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American ROMANCE®



NOAH AND THE STORK



Penny
McCusker

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Noah And The Stork

«HarperCollins»

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This Stork Was Nine Years Late! When Noah Bryant returns home to Erskine, Montana, he's not anticipating a hero's welcome. After all, he abandoned the town—and his high school girlfriend—right after the prom and hasn't spoken to anyone there since. But the last person he expects to meet is his nine-year-old daughter, Jessie... a daughter he didn't know he had. When Noah returns, Janey realizes she never really stopped loving him. And he seems eager to be a part of Jessie's life, and hers. But Noah's back in Erskine for more than personal reasons; he has a business proposition that could seriously affect the whole town. And if there's anything Janey loves as much as her family, it's Erskine.

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“You’re a mom?” Noah said

Not that he couldn’t see Janey as a mom. He could think of no one who loved children more or would be better at raising them than Janey. It was simply that in his mind she was still seventeen, still carefree and single, not a grown woman with a kid around eight or nine years old....

Jessie turned around right then and Noah found himself looking into a pair of green eyes, the kind of green eyes he’d seen every morning of his life, staring back at him from his own mirror. His gaze rose, slowly, to meet Janey’s, suspicion oozing into the tiny part of his brain that shock hadn’t paralyzed.

Janey pulled her daughter against her, wrapping her arms around the thin shoulders. The truth Noah saw in her eyes slid into uncertainty, then misery when he didn’t speak.

Jessie glanced up at her mom, then simply and confidently stepped out of the shelter of Janey’s arms. She stopped halfway between the two adults, fixed Noah with a stare that was almost too direct to return and said, “I’m Jessie. Are you my dad?”

Dear Reader,

Welcome back to Erskine, Montana, where the streets roll up promptly at 6:00 p.m., neighbors still come together to lend a hand in times of need, and gossip is as much a way of life as baseball and apple pie. Erskine’s not perfect by a long shot, but Janey Walters loves it just the way it is.

She grew up there, she fell in love with Noah Bryant there and she had her daughter, Jessie, there. Noah is Jessie’s father, but he left town before he knew Jessie was on the way. That was ten years ago. He’s back now, but he isn’t the only one who’s getting a surprise. He has big plans for the little town that Janey loves and he couldn’t wait to leave.

The townspeople are like a large, eccentric, extended family to Janey and Jessie, and Erskine is their home. But as Noah becomes a part of his daughter’s life and earns himself a place in Janey’s heart again, is she willing to trade the town she’s always loved for the real family she and Jessie have always wanted?

Reunion stories are some of my favorites. I hope you truly enjoy Janey, Noah and Jessie’s story.

Penny McCusker

Noah and the Stork

Penny McCusker



www.millsandboon.co.uk

For my husband, Michael, and my kids, Mike, Erin and Ian. Because you put up with me.

Books by Penny McCusker

HARLEQUIN AMERICAN ROMANCE

1063—MAD ABOUT MAX

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Chapter One

Men were generally a pain in the neck, Janey Walters thought, but there were times when they came in handy. Like when your house needed a paint job, or your kitchen floor could use refinishing, or your car was being powered by what sounded like a drunk tap dancer with a thirst for motor oil.

Or when you woke in the middle of the night, alone and aching with needs that went way beyond physical, into realms best left to Hallmark and American Greetings. Whoever wrote those cards managed to say everything there was to say about love in a line or two. Janey didn't even like to think about the subject anymore. Thinking about it made her yearn, yearning made her hopeful, and hope, considering her track record with the opposite sex, was a waste of energy.

She set her paintbrush on top of the can and climbed to her feet. She'd been sitting on the front porch for the past hour, slapping paint on the railings, wondering if the petty violence of it might exorcise the sense of futility that had settled over her as of late. All she'd managed to do was polka-dot everything in the vicinity—the lawn and rosebushes, the porch floor and herself—which only made more work for her and did nothing to solve the real problems.

And boy, did she have problems. No more than any other single mom who lived in a house that was a century old, with barely enough money to keep up with what absolutely had to be fixed, never mind preventive maintenance. And thankfully, Jessie was a normal nine-year-old girl—at least she seemed well-adjusted, despite the fact that her father had never been, and probably never would be, a part of her life.

It only seemed worse to Janey now that her best friend had gotten married. But then, Sara had been waiting six years for Max to figure out he loved her, and Janey would never have wished for a different outcome. She and Sara still worked together, and talked nearly every day, so it wasn't as if anything had really changed in Janey's life. It just felt...emptier somehow.

She put both hands on the small of her aching back and stretched, letting her head fall back and breathing deeply, in and out, until she felt some of the frustration and loneliness begin to fade away.

"Now there's a sight for sore eyes."

Janey gasped, straightening so fast she all but gave herself whiplash. That voice...Heat moved through her, but the cold chill that snaked down her spine won hands down. It couldn't be him, she told herself. He couldn't simply show up at her house with no warning, no time to prepare.

"The best scenery in town was always on this street."

She peeked over her shoulder, and the snappy comebacks she was famous for deserted her. So did the unsnappy come-backs and all the questions she should've been asking. She couldn't have strung a coherent sentence together if the moment had come with subtitles. She was too busy staring at the man standing on the other side of her wrought-iron fence.

His voice had changed some; it was deeper, with a gravelly edge that seemed to rasp along her nerve endings. But there was no mistaking that face, not when it had haunted her memories—good and bad—for more than a decade. "Noah Bryant," Janey muttered, giving him a nice, slow once-over.

He was taller than she remembered, and had a solid, substantial look to him now. In high school he'd been lanky, slim but wide-shouldered with a bad-boy gleam in his sharp green eyes that made every female heart within range tumble just a little. Except hers, Janey recalled. Her heart had taken the whole long, irrevocable fall the first time she'd laid eyes on him. That would've been the fourth grade. And she'd stayed madly in love with him, right up to the moment he'd blasted out of town without so much as a backward glance.

Ten years ago, that had been. She hadn't seen him since, but all the times she'd imagined this scene, it had never gone down like this, with him in a suit that probably cost more than she made in a month, while she was decked out in the latest in janitor chic. She reached up to pull the bandanna

from her head, then decided against it; flat hair would only complete the fashion statement. “You swore you’d never come back to Erskine.”

And there was the grin that went along with the gleam. “Things change.”

“Really? You never could keep your word.”

His smile dimmed. “Still haven’t forgiven me, I see.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She pulled her bandanna off, after all, to brush at the droplets that had splashed onto her legs. Who was she trying to impress, anyway? A guy who’d claimed to love her a decade ago and then hightailed it out of town without even telling her why? “You haven’t crossed my mind in years.”

“Well, I’ve thought of you, Janey. You’re the one pleasant memory I have of this place.”

“Yeah, this is hell on earth,” she said, peering up and down the quiet street. Hundred-year old houses with perfectly manicured lawns and gardens sat behind white-picket or wrought-iron fences. Most of them were businesses now, all but her house and Mrs. Halliwell’s, across the street and a couple down. To him, Erskine, Montana, was tame, boring, forgettable. To Janey it was simply home. “No wonder you couldn’t wait to get out of here.”

“I’ve always regretted the way things ended between us.”

Regret? He had no idea what that meant. She glanced over her shoulder even though she knew the front door was safely closed, and then she went down the stairs to be absolutely sure her voice wouldn’t carry inside. “Yeah, well, they did end, so why are you here?” she asked, taking a stance on the front walk, one hip cocked, arms crossed, chin lifted. Noah seemed to get some amusement out of it, judging by his slight smile, but it made her feel stronger.

“I was passing through on business and when I saw you...”

All she had to do was look at him and he got the message. He wasn’t stupid, just untrustworthy.

“I guess I should head out,” he said, but instead of leaving, he had the audacity to step up to the fence and offer his hand.

Janey was going to take it, too. There was no way she’d back down from the challenge she saw in his eyes, no matter what it might cost her to actually put her hand in his. She took a step forward, then stopped short at the sound of her daughter’s voice.

“Mom,” Jessie called, racketing out the front door and down the steps, jumping the last three as had become her habit. She hit the ground and barreled into her mother—another new habit—practically knocking Janey off her feet. “Mrs. Devlin called. They’re riding out to bring in the spring calves this weekend, and she asked if I want to go along. She said I could take the bus home with Joey tomorrow and spend the night, if it’s okay with you.”

“Mom?” Noah said, his jaw dropping. Not that he couldn’t see her as a mom; he couldn’t think of anyone who loved children more or would be better at raising them than Janey. It was only that, in his mind, she was still seventeen, still carefree and single, not a grown woman with a kid eight or nine years old....

Jessie turned around then and Noah found himself looking into a pair of green eyes, the kind of green eyes he’d seen every morning of his life, staring back at him from his own mirror. His gaze lifted, slowly, to meet Janey’s, suspicion oozing into the tiny part of his brain that shock hadn’t paralyzed.

Janey pulled the kid back against her, wrapping her arms around the girl’s thin shoulders. The truth Noah saw on her face slid into uncertainty, then misery when he didn’t speak. They stood that way for a moment, eyes locked, nerves strained, enough emotional baggage between them to make Sigmund Freud feel overworked.

The kid came to everyone’s rescue. She glanced up at her mom, then confidently stepped out of the shelter of Janey’s arms. She stopped halfway between the two adults, fixed Noah with a stare that was almost too direct to return, and said, “I’m Jessie. Are you my dad?”

NOAH FOUND HIMSELF still at the curb in front of Janey's house, sitting in his car with no clear idea how he'd gotten there except that raw fury had something to do with it. By the time he fought through the red haze blurring his vision, the dashboard clock told him a couple of hours had passed. The day was no more than a pale crescent over the mountains and lights were burning in Janey's windows. Homey, inviting lights that weren't meant to make him feel like an outsider. But he did. He always had, his entire life. Some people would say that nobody could make you feel inferior without your own permission, but when you were the kid of a dirt-poor farmer in cattle country, and you moved to a town like Erskine where the people knew each other so well they were like family, ostracism was the least of what you felt.

Janey had been the one person he'd counted on to always stand by him, whether they were a couple or just good friends, even if it meant bucking the opinion of the entire town. He'd come back to town believing that hadn't changed. But all these years she'd shut him out, making a home for herself and her daughter in this small, close-knit community. Without him.

It wasn't fair of him to see it that way but he didn't care. He needed to be angry, because without the strength of that emotion, he'd have to feel the hurt and betrayal—weak emotions that would make it impossible to face her again. And he had to face her again, if for no other reason than that she owed him an explanation about his daughter.

His half-grown daughter.

Noah wasn't sure how he felt about that. Except scared. And angry.

He let the injustice of the secret Janey had kept carry him to her front door, three inches of solid, sound-deadening oak with a nice, big dead bolt. He'd kick it in if he had to.

Janey opened it before he could even knock, stepping out on the porch and closing the door softly behind her. "I think it would be best if you didn't come in."

"You can't expect me to walk away."

"I'm not expecting you to walk away, Noah. Just give yourself some time to calm down."

"And what about Jessie? The kid's been wondering where I've been all her life, and the minute I show up you hustle her off like I'm some kind of maniac."

"If you'd seen the expression on your face, you'd have done the same."

"Okay, so I'm steamed. But it can't be good—"

"Don't you dare lecture me on what's good for Jessie. You haven't been around—"

"How was I supposed to know?"

"I called you when...when I found out I was pregnant. I left you a message." She stopped, wrapping her arms around herself.

Noah got the impression she was fighting back tears—but that was absurd. The Janey he remembered never cried.

"You didn't return my call," she finally finished.

"You should've kept calling."

"That was my responsibility, too? To hound you until guilt brought you back here when love couldn't? It's not bad enough that I had to tell my father and see the disappointment—" This time her voice did break.

Noah took a step forward, just one, before she took a step back and he remembered that all he should be feeling toward her was anger.

It didn't take her long to get herself together. Janey was nothing if not strong. "What would you have done?" she asked him. "Given up college, forgotten all your plans for a big career and settled here?"

"You didn't give me the chance."

"No, you didn't give us a chance, Noah. You walked out with no goodbye, no explanation and now you stand there and tell me I should've dragged you back out of responsibility when it was clear you didn't want me? You knew me better than that."

Yes, he did. Janey wouldn't have begged, but when she'd called him all those years ago, he'd let himself believe she was going to do exactly that. He'd told himself that she loved him enough to swallow her pride and ask him to come back. He'd never imagined she might have another reason for contacting him—his ego hadn't allowed it—so he hadn't contacted her. And he'd thought he was being so noble, that if he really loved her he'd let her go because that was best for her. “Janey—”

She held up a hand. “That's behind us now, and I'd rather not rehash it, if you don't mind.”

“No,” he said after a contemplative moment. There was no use rehashing it, and what could he have said? That there'd been regrets? That he'd often wished he'd made different choices, burned fewer bridges? What good would it do them now? “We have a daughter. That matters.”

Hearing it put like that shocked her. Her expression didn't give her away, but she stiffened and even in the deepening gloom of the covered porch, he could tell all the color had washed out of her face. The last of his anger faded. He'd just discovered he had a daughter, but it must, Noah realized, have taken a great deal of courage for Janey to even open her front door, knowing that no matter how he reacted, she'd have to deal with it and then help Jessie do the same.

“We can stand out here,” he said, slapping at a sudden sting on his neck, “or we can go inside.”

“A few mosquito bites won't hurt us.”

“Okay, but it's not only the mosquitoes. Someone's bound to see us, and the news will be all over town before you can say West Nile virus.”

Her mouth curved in a ghost of a smile. “Gossip is the national sport around here, and I get my turn to be the star player, like everyone else. It's never really bothered me.”

“Even if it means you'd be linked with me again?”

She shot him a look. He had a point, but she'd be damned if she admitted that the last thing she wanted was to hear her name and his in the same sentence. In any context. She'd had enough of that when she was seventeen. “It's not as if we have much choice. People are bound to find out you're back in town again.”

He didn't reply, and although his expression was inscrutable, Janey didn't get a very positive feeling about what he was thinking. Or maybe, where Noah was concerned, it was best to be pessimistic. “If you're truly worried about Jessie, leaving now is about the worst thing you could do.”

“I didn't leave, did I? I want to discuss this, but I don't see why we have to be eaten alive while we're doing it.”

“Consider it planning your part in the food chain.”

Noah did the why-me combination, heavy exhalation, eye roll, a little shake of his head. “You were always too stubborn for your own good.” He closed the distance between them and reached for her.

“Don't touch me.”

“Worse things have happened.”

“True, but you were around then, too.”

“Does that include Jessie?”

She went still, one hand creeping up to rub at her aching chest. “I've never considered her a bad thing.”

He cupped her elbow and steered her up the front steps. “Just the fact that I'm her father.”

Janey would've told him to go to hell, but she couldn't have dug a coherent sentence out of her brain with a bulldozer, let alone voice it. The touch of his fingers on her bare skin had scorched enough brain cells to leave her temporarily senile.

When he let go of her to open the door and her mental processes kicked back in, she realized this was about Jessie. The girl had been wondering about her father for nine years, and when she finally met him, he completely freaked out. Heaven only knew what was going through her daughter's mind, Janey thought, because she rarely did. If Noah disappeared now, though, Jessie was bound to take it personally. Janey had firsthand experience with that.

"I can't believe you still live here," Noah said, as he ushered her into the big old Victorian house that had been built by her great-great-grandparents.

She slipped into the front parlor, turned on a floor lamp with a fussy, glass-fringed shade and felt instantly comforted. She loved the cheerful tinkling sound it made, how it threw prisms of light into every corner of the room, the same way it had for as long as she could remember. "Where else would I live?"

"New York, L.A., London. There are some real cities out there in the world, Janey."

"I like it here. You're the one who couldn't wait to get out of Erskine."

He went quiet for a long moment. "I had my reasons."

"I knew you weren't happy here, Noah, but you never wanted to talk about it."

"It's still never."

She stepped back out of the parlor. "Is that why you're standing in the hallway?"

He stared at her for a second, mouth set in a grim line, eyes dark and intense.

"The front door's right behind you."

She could see he was considering it, and she knew before he spoke that he'd come to the same conclusion she had only moments before. This was about Jessie.

"Where is she?" Noah asked.

"Upstairs, in the tower room." Janey said, referring to the uppermost floor of the turreted part of the house. The room was ringed with windows and high enough to see over the other houses in this part of Erskine. Jessie seemed to find the view soothing, although all that would be visible at this time of evening was the sun setting behind the mountains. "It's where she goes whenever something's bothering her."

"So did you," Noah murmured with a half smile Janey couldn't bear to see. The look of pleasant nostalgia on his face was too painful to believe.

"What have you told her?" he asked.

"What's there to tell her? I had no idea where you were or what you were doing."

"So all I am is some guy you slept with ten years ago?"

"What do you want to hear, Noah?" She straightened, coming out into the hallway to confront him, her voice as tightly controlled as her temper. "That she used to ask who her father was, and where he was, and why her mom and dad weren't married like most of the other kids' parents—or at least divorced and splitting weekends and holidays?"

"Those are good questions, Janey, every one of them."

"And I had good answers for them, except she was too young to understand those answers. She doesn't know how it feels to be in love, to trust someone so completely..." Janey clenched her fists, refusing to let him see how much it had hurt. "I lived it and I don't even understand it."

"Janey—"

"Then she started asking the hard questions," she continued, talking right over him. "Like why didn't her dad want to spend any time with her, or at least meet her? And here's the really hard one, Noah. What's wrong with her? No matter how often I said it had nothing to do with her, I could tell she still thought it was her fault."

"Jeez, Janey." Noah ran a hand back through his hair, leaving it rumpled, a fitting counterpoint to the wild light in his eyes, eyes so like Jessie's it was painful to look into them.

Janey bit back the rest of the angry words clawing at the back of her throat. He'd earned her anger, but making him hurt, like she and Jessie had hurt, wouldn't solve anything. "Jessie stopped asking questions about you a long time ago. She's accepted the fact that her parents aren't together. It's not unusual, even in Erskine. It's just—" She caught her lower lip between her teeth and turned away. It didn't help; Noah could still read her mind, it seemed.

"You're wondering whether it's a good thing I'm here or not."

"Yeah, well, something about stuffing toothpaste back into the tube occurs to me."

“So, what happens now?”

She brought her eyes back to him. “Right now that depends on you.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“And I can’t give you the words, Noah.”

He jammed his hands in his pockets, seeming more uncertain by the second.

“If you can’t do this, I’ll find some way to explain it to her.”

“What if I say the wrong thing?”

“At least it’ll be you saying it. And you can always apologize. It’s not like she thinks you’re perfect or anything.”

He held her gaze for a moment, then smiled wryly. “No, I don’t imagine she does.”

“I’ll go get her.” When Janey got to the tower room, however, she found Jessie curled up fast asleep on the old sofa that had been there forever. For the last four years her beloved stuffed bear had held a cherished place on the topmost shelf of her bedroom hutch. The fact that it was back in her arms tonight spoke volumes about the state of her heart and mind.

Janey brushed the hair from her daughter’s brow, carefully so as not to wake her, and covered her with an old knitted blanket. Better she have as many hours of peace as she could, Janey figured, easing out of the room and down the creaky staircase. Noah would have to come back tomorrow.

But when she got downstairs, he was already gone.

Chapter Two

Janey had been upstairs longer than she intended, but she'd expected Noah to hang around. Of course, he'd never had much staying power....

"I'm in here," he called out.

And she'd become way too cynical, she realized as she followed his voice into the parlor. So he'd romanced her out of her virginity after their senior prom and then left town. All on the same night. So he'd ignored her attempts to tell him he had a child, then got angry with her when he found out by accident. Water under the bridge, all of it. She'd gotten herself through college, with the help of her parents, and even after she'd lost them, within months of each other, she'd made a life for herself and her daughter. There were times—okay, there were lots of times—when she'd wished there was a man around, not just to deal with a broken-down car or paint the porch, but because it would've been nice to share the emotional load once in a while. But she had friends, a whole town full of them, and she had Jessie. And if, every now and then, she woke in the night, unbelievably lonely, that was her choice, too.

There'd been opportunities over the years, but no one who'd...Hell, she might as well admit she compared every man she met to Noah. Or not to him, exactly, but to the way he'd made her feel all those years ago. Nothing since had even come close.

Until now. Noah was sitting in her father's favorite armchair, suit jacket unbuttoned, tie loosened, his head back and his eyes closed. She'd seen her father sit just like that, countless evenings after countless days at his law office. A strong sense of rightness washed through her—which she had no trouble shaking off when their history flashed through her brain. Even if she still loved him, she'd be a fool to trust him again. And Janey Walters was nobody's fool.

"Don't get too comfortable," she said.

He opened his eyes and stared at her long enough to make her antsy before he lifted a brow in inquiry.

"She's sleeping."

Noah felt every muscle in his body relax—well, not every muscle. He should be taking this unexpected reprieve as an opportunity to get his thoughts in order, but how could he with Janey prowling the room like that? He could understand the nerves that kept her on her feet, but when she reached up to straighten a picture, all he could think about was how incredible she was. Beautiful. Her face was more angular than he remembered, pared down by time and maturity so that her inner strength showed through. He'd always been a sucker for strong, self-sufficient women, and there was something about Janey, taking charge of her life in that ratty old bandanna and T-shirt. And the jeans...

He closed his eyes, hoping that if the denim was gone from his sight, he'd forget how it hugged her bottom and skimmed the swell of her hips. It didn't work. Closing his eyes was like giving his imagination a blank canvas, and Janey Walters was a model who would've done any of the old masters proud. One look at her and he felt as if a freight train had slammed into his chest.

Or maybe that had more to do with finding out he had a daughter.

He opened his eyes again, caught her watching him, and nodded toward the chair across from his.

"I have paint all over me," Janey said.

"It's probably dry."

She said a word under her breath that sounded suspiciously like damn, which, in light of what followed, made perfect sense. She started for the door, saying, "I left the paint open and the paintbrush is probably rock-hard by now."

"It's just a paintbrush, Janey."

“It’s not just a paintbrush when—” She broke off, shook her head.

That hesitation was unlike Janey, at least the Janey he used to know. She’d always been so in-your-face, so unafraid to put her opinions and feelings out there and dare anybody to take issue with them. In Erskine that went beyond courage.

But she had someone else to think of now. What she said and did would reflect directly on Jessie, and if he knew Janey, she’d go well out of her way to avoid causing her daughter any unhappiness. Not that the old Janey wasn’t still in there somewhere. She might be more tightly controlled now, more guarded, but one look into his daughter’s eyes, and there was no question where she’d gotten that straightforward approach to life. Janey had raised her alone—and done a hell of a job. But then, Noah had never doubted Janey would be a great mom. She’d always known what she wanted. And he’d always been afraid he couldn’t give it to her. In the end, he hadn’t. He’d let her down just like everyone had expected him to—worse than they’d expected.

But she’d hadn’t exactly given him a chance to redeem himself.

“So, how much does Jessie know about me?” he asked.

“Not much.” Janey sank into a chair after all. “If anyone in this town heard from you in the last ten years, they didn’t mention it to me, and they wouldn’t bring it up to Jessie.”

“It’s no surprise that everyone rallied around you, Janey. This was always more your place than mine.”

“You cut the ties, Noah.”

“Dad was still alive and living here, then.”

“And you didn’t want anything to do with him, either. I get that. So do us both a favor and don’t try to make this whole thing my fault. Maybe I could’ve found a way to tell you sooner. If you’d bothered to call me ten years ago.”

He rested his head against the chair again and reminded himself that she was right: holding on to his anger over the past would only make the present situation more difficult. He’d learned that the hard way, not coming back for his father’s funeral because the man had never made room in his life for anyone but himself. Funny, Noah thought, how petty that kind of retribution felt after a decade had passed. Funny how you didn’t want it to happen again. “So tell me about her.”

“Her name is Jessica Marie Walters.”

That brought his attention back to Janey. “Walters?”

“Walters.”

It took him a minute, but he swallowed that, too. “What else?”

“If you call her Jessica, she won’t answer you. The rest I think you should find out on your own.”

“Come on, Janey, give me a break.”

“If I tell you everything, the two of you won’t have anything to talk about, and you were concerned about that.”

“Okay.” He shoved a hand through his hair. “Okay.”

“You should go.”

“Yeah.” Noah stood and rolled his shoulders, looking around the room as if the walls were hiding the answer to the strange way he was feeling. He tucked a hand in his pocket and jingled his car keys.

“I’ll call you tomorrow night. Where are you staying?”

“The Erskine Hotel, I guess.”

“The hotel is being fumigated. Termites.”

Not surprising for a town built almost entirely of wood that hadn’t seen the inside of a tree for a couple centuries. What surprised him was that any of the decrepit old buildings were still standing. But that wasn’t really the point.

The Tambour clock on the mantel chimed once for eight-thirty. Past closing time for a community that started its day before 6:00 a.m. The hotel was the only place in town that stayed open

pretty much around the clock, and even then the dining room shut down by ten. "I'll have to drive to Plains City before I can find a place to stay. That's fifty miles."

"Then maybe you'd better get started."

"Can't. I was almost out of gas when I saw you and decided to stop. I probably won't make it twenty miles."

"At least that would be twenty miles away from here," Janey muttered. She refused to feel guilty. It wasn't her fault he'd run his car nearly out of gas when he knew all too well that the streets of Erskine were rolled up promptly at 8:00 p.m. It was one of the reasons he'd been in such a rush to get out of town. She was the other reason.

"Is Max Devlin still around? Maybe I can impose on him for the night."

"Yes. No! I mean, Max is still here. He came back after college, but you can't bother him. He just got married." To her best friend, who would insist on hearing the whole story and then dissecting it as if it were a science experiment. Janey loved Sara Devlin like a sister, but she had no intention of reliving the past. She'd done enough of that for one night, she thought, glancing over at Noah.

He was smiling. At her. That couldn't be good.

"Then I guess I'll have to stay here."

"Uhhh...she said, waiting for her brain to come up with another objection. Eventually she had to close her mouth. She already felt stupid; she didn't have to look it, too.

"What are you worried about?" he asked, easing back a step, his hands spread out, just as she'd seen every cop on every crime show do with every cornered criminal. Look at me, he was saying, I'm harmless.

Harmless, hah. The man was a walking weapon, from his to-die-for face to the tall, solid body that made her heart pound so hard she could imagine it jumping out of her chest and throwing itself at his feet, leaving behind a flat-haired corpse in paint-spattered clothes. The way he walked was enough to stall the air in her lungs so she could barely breathe, which was probably for the best since not breathing meant not smelling. She'd always been far too susceptible to a man who smelled really good, and Noah Bryant appeared to be a man who'd learned how to balance his cologne with just the right amount of, well, himself.

"You don't worry me," she said. No, she was worried about herself. "But you still have to leave."

"C'mon, Janey, it doesn't make sense—"

"You can't stay here."

"—for me to leave—"

"You can't stay here."

"—when I'll just have to come back to talk to Jessie. Besides, where am I going to go?"

"You didn't seem to have a problem figuring that out ten years ago."

"I'm beat, Janey," he said. "I promise it'll only be for one night."

She folded her arms and glared at him, trying to find it in herself to send him packing. But he really did seem to be exhausted, and if she kicked him out she'd only be up half the night worrying about him stranded in the middle of nowhere, sleeping in his car. If he didn't fall asleep at the wheel and end up in a ditch filled with water, upside down with both his doors jammed shut and his seat belt stuck....

"One night." She left the parlor and started up the stairs, adding over her shoulder, "Tomorrow you find somewhere else to stay."

Noah took his time getting to the top, smiling benignly.

"I mean it."

He pressed his lips together. His eyes were still sparkling at her, but without the grin she could pretend he was taking the whole thing seriously.

She opened the door to the first bedroom she came to and said, "You can sleep in here."

"Do you mind if I have a shower?" he asked.

“Bathroom’s right next door.” Janey held her hand out, palm up.

He stared at it, clearly puzzled.

“Unless you plan to borrow my clothes, too, you’ll need your suitcase.”

“I’ll get it.”

“No way. Mrs. Halliwell is home by now. I don’t want her to see you walking into my house carrying a suitcase.”

“Won’t she wonder about my car?”

“I can explain that away. You, on the other hand...” She shook her head. “There’s no explaining you.”

“Does that mean she’s not used to seeing men come into your house at night and leave the next morning?”

“Men? That’s not a revolving door down there, you know.”

“Okay, man, singular. You don’t have a boyfriend who does sleepovers?”

“None of your business.”

“It is if he’s going to come storming in here to punch my lights out.”

Now there was a mental picture worth smiling about. “Maybe you should reconsider staying here.”

“I’ll chance it,” Noah said, “but I don’t want some dumb-as-a-post cowboy taking out his anger on my car.”

“Dumb because he’s a cowboy or dumb because he’s dating me?”

He gave her a once-over, a slow grin starting at his mouth and moving all the way to his eyes.

“Okay, I take back the dumb part, but only if you’ll let me put my car in your garage.”

Janey would’ve let him do anything—just about—as long he stopped looking at her as if he wanted to repeat history. “Nobody will beat up your car.”

“I didn’t really think so,” he said, “but it’s supposed to rain tonight, so I’d still like to put it inside.”

“Why?”

“You’re kidding, right? Did you see it?”

“Yeah, it has four wheels, a couple of doors. I think it was red,” she added hopefully, but he just kept staring at her as though she’d let down the team. “What’s the big deal?”

“It’s a Porsche.”

“So? It’s not made of gold, is it?”

“It ought to be, considering what I paid for it.”

“Well. Your fancy ride will be bunking with a Beetle.”

Noah thought about it for a minute. “What year is it?”

“I’m not sure. Seventy-something, I think.”

He nodded in approval. “Vintage.”

Janey knew he was half kidding, but it was the half-truthful part that had her so bemused. She looked him up and down, shaking her head. “Expensive suit, expensive car and you probably have a prestigious address and a trophy blonde to go with it all. You got everything you wanted, didn’t you, Noah?”

He shrugged. Sure, he had all the status symbols, along with a nice fat bank account to support his fast-paced, exciting lifestyle. But it was funny how the simplest pleasures still mattered the most. “What I really want is a shower and a meal, both preferably hot,” he said. “And a bed. Any kind, but I like soft.”

“There’s hot water and a soft bed, but if you want to eat you’re getting leftovers,” Janey said, accepting his car keys when he held them out.

She was true to her word, too. Noah had just stepped out of the shower when he heard a knock. He cracked open the door and peeked out, but he could’ve saved himself the trouble of slinging a

towel across his hips. His suitcase was sitting there; and the rest of the hallway was empty, but his disappointment lasted about as long as it took the cloud of shampoo-scented steam to evaporate. He threw his clothes on and let his nose lead him down the stairs and through the house, as if he were a cartoon character following a tantalizing aroma. “It looks like a kitchen but it smells like heaven.”

Janey swung around, startled. Her gaze dropped to his bare feet, skimmed the jeans and long-sleeved T-shirt and ended up on his wet, slicked-back hair. She turned away from him. “It’s chicken stew.”

“Like your mom used to make?” Noah sat down at the end of the table, where she’d laid out cutlery and bread and butter. In answer, she set a steaming bowl in front of him. He spooned some up and stuck it in his mouth, sucking in air to keep from burning his tongue. It tasted so good his eyes practically crossed in ecstasy. “God, that’s incredible,” he said. “Where is your mom, anyway? She move to Florida or something?”

Janey didn’t say anything for a minute, and Noah realized she was still standing behind him, so close he swore he felt the warmth of her breath on the nape of his neck. He would have smiled, if not for her response.

“Mom passed away not long after Dad,” she finally said, moving to sit at the other end of the table.

“I’m sorry, Janey. I didn’t know. I heard about your dad, of course. The obituary of a state representative, especially one who was so well-known and well-liked, makes the front page of all the papers.” Noah picked up his spoon again, stifling a pang of envy over how close Janey and her dad had been. “I’ll bet you miss him.”

“Every day. He was the best.” Janey propped her chin on her hand and watched him eat. “So, what kind of job pays for that fancy car?”

Noah froze with the spoon halfway to his mouth. “I’m, uh...sort of a scout,” he said, taking his time with the next bite of food. It was impolite to talk with your mouth full.

“If you came for the state championships, you’re too late.”

“Yeah, that’s what I heard. Is there any more?” he asked, handing her his empty bowl.

“Sure.” Janey got up, but when she turned around Noah was on his feet, as well.

“On second thought,” he said, “I’m really tired. If you don’t mind, I’ll just go to bed.”

He was gone so fast she’d just refilled his bowl when she heard the faint sound of his bedroom door closing.

She emptied the bowl back into the pan, shaking her head at her own stupidity. The man walked out of her life with no explanation and no goodbye, leaving her brokenhearted and pregnant, and here she was, giving him a place to stay, parking his car—making him a meal, for crying out loud. And he hadn’t even offered to do the dishes.

Yep, men were definitely pains in the neck, she thought, looking up at the ceiling in the general vicinity of his room. Except the ones who were a pain in the heart.

Chapter Three

Noah rolled over, ramming his big toe into the footboard for the... Well, it had happened so many times he'd lost count. It barely even hurt anymore. The bed was too short and too hard, but he wasn't really sleeping, anyway.

He was reflecting—not something he normally indulged in. It was as if Erskine had a magnetic barrier at the edge of town that repelled common sense and logic and coherent thought of every kind. One minute he'd been innocently driving along, then wham! he'd crossed the city limits, and before he knew it he was standing in front of Janey's house. He had no idea how he got from point A to point B—except that his brain didn't have anything to do with it. And what insanity propelled him to get out of the car and walk up to her gate, just because he felt...

He felt. Seeing Janey again had brought back so many memories and emotions—more than he was prepared for—and he didn't like it. This trip wasn't about facing his past, surprising as that had turned out to be. It wasn't about his future, either, at least not the future that might include getting to know a nine-year-old daughter. It was about the next move in his career. Forgetting that would be like dancing on a sea of ice. The first step might be okay, but sooner or later he'd wind up on his ass.

He could see exactly how it would go bad, too. First he'd get sidetracked by the fact that he had a daughter, and then Janey would start to look good—hell, who was he kidding, she'd looked good from the moment he'd laid eyes on her again. He'd already conned her into letting him spend the night. Next, he'd be taking deep, appreciative breaths of the fresh country air, snapping photos of the beautiful scenery and thinking this place wasn't as bad as he remembered, that maybe he should think twice about why he'd come back here.

He thought, all right. He thought about the city where he belonged. At 11:00 p.m. his night was only beginning. Even after a long day of wheeling and dealing, he'd have gone out on the town, fuelled by caffeine and restlessness, and air polluted with enough chemicals to keep him on his feet two days after he was dead. And there'd be people, crowds of people to lose himself in, and loud music and the bottom of a scotch bottle to get to. No high-school sweetheart, no long-lost daughter, no sea of ice daring him to see how long he could keep his feet under him.

The problem was, he had to take that first step. Career destruction aside, he couldn't just walk out the door now. And it amazed him.

Who'd have believed he could feel this instant and overwhelming... awe? He'd never even considered the possibility of marrying, or having children. There'd been any number of reasons—good reasons having to do with his dismal family history and his burning ambition. What hadn't occurred to him was how it would feel, being a father. It wasn't just a job; you didn't go into it with a résumé or work experience, or anything, but complete and utter fear. And when you started out with a half-grown kid who was probably harboring resentment, on-the-job-training had a whole new meaning....

The long day and sleepless hours finally caught up with him, and when he opened his eyes again, they felt as if they were filled with about a pound of sand apiece, mixed with something roughly the consistency of school paste. He thought he saw Jessie. He blinked a couple of times, but the picture didn't change. It was still Jessie, barely visible in the predawn light leaking in around the window shades, wearing the same clothes as last night, jeans and T-shirt, both baggy on her spindly frame.

He'd avoided thinking of the conversation that was coming this morning. He wasn't a man who worried and agonized, who rehearsed. He was a fly-by-the-seat-of-his-pants kind of guy. More often than not, he went with his gut. The problem was, his gut wasn't up to this conversation at the moment, not without about a gallon of coffee in it.

He rolled over and closed his eyes.

She took it as an invitation.

“What are you doing here?”

Noah flopped onto his back, thought about pulling the pillow over his head, and settled for scrubbing his hands over his face. “The hotel is closed,” he said in a voice that probably should’ve scared her off. No such luck. “I didn’t have enough gas to get to Plains City.”

Silence. She stood there staring at him, unblinking. It would have been unnerving if he’d cared about anything but sleep.

“The gas station is open now,” she said the minute he closed his eyes again. “It opens at five, on account of the ranchers and farmers.”

He groaned and rolled over again, and then it hit him. He twisted around to squint at the clock on the nightstand. “Jeez, it’s not even six yet. Nobody in their right mind gets up this early—Oh, I forgot, this is Erskine. I’ve left normal behind.”

Jessie glowered in a way that reminded him of...himself.

“I wasn’t talking about you and your mom.”

“Why not? You left us behind, too.”

Noah let his eyes drift shut, but it had nothing to do with exhaustion this time. He still wanted to go back to sleep, badly, but it was impossible now.

He sat up, scooting back so he could lean against the head-board. “I haven’t seen a sunrise since Hell Farm,” he said, his private name for the hardscrabble farm his father had bought when Noah was ten and lost to the bank not long after he’d graduated from high school.

“You haven’t seen this one yet,” Jessie said. “What’s Hell Farm?”

“Forget I said that.”

“If you won’t explain it to me, I guess I shouldn’t bother asking you anything else.”

“Is that what you’re after? An explanation?”

She locked her hands behind her back and stared down at her toes, giving him a one-shoulder shrug.

Noah waited until she looked at him, then crossed his arms and let his eyebrows inch up.

Her cute little face was scrunched in a frown. “So, what’ve you got to say for yourself?”

He rubbed his jaw, mostly to hide the smile. He could just imagine Janey saying that whenever Jessie got into trouble—and if she was anything like her mother, she got into plenty of trouble. It was a sobering thought, considering the situation. “Well, first off, I didn’t know about you.”

“Mom said.”

“When I left town, it was just the two of us.”

“Didn’t you like her anymore? If you sleep with someone, you should like them. Or use a condom.”

If she’d wanted to shock him, she’d succeeded. His mouth was open, but nothing came out except a strangled sort of sigh.

“I learned that in school. In health class. Condoms prevent...some sort of diseases and unwanted pregnancies. That’s me, right?” She raised her chin and met his gaze head-on.

She was all but daring him to lie to her. Or maybe she was daring him to tell her the truth. “Um...Your mom—”

“Mom tells me all the time that she wouldn’t trade me for anything in the world, and I believe her. She never lies—or hardly ever, and then she always has a good reason.” Jessie frowned. “Even if she doesn’t say what it is.”

“I thought I heard voices.”

They both looked over and saw Janey leaning in the doorway. Noah could’ve kissed her, and not simply because the sight of her did things to him he should have outgrown ten years ago—although that would be reason enough.

Her hair was tousled, her eyes sleepy. She crossed her arms under her breasts, which just about killed him. He would've preferred something lacy and revealing to the loose midlength-length T-shirt she was wearing, but apparently his hormones weren't very discriminating. Janey in a gunny sack probably would've gotten him revved up.

A glance at Jessie was all it took to cool him down again.

"What are you doing in here?" Janey asked her daughter.

"Talking to him." Jessie crossed her arms in a miniature copy of her mother's stance that gave Noah a pang he didn't want to examine too closely.

"She's after an explanation," he supplied helpfully.

"You won't be getting one," Janey said to her. "Why doesn't matter anymore. Where we go from here does." She glanced at Noah, then quickly away. "First we all need to get dressed."

"I'm already dressed," Jessie pointed out.

"In yesterday's clothes. Go wash your face, brush your teeth and put on something clean." Janey shooed Jessie from the room, following her out into the hallway.

Noah called her back.

Janey took a minute to watch Jessie disappear into her room, feet dragging the whole way, before she turned back. She should've gone with Jessie—that was all she could think. Noah had swung his legs over the side of the bed, covers be damned, and now that Jessie was gone, it was just too easy to let her mind—and her eyes—stray. And really, it was his fault for sitting there all bare, except for a pair of blue boxers. Silk boxers. His legs were tanned and muscular, peppered with dark hair; so was his chest, but her gaze kept straying back to those boxers. Who'd ever have thought silk could be so clingy? Who'd ever have thought he'd be so—

Dangerous.

She'd walked behind his chair to put his dinner on the table last night and been caught by the scent of him, fresh from the shower. He'd used her shampoo and soap, but on him it had smelled different, the familiar fragrances tangled with some wild and unpredictable aroma that defied description. All she knew was what it did to her. And what it did to her was unacceptable.

She had no business being attracted to Noah Bryant after all these years and all the pain he'd caused her. Not to mention Jessie.

"You need to get dressed, too. If know my daughter, she'll be ready in record time and I don't think you want her to see you like that."

"Our daughter."

She held his eyes, despite the fact that her heart lurched over hearing him say that. "You're right, biologically speaking. I wonder if you can make it true in any of the ways that really count?"

"But you're afraid I can, and that you'll lose part of her to me."

"I'm surprised you care what I'm feeling, Noah."

"But you're not denying it."

Because she was very much afraid he was right. It wasn't that she didn't want Jessie to have a father, but it had been just the two of them for so long. The idea of having to send her daughter off to live with Noah on summer vacations made Janey want to throw up. And what holidays could she stand to miss with Jessie? Even Arbor Day seemed to hold a special meaning suddenly, and as for Christmas or Thanksgiving, what would be the point if she was alone?

"Jessie is all that matters," he said.

She hated him in that moment, hated him for coming back and turning her world upside down again, for leaving her ten years ago, for moving to town in the first place. Especially, she hated him for showing her what should've been her first concern. But the guilt was stronger. "She deserves to make up her own mind about you. And, believe me, she has a mind of her own."

Noah gave her a crooked smile. "Now why is that so easy to believe?"

"Because it's the truth."

He dropped his gaze, exhaled heavily. “You weren’t kidding, were you? You didn’t tell her anything about me—”

“There was nothing to tell.”

“—and you didn’t tell me anything about her,” he finished. “You’re going to make us get to know each other without bogging us down with your opinions.” He looked up at her, and what she saw in his eyes was more eloquent than whatever he might have said.

“Get dressed,” she said gruffly, refusing to let his respect and admiration mean anything to her. “You’ve got fifteen minutes.”

That made him smile, full and wide and just as irreverently as when he’d been a kid and the black sheep of the entire town. “And if it takes me sixteen?”

She returned his smile, but there was no amusement in her eyes. “I’ve still got your keys.”

“COME ON, Bryant,” Janey yelled up the stairs. “Get it in gear.”

From her seat at the kitchen table, Jessie heard Noah shout down, “I thought you were kidding about the fifteen minutes.”

“I have to be out of here, like, now.”

Noah’s okay floated down the stairs, and her mom came back into the kitchen. She stopped in front of the sink and stood there a minute, staring off at nothing with a goofy expression on her face.

Jessie rolled her eyes, thinking, jeez, adults are weird. “Uh, Mom, do you want me to finish making my lunch?”

“No,” Janey said, stepping to the counter by the fridge. “Turkey or peanut butter?”

“Peanut butter,” Jessie said, although she couldn’t care less.

She didn’t like the way Noah Bryant looked at her mom, and she didn’t like the way her mom looked at him. And she didn’t want a father anymore.

Okay, maybe when she was a kid she’d wished for a father, even if he didn’t live with them. Some of the kids in school had parents who were divorced and they got to see their fathers, and that was all she’d wanted. But fathers weren’t always nice. The kids at school were always complaining about how their dads yelled at them and Davy Martin’s dad had even spanked him!

It wasn’t as if she thought Noah would do something like that, though; he didn’t seem to be that kind of guy. But she didn’t see any reason for him to stick around, either. Her life was fine the way it was. There was Clary—Deputy Sheriff Beeber—who took her fishing any time she wanted. Sure, it was partly because he liked her mom, the boy-girl icky sort of like, but they were friends, too, she and Clary. And there were the Devlins, who treated her as part of their family, even though they weren’t really related. That wasn’t so many people when you counted them up, but there was the whole town, too, Mrs. Halliwell, and the Shastas and just...everybody.

So what did she need a father for? Especially one who couldn’t even be bothered to explain why he hadn’t been around for her entire life. Well, she didn’t want explanations anymore. She just wanted him to go away and stay away.

“So where is he?”

Her mom glanced back at her. “He’ll be down in a few minutes.”

“He’s going to make us late.”

“No, I’m not.”

They both turned around. Janey stared at him as if she’d never seen a man wearing a dumb old black suit before. And he stared back.

Jessie flounced around in her chair and put on what her mom called her thundercloud face—which seemed to get the point across because her mom turned around again, loaded up the lunch box and snapped it shut, holding it out.

“C’m on, Jessie,” she said. “Bring your bowl to the sink and let’s get going.”

“It’s only six-thirty,” Noah said.

“I teach government and history at Plains City High School in the mornings—” Janey washed the two cereal bowls and put them on the draining board “—which, if you’ll recall, is fifty miles away.”

He didn’t take the hint. “What do you do in the afternoons?” he asked, leaning against the wall.

“I counsel at the high school two afternoons a week and teach art at Erskine Elementary the other three. And if that isn’t enough for you, I’m also Mayor of Erskine.”

“Sounds hectic.”

“That’s exactly why I’m trying to get rid of you. School starts at 7:30, which barely gives me time to drop Jessie off and get to Plains City before class.”

“I guess I’m on my own for breakfast.”

Her mom gave him a look that said he’d always been on his own for breakfast. And then she turned to Jessie and said, “Go get your stuff together, kiddo.”

“You just want to get rid of me so you can talk about me.”

Janey half turned, placing a hand on her hip, mother-daughter shorthand for “Don’t make me say it again.”

“Okay, okay.” Her mom followed her out to the front entryway, watching her go upstairs. Jessie stopped on the landing, just out of sight, but not out of earshot.

“Are you going to be around later?” she heard her mom say.

“There are...matters I need to take care of.”

“Matters?”

“I’m here on business, remember?”

See, Jessie reminded herself, he wasn’t even here for her. She was glad she’d already decided she didn’t want anything to do with him. She sneaked up the rest of the stairs, so they wouldn’t know she’d been listening, grabbed her stuff and ran down with her backpack in one hand and her duffel in the other.

“You must have the entire library in those bags,” Noah teased. “What are they teaching you kids these days?”

“I’m staying at the Devlin ranch. I’m helping with the spring roundup. We’re camping out Saturday night.” Jessie puffed up for a minute, before she remembered who she was talking to and that the last thing she wanted to do was impress him. “I’ll be home Sunday morning. You’ll be gone by then,” she said, wincing when she caught the way her mom looked at her. So what, Jessie thought. Noah Bryant had been rude for ten years. He deserved to get some of it back. “I heard you tell Mom you were leaving town. Again.”

Noah’s smile faded. “I have some business to take care of, Jessie. I’ll call you when I’m back in the area, and maybe we can...I don’t know, talk or something.”

Jessie stared at him the way she’d seen her mom do when she figured what she was hearing was B.S., then she dragged her stuff out to the car and waited to go to school. Just like it was a normal day.

She’d had lots of practice pretending her life was normal.

Chapter Four

“Really, Mr. Gardner, it’s the best deal you’re going to get—unless there’s been a sharp increase in real estate here that I’m not aware of.”

Gardner scratched his head, staring intently at the purchase agreement Noah had set in front of him. “I don’t know, Mr. Bryant. It’s a big decision, selling my place.”

My place. Just like his old man, Noah thought. Hell Farm had been all about him. His dream. His life. He made all the decisions and dragged everyone else down with him.

Noah took a sip of coffee so weak it was probably the fourth pot brewed from the same grounds. Mrs. Gardner and her children were watching him as if he was the answer to their prayers. He knew he’d regret it, but he pulled the purchase agreement back, crossed out the amount and wrote another above it. Then he spun it around and slid it across the table.

Gardner took in the revised sum, his expression a mixture of greed and revulsion. “It’s not about the money.”

Not about the money? There was a reason cows outnumbered people in Montana, Noah figured. Most people were too smart to live in a state where day-to-day life was such a struggle.

No, that wasn’t entirely fair. Some people were cut out for this kind of life. He wasn’t.

And judging by the worn furnishings, the nearly empty pantry shelves, the hopelessness on the faces of Mrs. Gardner and her children, neither was John Gardner: He was just too stubborn admit when he was licked—or desperate enough to take the risk of blowing the deal on the chance he could squeeze a few more dollars out of the sale. Noah recognized in the man’s face what he’d trained himself not to see in his own mirror.

Work hadn’t been going all that well lately. He’d lost some of the momentum that had carried him to the upper ranks of the business world so fast, and the sharks were beginning to circle. He needed a big killing to get back on top of his game, and this was it. He couldn’t afford to blow it. He might even have said he was desperate not to blow it, but the difference between him and Gardner was that he wouldn’t let desperation drive him. “If that isn’t enough—”

“I thought you had to have this property,” Gardner said, looking up at him with suddenly shrewd eyes.

“I’d prefer this property.”

Gardner took a moment to consider the difference.

It was a moment too long. Noah rose. “Thanks for meeting with me,” he said, reaching for the purchase agreement.

Mr. Gardner snatched it from him. “I ain’t said no yet.”

“You haven’t said yes, either.”

“It’s not as easy as yes or no, son. Like this bit about keeping it a secret. Why is that, exactly?”

Noah had already explained it as best he could without revealing too much, but he swallowed his impatience. “Like I said before, Mr. Gardner. There’s nothing illegal or unethical about this deal. We’re not building something that’s harmful to the environment.”

“If there isn’t anything cagey about this deal, why the need to keep it from other folks?”

“We prefer to make the announcement when and how it best suits our purposes.” And because there was sure to be some opposition, and he didn’t want it to become public knowledge until he had the foundation of the project already laid. “If it gets out before we release it, the deal will be off.”

“At least that’ll make the decision easier.”

Noah sighed and sat down again. “Are you worried that people won’t understand why you decided to sell?”

“It’s not other folks I’m worried about, it’s myself,” Gardner said. “About all I got left’s my pride.”

And that was more important than his family's welfare? "I'd like to be able to set your mind at ease," Noah said, putting aside his anger and disgust, "but you're the only one who can do that."

"We've worked long and hard to get this far and it don't sit right just giving up."

Noah shrugged. "It makes no difference to me. If you don't sell, someone else will."

The man still hesitated.

"Mr. Gardner, I know how you feel."

"You got no idea—"

"Yes, I do." Noah tried to tell himself this was about business and nothing else, but it was too late for that. "I grew up on a farm like this," he said. "My father didn't have the money to buy cattle, so we worked, harder and harder every year, trying to get a decent cash crop in a state where winter lasts eight months of the year and spring and fall make up the other four." And the worse things got, the more often he'd felt the back of his old man's hand. Then after his mother died...

He'd gone a long way to forget those years. There was no point in remembering them now. "I know you want better for your family, Mr. Gardner. That's not going to happen as long as you stay here, and we both know it."

There was a moment of stunned silence, both of them taken aback by how much it mattered to Noah, and not just because he wanted the property.

"I know I'm being stubborn, son, but—"

"Do you think another chance like this is going to come along? Ever?"

Gardner took a deep breath, let it out. "When you put it that way..."

The farmer held out his hand. Noah shook it, but the relief he felt had nothing to do with getting the job done. "You should have a lawyer check that purchase agreement over before you sign it," he said.

"Hell, Bryant, you seem trustworthy."

Noah countersigned the paperwork, thinking a lot of people made the mistake of thinking he wasn't trustworthy, but one of the first lessons he'd learned was to look out for number one. The second lesson was that by the time somebody had stabbed him in the back, it was too late to do anything about it. Little by little he'd adopted an offensive strategy toward life—he never purposely hurt anyone, but if someone got in his way, he didn't waste his energy on regrets.

The Gardners, however, had nothing to worry about; the purchase agreement was aboveboard and soon they'd be on their way to a new life. It wouldn't take much to be an improvement over this one, Noah thought, as he stepped outside.

The main house was mostly gray, with white paint still clinging to the weathered wood in enough places to give it a strange mottled appearance. The barn listed badly to one side and the other outbuildings weren't much better, including one Noah would've sworn was an outhouse. The Gardners followed him, Mr. and Mrs. Gardner looking eerily like the couple in the painting *American Gothic* with Mr. Gardner clutching the purchase agreement instead of a pitchfork.

Noah climbed into his car and started it, savoring the smell of leather and his own aftershave, the coolness of the air-conditioning on his face and the comfort of the seat, with its built-in heat and lumbar support, beneath him. He felt more at ease—not because of the luxury that surrounded him, but because the world could do with one less place like this. Even if some of the people hereabouts lamented its loss, at least the Gardner children would benefit.

He bumped and jounced down the potholed driveway, along the slightly smoother two-mile stretch of dirt road that led to the main gravel road, and finally to the two-lane highway, a straight and unforgiving line of blacktop that stretched to the mountains behind him and the horizon in front. He heard the throaty purr of the Porsche's engine, felt the rumble of it through his seat and saw the landscape passing by the car windows, yet he felt like he was going nowhere.

Two weeks ago he'd known exactly who he was and where he was going, and his world had been what he made it. He'd been a man without a past, at least as far as anyone he knew in Los

Angeles was concerned. His friends had learned not to ask him about his childhood; he only made jokes, or if they pushed him, gave answers that were vague at best. And the women he dated weren't really interested in the past—or the future, for that matter. He made very sure of that.

Now, here he was, stepping right back into the life he'd managed to escape. And he'd done it willingly, not to mention arrogantly, certain he could walk in his own footsteps without any consequences. Hah. How deluded had he been to think that? And he wasn't talking about the stroll he'd just taken through the worst moments of his childhood.

He was talking about the best moments. All of which revolved around Janey.

She'd saved him from everything, the travesty of his family, from closed minds and unsympathetic authority figures, from his own self-destructive tendencies. At a point in his life when he was the town outsider, when almost no one in Erskine accepted him, Janey had. It was that simple.

And when she'd needed him, where had he been? Where was he now? Still focused on his career, his future, his own wants.

Sure, he'd called her house twice in the two weeks since he'd discovered he had a daughter. Both times she and Jessie had been gone and he'd left messages, grateful they weren't there to ask questions while resenting the fact that he felt obliged to check in with her at all.

He gunned the engine, watched the speedometer notch up to seventy, a foolish speed to be traveling on a backcountry road where a cow or a slow-moving tractor could be over the next hill. He didn't slow down, even when he passed the turnoff for Erskine. He wasn't ready to go back there yet. Besides, Jessie didn't want him around, anyway; she'd made that perfectly clear.

SPRING IN ERSKINE. There was no better season, Janey decided, and no better place to spend it than her hometown.

Erskine didn't change from year to year, the same old buildings, the same mountains and pastures and hay meadows, but in the spring it always seemed...newer, fresher. People opened windows to let in the breeze off the mountains, a breeze so crisp and clean it slipped into corners and swept through shadows, and left them brighter somehow. The winter's accumulation of dirt and dead leaves had been banished from the doorways, window boxes had been filled with geraniums and impatiens, and planters hung from eaves, dripping with ivy and crowded with glossy-leaved begonias.

It was such a beautiful day that she'd left her car at home and walked to the school for her afternoon art classes. She really should have taken Jessie directly home after school; she had a hundred tasks to complete, grades to tally for final report cards, trim to paint. Phone messages to listen to...

She looked down at her daughter and decided there wasn't any rush to get home. Two weeks had passed since Noah had left with a promise that he'd be back. Two weeks and two phone messages, they still hadn't seen him. As the days continued to add up, facing the answering machine each evening had become a real challenge. If the message light was blinking, it meant Noah couldn't make it again. If there was no message, it was even worse.

No one else in town knew about Noah's visit, a kind of unspoken agreement between mother and daughter not to bring up a subject sure to inspire gossip they didn't want to hear and questions they couldn't answer. But Jessie wouldn't talk to her about Noah, either, and that worried Janey.

"Clary's truck is at the sheriff's office," Jessie said. "Can I go say hi?"

"Absolutely. Tell him hi for me, too."

"You could tell him yourself."

Janey considered doing just that, for all of ten seconds. The hope on Jessie's face held her back.

Deputy Sheriff Clarence Beeber was not only Jessie's fishing buddy and good friend, he was the closest thing she had to a father. But it wasn't any secret that he wanted to be her father for real one day. It was Janey who was taking her sweet time. And she let them think that, because, honestly, she didn't know what else to do.

She didn't want to string Clary along, but she'd always been afraid of what it might mean for Jessie if she told him outright that they'd never be more than friends. So Janey walked a fine line

between not encouraging Clary, but not discouraging him so much it became uncomfortable for him to see Jessie. Walking that line was even more important now, when the last thing her daughter needed was more change in her life.

“I have about a million things to do, Jessie, but you go on ahead. Just be home for supper.”

Jessie headed off, dragging her feet, nothing like her usual upbeat self. Janey knew Clary would cheer her up, though, and in the meantime, she’d go home and weed or wash windows. Whatever kept her hands occupied and her mind off Noah Bryant.

“Hey there, Janey,” Earl Tilford called out as she turned the corner onto Main Street and passed the bakery.

Janey backpedaled a couple of steps and stuck her head in the wide-open doorway. “How’s it going, Mr. Tilford?”

“I was about to ask you that. I heard Bryant’s in town.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“Came by way of the usual sources.”

Which meant Dory Shasta, wife of Mike Shasta, owner of the Ersk Inn. If the Ersk Inn was the town watering hole, Dory Shasta was a prospector who spent all her spare time panning for little nuggets of information that she used to her best advantage. In Erskine, gossip was currency.

There was no telling how Dory had found out. Mrs. Halliwell might have seen Noah outside her house two weeks ago, or maybe somebody had recognized him when he gassed up on his way out of town. Or he was here now, which not only gave Janey a serious case of butterflies, it made more sense. No way would it have taken two weeks for such a juicy rumor to get around.

This kind of information ran through town like a bad case of the flu. That thought made Janey smile, since in both instances stuff was coming out of people’s mouths that would’ve been better off kept inside. Not that she resented the gossip all that much, even when she was at the center of it. Some people might not appreciate having everyone know their business, but to Janey it felt like being part of a huge, caring family. Being alone in the world and responsible for a daughter was a little less scary in Erskine.

“You being our newly elected mayor and all,” Earl said, “maybe you could make a law against ex-boyfriends who show up every decade or so and cause trouble. I’m sure Clary would be happy to enforce it.”

Janey didn’t quibble with Mr. Tilford’s assumption that Noah was there to cause trouble. Intentional or not, trouble was what he brought. As for the rest of it, “I think I can handle Noah without throwing around my political weight,” she said, tongue firmly tucked in cheek, “or calling in local law enforcement.”

“Well, at the very least, a girl could use a cookie when she’s facing an ordeal like this.” Earl came out from behind the counter and offered her one of the huge cookies—loaded with nuts and chocolate chips—that he was famous for.

“Just the air in here is enough to put ten pounds on me,” Janey protested, but she took the cookie, broke off a piece and slipped it into her mouth. She closed her eyes and let it melt on her tongue, sighing her approval. “Then again, this is worth a couple hundred extra sit-ups.”

“Here’s one for Jessie,” he said, handing her a bakery bag and waving off her thanks. “Knowing you appreciate it is reward enough for getting up at 3:00 a.m. If I was twenty years younger—”

“You’d still marry Meggie and break my heart.”

“You’re right. And my girls would still grow up and leave town.” Earl sighed, but the smile was back on his face by the time he ducked under the pass-through and straightened to look over the counter. “Dee’s stationed in Germany these days, and Andie’s a fancy pastry chef in one of them New York hotels. Meggie’s working on her, but the harder she pushes Andie to come home for a visit, the more stubborn the girl gets. I think Meggie’d be smarter to back off, use that reverse psychology I

always hear about, but—” he shrugged “—they’re peas in a pod, one of them just as pigheaded as the other.”

“My money’s on Meg,” Janey said with a smile. Literally. There was a pool down at the Ersk Inn, and Janey had put down her five dollars like everyone else in town. “If Meg can get Andie to visit by the Fourth of July, I’ll have more to thank you for than your cookies.”

She left Earl laughing, stepping out into streaming sunshine and nearly colliding with Sam Tucker. Besides owning one of the biggest ranches around, Sam was also the town veterinarian. As if that wasn’t enough, he was tall and handsome, with a body that belonged on a billboard—the kind that advertised boxers. Or briefs. When Sam was in town, girls sighed and went dreamy, mothers got that wedding glint in their eyes, and fathers made sure their shotguns were loaded with rock salt. Better to chase him off in the first place than deal with the broken heart he always left behind. Sam wasn’t known for monogamy.

Janey had gone out with him once or twice, but she’d been in no danger. Her heart had already been broken before Sam came into the picture.

Sam dropped a kiss on her cheek and plucked the rest of the cookie out of her hand in one smooth motion. “You going to marry me, Janey?”

“Not today,” she teased back, watching the rest of her cookie disappear in two huge bites. “Y’know, Earl sells those right in there.”

Sam craned his head to peer in the open door of the bakery, then gave her the kind of grin he used to charm women out of more than baked goods. “I’ve got a perfectly fine kitchen of my own out at the ranch.”

“Then maybe you should stop flirting with every girl in the state and marry one who can put that kitchen to use.”

“I keep asking you, but you keep turning me down.”

“You keep asking me because you know I’ll turn you down,” Janey said, setting off down the raised wooden walk-way that was a holdover from pioneer days, when the streets were dirt, or mud, and concrete wasn’t a fact of life yet.

Sam laughed, slinging an arm over her shoulder and falling into step with her. “It’s just wrong for a woman to keep this kind of anatomy to herself.” He made a big show of peering over his shoulder.

Janey elbowed him in the side. “Forget my anatomy.”

“Your anatomy is unforgettable. Nobody fills out a pair of jeans the way you do.” Sam faced forward again. “But I should’ve known it was hopeless when I heard Noah Bryant was back in town.”

“When did you hear that?” she asked, knowing she hadn’t managed to sound casual when Sam tightened his grip, turning it into a comforting one-armed hug.

“George Donaldson ran into him in Plains City around lunch today. Said Noah told him he’d be in town on business for a little while.”

“C’mon, Sam, can you believe anything George says?”

“Why would he make it up?”

“Well, it’s George,” was the nicest explanation she could come up with.

“It’s no secret George gets a kick out of winding other people up and then watching them walk into walls, but I don’t think he’s stupid enough to make up something like this,” Sam said. “If Max didn’t kick George’s ass, then Noah would. The two of them never got along. I remember one time...”

Janey tuned him out. She didn’t need Sam’s version of history; she’d lived it. “Do you know if he’s in town yet?”

That question earned her another hug. “I don’t know. But here’s Clary. I’ll bet he knows.”

“Knows what?”

Janey looked up just as Clarence Beeber stepped onto the boardwalk, Jessie at his side. His gaze dropped to Sam’s arm, still draped over Janey’s shoulder. Clary didn’t say a word, but Sam took his arm back and put some distance between them.

Janey smiled and shook her head. Even if Sam's flirting had been more than big talk, he would never have moved in on a woman Clary was interested in. The two had been best friends practically from the womb.

"What am I supposed to know?" Clary asked again.

"Just the latest gossip," Sam said, glancing at Jessie, all big ears and wide eyes, hanging on every word—spoken and unspoken.

Clary's face hardened, and Janey knew he'd heard about Noah's return already. Even if his expression hadn't given it away, there was no need to guess how he was taking it. Everything about Clary was starched, from his uniform to his personality, and once he made up his mind, there was no changing it. He had very definite ideas of right and wrong, the kind of ideas that could best be described as black and white. As far as he was concerned, Noah had screwed up, and no shades of gray, like youth or ignorance, could mitigate his crime. But Clary would never say as much in front of Jessie. He might apply the law as if it were set in stone, but he did it with compassion—when he felt compassion was warranted.

"I don't suppose there's any way you'd leave it alone altogether, Clary," Janey said.

Sam snorted. "You'd have more luck asking old man Winston's prize bull why he keeps charging with the barbed-wire fence."

"If you're done insulting me, Sam, you ought to go on out there and stitch him up again."

"That's where I was headed, before I decided to propose to Janey," Sam winked at her. "She turned me down, Clary. Maybe you should give it a try."

Clary went red from his collar to his hairline. Sam clapped him on the shoulder and sauntered off in the direction of the vet clinic, laughing the whole way.

"Sam's just giving you a hard time," Janey said, turning toward home because the longer she looked at Clary, the more embarrassed he seemed to get, and she didn't want to be responsible for his head bursting into flame.

He started walking with her, but he kept Jessie between them, the poor kid's head swiveling back and forth like a tennis court official's, even though no one was talking. Or maybe because no one was talking. They continued in silence for another block or so before Clary spoke. Janey didn't miss the fact that Jessie got him going with a nudge.

"Can I, uh, give you and Jessie a ride to the graduation party tomorrow?" he asked.

Since everyone in Erskine and Plains City knew everyone else, they'd decided years ago to have one party each year for the eighth graders graduating from Erskine Elementary and the seniors who'd survived Plains City High School. Sara and Max Devlin didn't have any actual graduates, but they had a nice, big ranch not too far from either town, and they'd offered to host.

"Jessie and I are going out to Sara's early to help them set up," Janey said.

"I think it would be a good idea if I drove the two of you," Clary looked over at her. "You know," he said, his eyes dropping to nine-year-old level, then back up. "Just in case."

"In case of what?" Jessie piped up.

"Just in case," Janey said to her daughter. "Do me a favor and go on home. I'll catch up with you in a few minutes."

"You're going to talk about me, aren't you?"

"I think we're going to talk about Noah," Janey said, giving in to the inevitable.

"That's still about me. I have a right—"

"You're nine years old. You don't have any rights."

"Janey!"

"Mom..." Jessie said at the same time, making that one word about three syllables long, and loading it with indignation.

"Jessie, you know there are occasions when you get sent out of the room—or sent home, in this instance—so I can talk without having to worry about what I say. Sometimes that conversation will

be about you, and sometimes it won't, but it's always going to be something I don't think you're ready to hear, and stamping your foot and scowling at me won't change that fact."

"That's not fair."

"No, sweetie," Jane said, brushing a hand over her daughter's hair. "It's not fair, but it's how things work, and I think you'd rather I was honest about that much, at least."

Jessie glanced over at Clary, and when she saw he wasn't going to intervene, she did as Janey asked, making it absolutely clear she was going under protest.

"Do you think that was the best way to handle her?"

"She's not stupid, Clary. And if you weren't so determined to talk about this, I wouldn't have to handle her at all."

"You're right." Clary pinched the bridge of his nose. "I should've waited until you had a chance to tell her that her father's back in town."

"She met him two weeks ago," Janey said without thinking, then caught the look on his face. "Jessie didn't tell you."

"Neither did you."

"I'm sorry, Clary. It's difficult enough without the whole town asking questions—not that Jessie or I thought you'd spread it around. I guess neither of us really wanted to talk about it. But I should have told you."

"I'm sure you had a lot on your mind, Janey. Don't worry about it," Clary said. But his expression told a different story. He was hurt; maybe he hadn't officially asked her out, but everyone in town knew how he felt, and it was not only understandable for a man who'd buried his wife at his young age to take his time jumping into another relationship, it was expected in a town like Erskine.

He wouldn't admit it, but he wanted an explanation, and after what she'd held back already, she felt she owed it to him. Not that there was all that much to tell. "He showed up two weeks ago, out of the blue, and before I could get rid of him, Jessie came out of the house. Noah took one look at her and just seemed to...know."

"It's the eyes," Clary said grudgingly.

"Yeah," Janey agreed. It was more than that, but the rest of the similarities were subtler, deeper, and she was the only person in town who knew Noah well enough to pick up on them. "Anyway, he said he was here on business, and that he'd be back this way when he was done."

"And you haven't seen him."

"He's back now."

"So I hear, but you haven't seen him."

"It can't be easy for him, either, Clary, discovering he has a nine-year-old daughter."

"It didn't have to be a surprise, Janey."

"I know."

"And yet here you are, defending him."

"Yeah," she said with a humorless smile. "But here's the thing. Being angry with him won't make this easier on any of us, especially Jessie."

"You're right." Clary flipped off his Stetson and rotated it in his hands as he always did when he was agitated. "It's just...With his track record, I'd hate to see her get her hopes up."

"Trust me, she's not going into this with false hopes." Janey smiled for real this time, remembering the way Jessie had seen Noah off that morning two weeks ago. "And she's not going to make it easy on him, either."

"She's your daughter," Clary said, his face folded into its usual sober lines. "Don't think you have to go through this alone, Janey. If you need anything..."

"You'll be the first one I call, but Clary—" she put her hand on his arm and he stopped, turning to look at her "—I know how you feel."

“I know.” His face went red again, and there was so much hope shining in his eyes it was almost painful to see.

“Just for the next little while, I have to concentrate on Jessie.”

“Sure. I understand.”

“Thanks,” she said, giving his arm a squeeze.

Clary opened his mouth to speak, but something over her shoulder caught his attention. “Does Bryant drive a red Porsche?” he asked.

Janey turned around and squinted in the same direction, barely making out a bit of red behind the rusted-out hulk of Arliss Cunningham’s truck parked a ways down on the opposite side of the street. “You can tell from here that’s a Porsche? Must be a guy thing.”

He gave her a sheepish smile that hardly registered, since Janey was busy looking up and down the street. Sure enough, she saw a tall suit-clad form coming out of Keller’s Market. Unfortunately, so did Clary. He took one step in that direction before Janey blocked him.

“Where are you going?”

“I just want to have a little talk with him.”

“Is he doing something wrong? Something illegal,” she qualified.

His expression was stony as he watched Noah change directions and come straight toward them. “I’m sure I can come up with something.”

Chapter Five

Noah had been standing by the cash register in Keller's Market for what felt like hours, talking about the weather and the price of beef with Owen Keller, his mind wandering because Owen...well, Owen tended to be a putz, which Noah had forgotten until he ran into the market to get a Coke and Owen wouldn't stop talking. So, about the time Owen was claiming his astronomical profit margin had nothing to do with the fact that Keller's was the only market for fifty miles around, Noah glanced out the wide front window, searching for an excuse to bug out of there—politely, if at all possible. What he saw was Janey. With Sam Tucker.

Noah had never liked Sam Tucker all that much. He was too slick, always smiling and strutting around like this little backcountry town was New York City and he owned Fifth Avenue. Even from where Noah stood he could see there was manure on Sam's boots. He probably had dirt under his fingernails and smelled bad, too, but Janey didn't seem to mind when Sam draped his arm over her shoulders. She should've known better than to be taken in by a cheap-talking veterinarian who went through women faster than Niagara Falls made mist, but there she was, strolling slowly down the street with him, their heads bent together in conversation—until Sam peered over his shoulder, clearly scooping out her butt.

In two seconds flat, Noah was standing out on the board-walk, with no clue what he intended to say or do. But Sam was already walking away, and Janey had been joined by Jessie and a tall man who could only be described as square: a square jaw, square shoulders, square pleats down the front of his cop's shirt. The only thing that wasn't by the book was the way he looked at Janey.

Noah found himself walking over to them and saw Janey send Jessie off toward their house a minute or so before they spotted him. The big, bad sheriff stepped out from behind Janey and braced himself for a confrontation—and damn, Noah thought, if he wasn't happy to oblige the son-of-a-gun. Then Janey turned around and saw him. Even from a block away he could see the warning in her eyes. Whoever Janey chose to spend her time with was none of his business, she was saying, and she was right.

And it wasn't like she didn't already have enough reasons to be mad at him.

For a moment, Noah considered climbing into his car and driving off. But that would only postpone the inevitable. And he definitely wouldn't be doing himself, or Janey, any favors by avoiding her in front of the whole town.

Apparently, Janey felt the same way. She lifted her hand against the glare from the sun and waited for him to cross the street as if there was nothing in the world she'd rather do than say hello. He saw the waver in her smile, though, and saw her hands clench together at her waist before she dropped them to her sides.

"Hey, Janey," he said, casually joining her on the board-walk. "Pretty day, isn't it?"

"It was."

That stung—in a nostalgic sort of way. Janey had never been one to pull her punches. And he'd never been able to resist tweaking her back. He glanced over at the uniformed man beside her and swooped in to give her a peck on the cheek before she could avoid him.

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