyllis was glad for the respite.

Matt had one hell of a lot of pain bottled up inside him. Phyllis hadn't felt anything that potent in more than a year. Probably not since she'd first met Tory Sanders, struggling with grief for her sister and fear of her ex-husband. She knew that if the situation with Matt was different, if she'd met him at another time, in another way, if she hadn't slept with him, she could probably have helped him.

She would've liked to try. Underneath all the keep-off signs, Matt Sheffield was an intelligent, gentle man. A kind man. At least judging how he'd been with her. And with his students during her symposium.

“People come here from all over the world and leave the money,” Matt said after their waiter had taken their drink order, imparted a bit of Tortilla Flat history and left. Matt indicated the newspapers the man had set in front of them.

“The rest of the history is right there, and the article on the second page is the menu.”

The place was crowded, with every one of the fifteen or so tables taken and people milling around in the gift shop just beyond.

“The bills all have names on them,” Phyllis said.

“Or business cards tacked to them.”

“How many of them do you think there are?”

“I wonder every time I come here, but I have no idea.”

“A million maybe?”

“I doubt it. But I know it was a lot more than anyone wanted to lose when the place burned in ’87.”

“The walls were covered like this back then, too?”

“More so, from what I’m told. I guess the bills were four and five thick in some places.”

He looked so comfortable sitting there, sipping from the iced tea the waiter had brought. The perfect host.

Phyllis could hardly believe this was the same man she’d known in Shelter Valley. Or the one she’d driven up with.

He’d shed his jacket, revealing his broad shoulders in the denim shirt he was wearing. It was tucked into another pair of the snug-fitting jeans that had driven Phyllis to insanity that fateful Saturday afternoon.

His black hair and eyes were just as captivating. And those hands, resting so easily on the table...

She guessed it was time they returned to the business at hand. Before she forgot that all it could ever be was business.

“So,” she said, leaning forward, hands folded on the table. “Back to medical history. Any allergies in your family?”

“None.”

“You aren’t allergic to any medications?”

“Not that I know of.”

She could do this. Breeze right through without ever really focusing on what was going on. Just get the information and process it later.

“What about blood type?”

“I have one.”

Startled, Phyllis brought back her wandering gaze to land on him. He was grinning. The effect was devastating.

Phyllis smiled back. “I assumed so. You wouldn’t happen to know what it is, would you?”

“B positive.”

She was A positive, which would be just fine.

And then she ran out of questions.

The waiter finally stopped at their table on one of his many trips past. They gave their lunch order. He was having a burger. She’d chosen the taco salad. After that she just sat. And pretended there weren’t a million things she wanted to know about him.

She could tell herself that she should ask them in order to safeguard her child’s future. But she didn’t. She was a psychologist; she knew those tricks.

She was familiar with the various and often complex rationalizations the mind devised, rationalizations that let you do what you wanted when you knew you shouldn’t. Focusing on the one reason it was all right to proceed while ignoring the four reasons it wasn’t.

Such rationalizations had caught her once—and trapped her.

She wasn't going to be caught again.

Not by the mind's devices. Not by her own devices. And not by being vulnerable to the whims of the male ego.

She'd finally gotten beyond the pain of her divorce. Faced reality. Left useless dreams behind. She'd moved to Shelter Valley and found happiness. She loved the town, her work, helping others. She loved the way people in Shelter Valley made her feel. She finally had a life full of true friends and the things that really mattered.

And she had a baby on the way. She couldn't afford to threaten all of that by doing something foolish—like getting involved with a man who had no place in her new life.

CHAPTER FOUR

MATT HAD NO IDEA how he and Phyllis had ended up sitting on her front step as the afternoon waned. He'd walked her to her door after their trip, she'd asked a question about the presentation he'd helped her with earlier that semester—said she was hoping to have a video made of it for some of her peers who'd attended the symposium. One comment led to another and suddenly, almost an hour later, he became aware of himself sitting there, having a real give-and-take adult conversation for the first time in years.

They still hadn't broached the reason he'd called this meeting. And he wasn't sure how, exactly, he should bring up the subject.

"What about dating?" he suddenly blurted as her questions about lighting-design techniques finally dwindled.

"No!" she exclaimed, her shoulders straightening, bringing her breasts into relief against the black velour covering them. "We already agreed there'll be no involvement between us," she added with a little less agitation.

Matt could almost feel the effort it took her to appear unaffected. So the good doctor had secrets, too.

"I meant you dating," he said slowly, wondering just what those secrets might be. "Not us."

"Oh." She paused, her shoulders relaxing as she wrapped her arms around her knees. "Well, not that it's any business of yours, but I don't."

"Don't date?" If he wasn't so detached, he might've been shocked. "Ever?"

"Nope."

"Why the hell not?"

She pierced him with a look he'd have been hard-pressed not to challenge in another life. "This may come as a surprise to you, but not every woman needs a man in her life to be happy." Her eyes dared him to argue with her.

"No, I guess lesbians don't."

"I'm not a lesbian."

"I'm fully aware of that."

She blushed. Looked away.

Matt bit back a grin.

And then quickly sobered as he remembered he wasn't there to enjoy himself.

"It occurred to me yesterday that this...situation we've created makes any relationship you are...or hope to be involved in...difficult. Romantically speaking."

Smooth, Sheffield. Spit that one right out.

"No problem there."

"Oh." Matt nodded, waiting for the relief he was going to be feeling any second. "Good."

What the hell did that mean—No problem there? That she was in a relationship—one that had moved beyond dating—and the man was willing to take on Matt's baby? Or that she'd really been speaking of herself and not just hypothetically when she'd said a woman didn't need a man in her life to be happy?

A family, all wearing helmets and gloves with their sweatshirts and jeans, rode by on bikes, two adult-size and two child-size, one with training wheels. Matt and Phyllis watched silently. He wondered if things were as perfect inside that family's house as they appeared on the outside.

"So, you really doing okay?" he asked Phyllis as the family rode slowly around the corner and out of sight.

"I really am."

"You're sure?"

She turned to look at him, her soft green eyes filled with question. “I’m sure,” she told him. “Why do you find that so hard to believe?”

Matt shrugged, gazing out at the street. With his forearms resting on his knees, his black leather jacket open, allowing the evening chill to penetrate the thin cotton of his button-down shirt, he contemplated the wisdom of answering her question.

“I guess because I’m having a little trouble with things myself,” he finally said.

A quick sideways glance showed him her frown. Matt focused on the white minivan driving past. A thirty-something short-haired man was driving, a blond woman in the passenger seat. A not-too-tiny hand was plastered to one of the back windows facing them. He’d seen at least one car seat, as well. A family going out to dinner after work?

Or maybe to some kind of ball game? Had that hand in the back belonged to a boy? Was he an aspiring athlete? And if so, did he have any real talent, or were the next few years going to be a real struggle for him?

“What kind of problems are you having?” Phyllis’s question, which sounded almost reluctant, reminded Matt that he wasn’t sitting there alone. And shouldn’t, for the moment, be living vicariously.

“I wouldn’t call them problems,” he was quick to assure her. Nothing so complicated as a problem. “But I’m not an irresponsible man.”

“I never thought you were.”

He was glad to hear that. Not that it should matter.

“So, the fact that I’ve fathered a child and am doing absolutely nothing to take responsibility for it isn’t going down right with me.”

“But I’m not letting you do anything.”

“I know.”

“So the choice is out of your hands.”

He pinned her with a hard stare. “Is it?”

Rocking back and forth, her feet leaving the step, then gently touching again, Phyllis nodded. “Of course it is. It’s not as if there’s anything for you to do. Any role to play. We hardly know each other.”

“I’m the baby’s father.”

“He doesn’t know that.”

His stomach dropped. “It’s a boy?”

“I don’t know.” She glanced at him and then away. “That was a generic ‘he.’”

“Oh.” Good. For a second there, thinking the baby actually had a sex had made it all seem so much more real. So much more threatening.

He knew that made no sense. Of course the baby had a sex. Whether or not its unprepared parents knew what it was.

“The point is,” Phyllis said, still hugging her knees, still rocking slightly, “your involvement here is only biological. In the big picture, that doesn’t have to mean anything.”

Relief flooded through Matt, almost bringing forth the grin he’d suppressed earlier. Almost, but not quite. A strange, inexplicable sadness got in the way.

“I can’t just turn my back on this.”

“You have no choice.” She started to rock harder.

“There are always choices.” Some much harder to face than others.

“We agreed I’d do this on my own.” Her voice had a definite edge to it.

“I know.”

“But you’re reneging on that?”

“No.” He thought about the past weeks, wondered how he could possibly explain them to her. To himself. Wondered why he even wanted to try.

“So you’re going to let me do this alone, but you’d like to be a father to the baby?” She’d lost some of her edge but was still hugging herself tightly. He thought she might be cold, in spite of the thick velour sweater she was wearing.

The air was definitely cooler now that the sun was losing its intensity.

It really wouldn’t be good for her to catch a chill.

“I can’t be a father.”

He hadn’t meant the words to come out like that. Wasn’t sure he’d meant them to come out at all. Somehow, over the years of observing rather than living, he’d forgotten how to communicate.

“What do you mean, can’t?” she challenged. “Don’t you mean won’t? That you don’t want to?”

No, that wasn’t what he’d intended. It had been so long since his wanting had played a part in anything that he no longer even asked himself what he wanted.

“You’re just going to have to trust me on this one.” He bit down hard, controlling the tension gripping him. “I’m not father material! Wouldn’t be good for a child.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Phyllis said, apparently not having heard his admonition about trust. Or perhaps it was the fact that he hadn’t done anything to earn her trust that had her arguing an inarguable point with him. “You’re great with your students,” she continued. “Patient, firm. It’s obvious they adore you.”

No one adored him. No one got that close. He made certain of that. “I control the grade book.”

He could feel her eyes on him again. “You really believe that’s all it is?”

“Of course.” That was all it could be. “I have a past, Phyllis,” he told her, sounding a little too adamant. They had to get over this once and for all so they need never visit it again. “I’ve made mistakes that would inevitably reflect on anyone closely associated with me.”

“Everyone reaching our age has made mistakes. Either that or they haven’t lived.”

“I can’t be a father to that child.”

He’d grown up the child of a convict. Knew how that fact insidiously wore away at a boy’s self-esteem, his confidence. His sense of who he was. Coming from a family of cons did something to a kid, made him something he might not otherwise have been, convinced him of things he didn’t even recognize until it was too late.

Matt might not be guilty of the crime of which he was convicted, might even have won his acquittal, but only because the evidence hadn’t been strong enough the second time around to pass the “beyond reasonable doubt” provision. No one really knew—except Matt himself—what had happened between him and Shelley Monroe. Shelley wasn’t certain herself, although Matt knew full well what she wanted to believe, what she chose to believe. She thought Matt had slept with her that day in his office when she’d been too drugged to remember what had happened. It was what she needed to think.

He understood that now.

Understood, too, that a lot of what had happened between them was his own damn fault. Shelley had longed for love and acceptance. At fourteen she’d already been conditioned by the life she led, the choices she’d made, to take her validation, her self-worth, from her body. Because of that, she’d needed badly to believe that Matt found her body worthy, that he considered her attractive. And so, like an idiot, he’d given her the verbal praise she’d seemed so desperately to require.

He hadn’t even been able to ease his guilt with the knowledge that he’d never ever thought about Shelley as a female. The idea of having sex with a fourteen-year-old girl, no matter how much older than her years, hadn’t entered his mind for even a second. But, he had, perhaps, fallen just a little in love with the woman he knew she could someday become.

Which was one of the reasons he sent her a support check every month. He might not be the father of her child, but he wasn’t completely free of responsibility for what had happened. Besides, then and now, he saw her potential—a potential she was well on her way to achieving.

Shelley was one of those rare people who had grit and talent, wit and compassion and that ability to see a bit deeper, go a bit farther, than most people.

Phyllis let out a heavy sigh, bringing Matt back from the hell he'd visited less and less over the past four years—and almost hourly, it seemed, during the past month. She'd stopped rocking. Rested her head on her pulled-up knees.

"What exactly do you want, then?" He could feel her gaze on him, but didn't turn to meet it.

"I'm not sure," he answered honestly. Having come this far, he didn't see that he could answer her in any other way. "I just feel I should be doing something. Watching out for you, if nothing else."

She took a quick breath and he held up his hand to forestall the argument he knew was coming. "We hardly know each other," he said, choosing his words carefully. "But at the moment, we share a very intimate problem and I can't seem to forget that."

"Don't get me wrong," he continued when she didn't have anything to say to that. "I'm honestly very glad that you're doing so well with all of this, and I don't want to make things more difficult for you. It just seems as though I'm getting off too easy here. Life doesn't work that way."

"I didn't think of that." Her voice was soft, compassionate, compelling him to meet her gaze. It was as warm as her voice had promised, and though he knew he should, Matt couldn't look away. "What you're saying makes perfect sense," she went on slowly, still reaching inside him with that gentle, open look. "It might seem odd to admit this, considering the circumstances, but I guess I've been the selfish one here."

He had to look away. Or drown. "I'd hardly say that."

"I haven't been fair to you, but I'm not sure how to remedy that."

He wasn't sure, either. And was finding it a little difficult to breathe. "Maybe we should just leave things as they are for the moment," he said, stretching his legs in front of him in preparation for standing.

It was time to go.

"As long as you're really okay..." he added.

"I'm fine," she said, and sounded as if she meant it. She even met his eyes again, but somehow, though their eyes met, her gaze didn't touch him as it had before. "But you—"

"Don't worry about me. I'd say any discomfort I'm feeling is far less than I deserve."

They stood together.

"You'll call me if you need anything?" he asked, looking down at her, reluctant to leave her there—even while he couldn't get away fast enough.

God, she was beautiful.

"I promise," she told him, and he believed her.

And with that he was going to have to be satisfied.

IF PHYLLIS HADN'T LOVED Tory Sanders so much, she'd have skipped her younger friend's baby shower the next day. She'd been nauseated almost every morning that previous week, though thankfully not at all during her time with Matt the day before, but nothing compared to the way she was feeling on Sunday afternoon. The taste of grape juice she'd had during communion at church had turned her stomach, and by two o'clock—the time for Tory's shower—her traitorous insides had not yet righted themselves.

Because the shower was a double one, for Tory and for Randi Foster, both of whom were expecting their first babies within the next six weeks, they'd all decided to have it at Becca Parsons's large home up on the mountain rather than in Phyllis's little bungalow. As she gathered up the presents she'd wrapped the night before, Phyllis couldn't help but be grateful for small blessings.

She'd have died for sure if she'd had to prepare food and tidy her house for the onslaught of all of her friends. As it was, when Cassie came by to pick her up, Phyllis had to make a mad dash from the car and back inside to her bathroom before she was ready to go.

What Cassie didn't know was that the shower was a surprise for her, too. The entire town was turning out to celebrate with their golden girl.

"You have to tell them," Cassie said softly when they were finally under way.

“I know, but not today.”

“Why not today?”

Cassie was radiant in her moss-green maternity top and matching slacks. She was wearing her long red hair down these days and looked younger than she had in years. Unlike Phyllis, Cassie was a woman who needed the man she loved beside her.

Thank God he'd decided to end his ten-year absence and return home to the family he'd left behind in Shelter Valley. Phyllis had hated Sam Montford when she'd first heard about him. But after months of getting to know the man, she had to admit she was as fond of him as everyone else in this town.

Cassie was a lucky woman. In so many ways.

“Today is for Tory and Randi,” Phyllis answered her friend belatedly. “I don't want to spoil it for them.”

“I think a baby shower is a perfect time to tell your friends that you're going to have a baby,” Cassie said. Phyllis recognized the tone in her friend's voice. Cassie wasn't planning to give up on this one easily.

And, Phyllis wasn't certain she had the energy to fight her.

“Maybe,” she allowed, a partial concession.

“It'd be good to do it with everyone together.” Cassie turned onto the road that wound up the mountain to Becca and Will's home—the same road that continued on up to Montford Mansion, the home Cassie's husband would one day inherit.

“Maybe I should wait and tell Will first,” Phyllis said, frowning. “I'm not sure I should drop a bomb like this on my boss in a room full of people.”

Will Parsons was the president of Montford University. He'd been the one who'd hired Phyllis away from her Boston College the year before.

“You're afraid he's going to ask too many questions,” Cassie said.

She wasn't letting Phyllis get away with anything. “There is that.”

“All the better to make the announcement today, then. There'll be so many people talking at once, he won't have a chance to say a word.”

“Maybe he won't be there.”

“Are you kidding? Randi's his baby sister. He's watching her like a hawk. Besides, other guys are going to be there. Ben. And Zack.”

“And Sam,” Phyllis said, grinning at her friend. The guys were all coming over after a round of golf. They were going to grill steaks that evening.

Just the thought of it made Phyllis' stomach start to churn again.

“You need me to pull over?” Cassie asked, her quick gaze filled with sympathy as she noticed Phyllis sliding down in her seat, head in her hands.

“Not yet,” Phyllis said, trying to concentrate on cool breezes and sheets and showers and anything else that was cool and nonedible. “I don't know what's the matter with me today. It hasn't been nearly as bad as this...until today.”

“It happens like that sometimes,” Cassie said, a pregnancy pro now that she was all the way into her sixth month. “The good news is it can go as quickly as it comes.”

“Thank God for that.”

“So, you still coming over for Thanksgiving?”

“Of course.” Phyllis smiled. Hard to believe the holiday was only five days away. “I wouldn't miss it for the world.” Cassie, Tory, their families. It was what life was all about.

“I called you a couple of times yesterday,” Cassie said as she maneuvered her Taurus slowly up the hill.

“I was gone.”

“For hours.”

“You checking up on me, Mom?”

“Maybe.”

“Matt and I went to Tortilla Flat for lunch.”

“Oh?”

“It wasn’t like that.” Phyllis eyed her black leather boots, deciding they complemented the beige hip-huggers she was wearing with her leopard blouse and black leather vest. She might not be wearing the slacks or top for long, but the boots would still fit in a couple of months, wouldn’t they?

“How was it, then?” Cassie asked. If she’d been trying for casual, she failed.

“He just thought we should get together once, share medical information, stuff like that.”

“Did he tell you anything about his family? About his life before Shelter Valley?”

“A little.”

“And?”

“I don’t think he’s the cold fish you think he is, Cass,” Phyllis said, sitting up. “He had a rough time growing up, and I’m pretty sure there’s been some serious stuff since then, but he’s a good man. Fair. Conscientious.”

Cassie pulled into the Parsons’s circular drive, parking the car behind three others already there.

“I’m not telling them today,” Phyllis said, looking at the beautiful home that belonged to her very first friends in Shelter Valley. “I’m still early in my term—I need a little more time.”

Cassie’s expression relaxed as she nodded. “About Matt Sheffield, you’re going to be okay, aren’t you?” she asked softly.

“You mean I’m not going to do something stupid like fall for him?”

“Okay, maybe.”

“Don’t worry,” Phyllis said, her stomach heaving again. “There’s no chance of that at all.”

“I’d just hate to see you get hurt.”

“I know,” Phyllis said, squeezing Cassie’s hand. “I don’t intend to.”

Phyllis knew that not every woman was meant to share her life with a man. She was one of those women. She could handle relationships with men as friends, but that was it.

The ground was too uneven, too treacherous, for a lifetime of one-on-one. Maybe she was too much of a threat. Or perhaps being around her all the time just got old.

Which was fine by her. She’d already tried love and marriage and had no intention of taking those risks again. The one and only time she’d ever come close to losing her grasp on reality had been when she’d been emotionally involved with a man.

Cassie didn’t have anything to worry about.

Matt Sheffield couldn’t hurt her. Because he wouldn’t get the chance.

CHAPTER FIVE

“MR. SHEFFIELD, may I speak with you for a moment?”

Turning from the lighting board, Matt nodded. “Sure, Sophie, what’s up? Another problem with Daniel?”

Matt had assigned him to a couple of shows over the semester, in a couple of different capacities. The kid might love the theater, might want to be a techie more than anything else in life, but he just didn’t get the technical stuff.

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