SUSAN MALLERY

One In A Million

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Single mom and B & B owner Stephanie Wynne lived without stopping, until FBI Agent Nash Harmon showed up as her guest…and the star of her passionate fantasies. When he kissed her for real, Stephanie set some ground rules to avoid the messy complications of relationships with men. Sexy pillow talk was fine, but love…? Nothing surprised Nash, until Stephanie's lively and quirky attitude brought out the beast in him and made his hormones rage out of control–not to mention his steely emotions.Nash experienced an intimacy with Stephanie that stunned him. Of course, he agreed to a no-strings relationship with her, but his mission soon changed into a burning desire for matrimony!

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Nash groaned as heat and pressure poured into him.

It was bad enough he'd had a restless night filled with erotic dreams of his hostess. But there, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, Stephanie stood in the doorway, a piece of sandpaper in each hand. Nash watched as she reached up and rubbed at a spot well above her head. Her T-shirt rode up, exposing a bit of stomach. What was it about this woman and her belly?

"You need a ladder," he said, surprising her.

Stephanie jumped and squeaked, then glared at him. "I swear I'm going to buy you a collar with a bell and make you wear it."

"You'll have to wrestle me into submission first."

He'd meant the comment as a joke, but at his words, her eyes darkened and awareness sharpened her features. Tension crackled in the empty room.

So his attraction wasn't all one-sided, he thought with satisfaction.

One in a Million

Susan Mallery

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SUSAN MALLERY

is the bestselling and award-winning author of over fifty books for Harlequin and Silhouette Books. She makes her home in the Pacific Northwest with her handsome prince of a husband and her two adorable-but-not-bright cats.

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Chapter One

Good-looking men should not be allowed to show up on one's doorstep without at least twenty-four hours' notice, Stephanie Wynne thought wearily as she leaned against her front door and tried not to think about the fact that she hadn't slept in nearly forty-eight hours, couldn't remember her last shower and knew that her short, blond hair looked as if it had been cut with a rice thresher.

Three kids down with stomach flu had a way of taking the sparkle and glamour out of a woman's day. Not that the man in front of her was going to care about her personal problems.

Despite the fact that it was nearly two in the morning, the handsome, well-dressed stranger standing on her porch looked rested, tidy and really tall. She glanced from his elegant suit to the stained and torn football jersey she'd pulled out of the rag bag when she'd run out of clean clothes about two days ago because…

Her tired brain struggled for the reason.

Oh, yeah. The washer was broken.

Again, not something he was going to sweat about. Paying guests only wanted excellent service, quiet rooms and calorie-laden breakfasts.

She did her best to forget her pathetic appearance and forced her mouth into what she hoped was a friendly smile.

"You must be Nash Harmon. Thanks for calling earlier and letting me know you'd be arriving late."

"My flight out of Chicago was delayed." He drew his dark eyebrows together as he looked her up and down. "I hope I didn't wake you, Mrs…."

"Wynne. Stephanie Wynne." She stepped back into the foyer of the old Victorian house. "Welcome to Serenity House."

The awful name for the bed and breakfast had been her late husband's idea. After three years she could speak it without wincing, but only just. If not for the very expensive custom-made stained-glass sign that had replaced a front window and the fact that her kids would object, Stephanie would have changed the name of the B&B in a heartbeat.

Her guest carried a leather duffle and a garment bag into the house. Her gaze moved between his expensive leather boots and her own mouse slippers with their tattered ears. When she finally headed upstairs to her own bed, she must remember not to look at herself in the mirror. Confirming her worst fears would cause her to shriek and wake the boys.

The man signed the registration card she'd left on the front desk and she took an imprint of his credit card. Once she'd received approval, she handed him an old-fashioned brass key.

"Your room is this way," she said, heading up the stairs.

She'd put him in the front bedroom. Not only was it large and comfortable, with a view of Glenwood, but it was one of only two guest rooms that weren't under her third-floor apartment. When she wasn't completely booked, she found it much easier to have guests stay there than to constantly keep at her kids to stay quiet. Being loud and being a boy seemed to go hand-in-hand.

Five minutes later she'd explained the amenities of the room, said she would be serving breakfast from seven-thirty to nine and asked him if he would like her to leave a newspaper outside his door in the morning.

He refused the paper.

She nodded and headed for the hallway.

"Mrs. Wynne?"

She turned back to look at him. "Stephanie, please."

He nodded. "Do you have a map of the area? I'm here to visit some people and I don't know my way around."

"Sure. Downstairs. I'll put one out for you at breakfast."

"Thank you."

He offered her a slight smile, one that didn't touch his eyes. It was late and she was so tired that her eyelashes hurt. But instead of leaving that second, she hesitated. Oh, not more than a heartbeat, but just long enough to notice that the overhead light brought out brownish highlights in his close-cropped black hair and that the hint of dark stubble on his square jaw made him look just a little bit dangerous.

Yeah, right, Stephanie thought as she turned away. Apparently she'd moved into the hallucination stage of sleep deprivation. Dangerous men didn't come to places like Glenwood. No doubt Nash Harmon was something completely harmless like a shoe salesman or a professor. Besides, what he did for a living was none of her business. As long as his credit-card company put the right amount of money into her bank account, she didn't care if her guest was a computer programmer or a pirate.

As for him being somewhat good-looking and possibly single—there hadn't been a wedding ring on his left hand—she couldn't care less. While her friends occasionally got on her case for not being willing to jump back into the man-infested dating pool, Stephanie ignored their well-meant intentions. She'd already been married once, thank you very much. Nine years as Marty's wife had taught her that while Marty looked like a grown-up on the outside, he'd been as irresponsible and self-absorbed as any ten-year-old on the inside. She would have gotten more cooperation and teamwork from a dog.

Marty had cured her of ever wanting another man around. While on occasion she would admit to getting lonely, and yes, the sex was tough to live without, it beat the alternative. She already had three kids to worry about. Getting involved with a man would be like adding a fourth child to the mix. She didn't think her nerves could stand it.

Despite his late night, Nash woke shortly after six the following morning. He glanced at the clock and compared it to his watch, which was still on Central Time. Then he rolled onto his back and stared at the ivory ceiling.

What the hell was he doing here?

Dumb question, he told himself. He already knew the answer. He was in a town he'd never heard of until a couple of weeks ago, to meet family he hadn't known he had. No. That wasn't completely true. He was in town because he'd been forced to take some vacation and he hadn't had anywhere else to go. If he'd tried laying low in Chicago, Kevin, his twin and already camped out at Glenwood, would have been on the next plane east.

Nash sat up and pushed back the covers. Without the routine of work, his day stretched endlessly in front of him. Had he really gotten so lost in the job that he didn't have anything else in his life?

Dumb question number two.

He knew he was going to have to get in touch with Kevin sometime that morning and set up a meeting. After thirty-one years of knowing nothing about their biological father save the fact that he'd gotten a seventeen-year-old virgin pregnant with twins and then abandoned her, he and Kevin were about to meet up with half siblings they'd never known they had.

Kevin thought finding out about more family was a good thing. Nash still needed convincing.

By 6:40 he'd showered, shaved and dressed in jeans, a long-sleeved shirt and boots. While it was mid-June, a cool fog hung over the part of the town he could see from his second-story window. Nash paced restlessly in his comfortable room. Maybe he would tell his hostess to forget about breakfast. He could go for a drive and eat at a diner somewhere. Or maybe he'd just keep going until he figured out why, in the past few months, he'd stopped sleeping, stopped eating, stopped giving a damn about anything but his job.

He grabbed the keys for his rental car, then headed downstairs. At the front desk, he tore off a sheet of notepaper and a pen, then paused when he heard noises from the rear of the house. If the owner was up, he could simply tell her he was skipping breakfast in person.

He followed the noise down a long hallway and through a set of closed swinging doors. When he stepped into the brightly lit kitchen, he was instantly assaulted by the scents of something baking and fresh coffee. His mouth watered and his stomach growled.

He glanced around, but the big, white-on-white kitchen was empty. A tray sat on a center island. A coffee carafe stood by an empty cup and saucer. Plastic wrap covered a plate of fresh fruit. By the stove, an open box of eggs waited beside a frying pan. Through a door on his left, he heard mumbled conversation.

He started toward the female voice and crossed the threshold. A woman stood on tiptoe in front of shelves. As he watched, she reached up for something on the top shelf, but her fingers only grazed the edge of the shelf.

Nash stepped forward to offer help, but at that moment the woman reached a little higher. Her cropped sweater rose above the waistband of her black slacks, exposing a sliver of bare skin.

Nash felt as if he'd been hit upside the head with a two-by-four. His vision narrowed, sound faded and by gosh, he found himself experiencing the first flicker of life below his waist that he'd felt in damn near two years.

Over an inch of belly? He was in a whole lot more trouble than he'd realized. Apparently his boss had been right about him burning out.

A loud shriek brought him back to the here and now. Nash moved his gaze from the woman's midsection to her face and saw his hostess staring at him with wide eyes. She pressed a hand to her chest and sucked in a breath.

"You nearly scared the life out of me, Mr. Harmon. I didn't realize you were up already."

"Call me Nash," he said as he stepped forward and reached up for the top shelf. "What do you need?"

"That blue bag. There's a silver bread basket inside. I'm making scones and I usually put them in the larger basket but as you're my only guest at present, I thought something smaller would work."

He grasped the blue bag and felt something hard inside. After lowering it, he handed it to her. She took it with a shake of her head.

"I always meant to be tall," she told him. "Somehow I never got around to it."

"I wasn't aware it wasn't something you could get around to. I thought it just happened."

"Or not." She unzipped the bag and pulled out a silver wire basket. "Thanks for the help. Would you like some coffee?"

"Sure."

He led the way back into the kitchen. While he leaned against the counter, she ran hot water into the carafe, then drained it and wiped it dry. After filling it with coffee, she turned back to him.

"Cream and sugar?"

"Just black."

"The scones should be ready in about five minutes. I had planned to make you an omelette this morning. Ham? Cheese? Mushrooms?"

Last night he'd barely noticed her. What he remembered had been someone female, tired and strangely dressed. He had a vague recollection of spiky blond hair. Now he saw that Stephanie Wynne was a petite blonde with wide blue eyes and a full mouth that turned up at the corners. She wore her short hair in a sleek style that left her ears and neck bare. Tailored black slacks and a slightly snug sweater showed him that despite the small package, everything was where it needed to be. She was pretty.

And he'd noticed.

Nash tried to figure out the last time he'd noticed a woman—any woman—enough to classify her as pretty, ugly or something in between. Not for two years, he decided, knowing that figuring out the date hadn't been much of a stretch.

"Don't bother with eggs," he said. "Coffee and the scones are fine." He glanced at the tray. "And the fruit."

Stephanie frowned. "The room comes with a full breakfast. Aren't you hungry?"

More than he'd been in a while, but less than he should have been. "Maybe tomorrow," he said instead.

A timer on the stove beeped softly. Stephanie picked up two mitts and pulled open the oven door. The scent of baked goods got stronger. Nash inhaled the fragrance of orange and lemon.

When she'd set two cookie sheets of scones onto cooling racks, she dug through a drawer and pulled out a linen napkin, then draped it in the silver basket.

"This morning we have orange, lemon and white chocolate scones," she said as she pulled a small crystal dish of butter from the refrigerator. "They're all delicious, which is probably tacky of me to say seeing as I made them, but it's true. Being a man, you won't care about the calories, so that's a plus."

She offered him a smile that made the corners of her eyes crinkle, then nodded toward the door next to him.

"The dining room is through there."

He took the hint and moved through to the next room. He found a large table set for one. The local paper lay on top of a copy of USA TODAY.

Stephanie followed him into the room, but waited until he was seated before serving him his breakfast. She poured coffee, removed the plastic wrap from his plate of fruit and made sure the butter was within easy reach. Then she wished him "bon appétit" before disappearing back into the kitchen.

Nash picked up one of the still-steaming scones. The scent of orange drifted to him. His stomach still growling, he took a bite.

Delicate flavors melted on his tongue. Hunger roared through him, as unfamiliar as it was welcome. He sipped the coffee next, then tried a strawberry. Everything tasted delicious. He couldn't remember the last meal he'd enjoyed, nor did he care. Instead he plowed through four scones, all the fruit and the entire carafe of coffee. When he was finally full, he pulled the copy of USA TODAY toward him and started to read.

A burst of laughter interrupted his perusal of the business section. He frowned as he realized he'd been hearing more than just Stephanie in the kitchen for some time. The other voices were low and difficult to make out. A husband? Probably.

The thought of a Mr. Wynne caused Nash a twinge of guilt. He didn't usually go around looking at other men's wives and admiring their bare skin.

He turned the page on the paper and started to read again, only to be interrupted by the sound of footsteps racing down the hall. He looked up in time to see three boys running toward the front door.

"Walk! We have a guest."

The command came from the kitchen. Instantly three pairs of feet slowed and three heads turned in his direction. Nash had a brief impression of towheaded boys ranging in age from ten or twelve to about eight. The two youngest were twins.

Stephanie stepped into view and gave him an apologetic smile. "Sorry. It's the last week of school and they're pretty wound up."

"No problem."

The boys continued to study him curiously until their mother shooed them out the door. The twins ducked back in for a quick kiss, then waved in his direction and disappeared. Stephanie stood in the foyer with the door open until a bus pulled up in front of the house. Through the window in

the dining room Nash could see the boys climb onto the bus. When it pulled away, Stephanie closed the front door and walked into the dining room.

"Did you get enough to eat?" she asked as she began to clear his dishes. "There are more scones."

"I'm fine," he told her. "Everything was great."

"Thank you. The original scone recipe dates back several generations. My late husband and I rented a guest house from an English couple many years ago. Mrs. Frobisher was a great one for baking. She taught me how to make the scones. I also make shortbread cookies that melt in your mouth. I would be happy to leave a few in your room if you'd like."

Nash told himself that her mention of a "late husband" didn't mean much more than that he didn't have to feel guilty for noticing Stephanie's bare stomach. The entire point of their encounter earlier that morning was that he wasn't as dead inside as he'd thought. Good news that was not particularly meaningful.

He glanced at her face and saw the expectant expression in her blue eyes. His brain offered a replay of her conversation and he cleared his throat.

"If it's not too much trouble," he said.

"None at all. The boys prefer chocolate chip cookies. I guess shortbread is an acquired taste that comes with age."

She offered a polite smile and carried his dishes out of the dining room.

Nash flipped through the sports section, then closed the paper. The news no longer interested him. Maybe he would go for that drive now and explore the area.

He rose, then paused, not sure if he should tell his hostess he was leaving. When he traveled it was usually on business and he always stayed in anonymous hotels and motels. He'd never been in a bed and breakfast before. While this was a place of business, apparently it was also Stephanie's home.

He looked from the kitchen to the foyer, then decided she wouldn't care what he had planned for his day. After fishing his car keys out of his pocket, he walked across the gleaming hardwood floor and out to the curb where he'd left his rental car.

Two minutes later he was back in the Victorian house. He walked into the kitchen, but it was empty. He crossed to the stairs and glanced up. Was she cleaning his room, or had she gone up to her private quarters?

A loud bang made him turn toward the back of the house. He followed the rhythmic noise past the kitchen and pantry into a large utility room. Stephanie sat on the floor in front of a washer. An open manual lay on her lap and there were tools and assorted parts all around her.

In the ten or fifteen minutes since she'd cleared his table, she'd changed her clothes. The tailored slacks and attractive sweater had been replaced by worn jeans and a sweatshirt featuring a familiar cartoon mouse. As he watched, she jabbed the side of the washer with a large wrench.

"Rat-fink cheap piece of metal trash," she muttered. "I hate you. I will always hate you. For the rest of your life, you're going to have to live with that."

He cleared his throat.

Stephanie gasped and shifted on the floor so that she faced him. Her eyes widened and her mouth twisted into a half smile that was as much sheepish as amused.

"If you keep sneaking up on me like this, I'm going to be forced to put a bell around your neck."

Nash leaned against the door frame and nodded at the washer. "Is there a problem?"

"It's not working. I'm trying to use guilt, but I don't think it's helping." She glanced from him to her jeans and back. "I thought you were heading out."

"The battery in my rental car is dead."

"Did you try guilting it into behaving?"

"I thought a jump would be more effective."

"Sure."

She tossed down the wrench and rose. Wearing athletic shoes, she barely came to his shoulder. She gave the washer one more kick, then walked toward him.

"Lead the way."

Nash straightened. "I could take a look at that if you would like."

Stephanie appeared doubtful. "You don't strike me as the washer repairman type."

"I'm not, but I'm pretty mechanical."

"Thanks, but I'm going to get a professional in. I'll go get my car keys. Why don't you meet me in front?"

Stephanie waited until Nash had started down the hallway before running upstairs to get the keys out of her purse. When she reached the top floor, she told herself that her rapidly beating heart had everything to do with the effort required to climb two flights of stairs and nothing to do with her guest's appearance. She figured she was being about sixty percent honest.

The truth was Mr. Elegant-in-a-Suit looked just as good in jeans as he had all dressed up. Daylight suited him, as well. Despite the fact that he couldn't have gotten more than four hours of sleep, he looked tanned, handsome and rested. She, of course, had dark circles that had defied her heavy-duty concealer and a bone-deep weariness compounded by a broken washer and an as-ever challenged bank account.

She took the back stairs down to the rear entrance and climbed into her minivan. After backing out of the driveway, she positioned her car so her bumper nearly touched his.

Jumper cables proved to be something of a challenge, but after rooting around in the garage for a few minutes, she found a set behind a box of old spare parts for some mystery machine. She picked them up and turned, only to run smack into Nash.

"You all right?" he asked as he grabbed her upper arms to steady her.

All right? With her nose practically touching his chest and her hands thrust into his rock-hard stomach?

He smelled good, she thought wistfully as she inhaled the scent of soap and man. Something deep inside her, that feminine part of her dormant for the past three years, gave a slight hiccup of resurrection and slowly stirred to life. Awareness rippled through her. Awareness and sexual interest.

Telling herself that the good news was that this would be a great story to tell her friends the next time they managed to sneak away for a girls'-only dinner, she stepped back and cleared her throat.

"Okay. While I'm out today I'm definitely getting you that bell." She handed him the jumper cables. "Hooking them up is going to be your problem. I know what a car battery looks like, but if I used those things, I would probably electrocute myself and set both our vehicles on fire."

"No problem. I appreciate the help. Are you sure I can't repay you by looking at the washer?"

"Thanks, but no. Think of this as part of our service here at Serenity House."

Nash studied her for a few seconds before turning and walking toward the parked cars. Stephanie sighed in relief. While the offer to pay her back was really nice, she had less than no interest in an amateur messing around with her washing machine. Whenever Marty had decided to "help," he ended up completely breaking whatever had only been partially broken before. Now she hired experts at the first sign of trouble. Easier and certainly cheaper in the long run.

She followed Nash to the curb and watched as he popped the hoods on both vehicles. He stretched out the cables and clamped one end to her battery.

"What brings you to Glenwood?" she asked as he walked to his car and she did the same.

"I'm visiting family."

Huh. She wouldn't have picked him for the small-town type. "I don't know anyone named Harmon in the area."

He opened his car door. "Actually their last name is Haynes."

"The Haynes men?"

He frowned slightly. "You know them?"

“Sure. Travis Haynes is our sheriff. Kyle, his brother, is one of the deputies, as is his sister, Hannah.” Stephanie tilted her head. “Let me see. I think Hannah is only a half sister. I never heard the whole story. There are a couple more brothers. One’s a firefighter and one lives in Fern Hill.”

“You know a lot.”

“Glenwood isn’t the big city. It’s the sort of place where we all keep track of each other.”

Which was one of the things she liked about the area. While owning a bed and breakfast had never been one of her dreams, if she had to run that kind of business, far better here than somewhere cold and impersonal.

Nash moved into his car and turned the key. The engine caught.

When he stepped back out, Stephanie studied his dark hair and strong jaw. “I can see the family resemblance,” she said. “Are you a cousin?”

“Not exactly.” He released the jumper-cable connection. “I don’t know much about them. Maybe you could fill me in later.”

A shiver shimmied through her. Anticipation, she realized. Great. In the time it took to serve breakfast and dig out jumper cables, she’d developed a crush. She was thirty-three. Shouldn’t she be immune to that kind of foolishness?

He coiled the cables, then handed them to her. “If it’s not too much trouble.”

“Not one bit. Hunt me down when you’re ready. I’m usually in the kitchen after the boys get home from school.”

“Thanks.”

He smiled. Unlike last night’s, this one reached his eyes. They brightened for a moment, which made the cold foggy morning suddenly less dreary.

Oh, she had it bad. And as soon as her long-legged, hunky guest drove off in his rental car, she was going to give herself a stern talking-to. Falling for one pretty face once had turned her life into a disaster. Did she really want to risk that a second time?

She was a sensible woman with children and bills. The odds of her finding love with a decent responsible guy had to be substantially less than one in a million. She would do well to remember that.

Chapter Two

Nash circled around Glenwood and started out on the interstate. He checked his watch and when he'd traveled twenty minutes, he drove off at the next exit, turned around and headed back to town.

With his car battery charged, he meandered through the picturesque residential neighborhoods. Ancient trees lined many blocks, the heavy branches touching over the streets and providing tunnels of shade. Big lawns stretched out in front of well-kept houses. Bikes and sports equipment littered the edges of driveways while bright blooming flowers provided color.

The quiet small-town neighborhood wasn't anything like the lakefront in Chicago where he currently lived. No big city lurked in the background. Despite the geographical differences, he was reminded of life back where he'd grown up. Possum Landing, Texas, might not have been as upscale as Glenwood, but it had the same friendly feel.

He made a couple of turns without any thought of direction. He just wanted to keep moving. Eventually he would have to get in touch with his brother and deal with the pending family reunion, but not just yet.

After his next right turn, he drove onto a wider street lined with huge Victorian houses. They were similar to Stephanie's. All restored, all elegant and framed by massive trees. A discreet sign in front of one indicated it was also a bed and breakfast, with a restaurant. He briefly wondered why Stephanie hadn't opened her business here rather than on the other side of town before dismissing the query and returning his attention to getting lost.

He continued to drive through the neighborhood, turning left, then right. After ten minutes he found himself facing a large shopping mall, which he had driven past the previous evening on his way in from the airport. He was about to turn around when his cell phone rang.

Nash checked the caller ID, then pulled over and hit the Talk button.

"What's up?" he asked, even though he had a good idea of the answer.

"I'm checking on you," Kevin, his twin brother said. "Did you flake out on me at the last minute or are you really here?"

"I'm in town."

"You're kidding."

Kevin sounded surprised. Nash shared the feeling. The last place he'd expected to be was here. Given the choice he would be at work—getting lost in an assignment, or training or even paperwork.

"What changed your mind?" his brother asked.

"I wasn't given a choice. You told me to get my butt here or you'd drag me yourself."

"Right. Like me telling you what to do has made you do anything." Kevin laughed. "I'm glad you made it, though. I've met with a couple of the guys. Travis and Kyle Haynes."

Their half brothers. Family they'd never known about. Nash still couldn't get his mind around the concept. "And?"

"It went great. There's a physical resemblance I didn't expect. Our mutual father has some pretty powerful genes. We're about the same height and build. Dark hair, dark eyes."

Someone said something in the background Nash didn't catch.

Kevin chuckled. "Haley says to tell you they're all good-looking. I wouldn't know about that. It's a chick thing."

Haley? Before Nash could ask, Kevin continued.

"We've set up a dinner for tomorrow night. All the brothers will be there along with their wives and kids. Gage is here."

Gage and Quinn Reynolds had been Nash and Kevin's best friends for as long as they could remember. They'd grown up together. Three weeks ago Nash had found out Gage and Quinn shared their biological father with Nash and Kevin.

“I haven’t seen Gage in a couple of years,” Nash said. “How’s he doing?”

“He’s engaged.”

“No way.”

“Remember Kari Asbury?”

Nash frowned. “The name’s familiar.”

“He dated her when he left the service and came back to Possum Landing. She took off to New York to be a model or something.”

“Oh, yeah. Tall. Pretty. They’re getting married?” It had to have been years since they’d seen each other.

“Yup. She moved back and the rest is history. Apparently it all happened pretty fast.”

“Even though Gage kept saying he wanted a family, I figured he was going to stay single forever. I hope it works out.”

Nash meant it. He wanted his friend to have a happy marriage. To be sure about the woman he married. Not to always wonder what wasn’t exactly right between them.

“Gage will be at the dinner tomorrow night,” Kevin said. “You’re coming, too, right?”

“That’s why I’m here.” To meet his new family. To try to get involved in something other than work. Maybe to find a way to feel something again.

Was that possible or was he like a kid wishing for the moon?

He didn’t want to think about it so he changed the subject. “How’s the leg?”

“Good. Healing.”

His brother had been shot in the line of duty. Kevin was a U.S. Marshal who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time during a prison riot.

“Do you have a limp?” Nash asked.

“Some, but it’s supposed to go away.”

“You’ll have the scar. Women love scars from bullet wounds. Knowing you, you’ll use it to your advantage.”

“Funny you should say that.” Kevin cleared his throat. “I would have told you before, but you were away on assignment. The thing is, I’ve met somebody.”

Nash thought of the woman’s voice he’d heard earlier. “Haley?”

“Yeah. She’s…amazing. We’re getting married.”

Gage’s engagement had been a surprise. Kevin’s left Nash speechless. He stared out at the tree-lined streets and couldn’t think of a single thing to say.

“You want to meet her?” Kevin asked.

“Sure.”

Why not? His brother had been born wild. Nash figured any woman strong enough to tie Kevin down had to be an amazing combination of sin and steel.

“We’re staying at a bed and breakfast in town.”

Kevin named the street and Nash realized it was the one he’d been on a few minutes ago.

“I’m about two miles away,” he said. “I’ll be right over.”

“A minister’s daughter?” Nash said as he stared at Kevin.

His fraternal twin grinned. “Not what you expected?”

“Not even close. What happened to all bad girls all the time?”

His brother shrugged. “I met Haley.”

“That had to have been some meeting.”

Kevin grinned. “It was.”

He motioned to the parlor just to the left of the foyer, then led the way into the formally furnished room. Nash glanced around, noting that this B&B seemed larger and more elegant than

Stephanie's. There were crystal chandeliers and some kind of tapestries on the wall. Her place was more homey.

Kevin limped to a long, high-backed sofa in a rich floral print. As he settled onto the cushions, he rubbed his thigh.

Nash took a chair on the opposite side of the coffee table. "You've seen a doctor for that, right?"

"When it happened and again back home. I'm healing. In another few weeks I'll be back to normal, but until then it aches from time to time. I know I'm lucky. The bullet missed the bone."

What he didn't say was if it had hit eighteen inches higher and a little to the left, he wouldn't have made it at all. Nash didn't like to think of anything bad happening to his brother.

"I thought you promised we weren't going to have to worry about you anymore," he said.

Kevin shrugged. "If I hadn't drawn the short straw, I would have been in Florida on a drug bust instead of delivering a prisoner. It wasn't my fault." He grinned. "Not that I'm complaining. If I hadn't been in Kansas, I wouldn't have met Haley."

"A minister's daughter," Nash repeated. "I still can't believe it. So where did you two hook up? Church?"

"A bar."

The answer came from the doorway. Nash turned and saw a young woman walking into the parlor. As he stood he saw she was of medium height, with short fluffy blond hair and hazel eyes. She was pretty enough, curvy, dressed in a snug T-shirt and shorts. His gaze automatically went to her bare legs and he waited for the kind of reaction he'd experienced when he'd seen that sliver of Stephanie's stomach that morning.

Nothing.

Which didn't make sense. If he hadn't had sex in forever and he was finally starting to feel something, why didn't Haley ring any bells?

"You must be Nash," Haley said as she approached. She tilted her head. "Wow—you're tall, like Kevin, and really nice-looking. The same dark hair and dark eyes, but you don't look very much alike." She wrinkled her nose. "What is it with this gene pool? Aren't any of you going to be fat or balding or at least kind of unattractive?"

Kevin beamed at his fiancée. He wrapped an arm around her and brushed a kiss against her temple. "Haley speaks her mind. You'll get used to it."

"If not, I'm sure you're polite enough not to say anything to my face," Haley said cheerfully.

She sank onto the sofa, pulling Kevin next to her. Nash sat down, as well. After linking hands with Kevin, Haley leaned forward and studied Nash.

"I'm really excited about the whole brother-in-law thing," she told him. "I'm an only child. I had way too many mothers, but no siblings. I always wanted other kids around. Some of it was to take the heat off me. I mean I couldn't even think bad thoughts. It's like everyone could read my mind. How awful is that? Okay, sometimes it was really great to have so many people worrying about me, but it could be stifling, too."

Kevin bumped her shoulder with his. "Slow down. You're going to scare Nash off. He's not the sociable twin."

Her gaze became as penetrating as a laser. "Really."

Nash shifted uncomfortably. "Congratulations on your engagement," he said in an effort to distract her. "If Kevin wasn't completely honest about his past, I'd be happy to fill in the details."

Haley giggled with delight. "Ooh, stories about when Kevin was bad. He's told me a few things, but not about the women. There had to be dozens, right? Hundreds, even?"

Now Kevin was the one squirming in his seat. "Haley, you know everything important. I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

She sighed and rested her head on his shoulder. "Isn't he the best? I can't wait to get married. Speaking of which, are you dating, Nash?"

Kevin stood and pulled Haley to her feet. “I think you’ve terrorized my brother long enough.”

“What?” she asked as she put her hands on her hips. “What did I say?”

He gave her a little push. “I won’t be long.”

“Did I upset you?” she asked Nash.

He stood. “Not at all. From what I can tell, you’re exactly what my brother needs in his life.”

“Ha.” She tossed her head and walked out of the room. “I’ll be upstairs,” she called back. “Planning the wedding. A really big wedding.”

“Have fun,” Kevin said, then flopped back on the sofa. “She’s a handful.”

Nash sat down. “Interesting young woman.”

“I think so. She’s smart, funny, fearless. She gives with her whole heart. I’m still learning how to do that, but she makes it so damn easy to love her.”

Had that been the problem? Nash wondered. Had Tina not been easy to love? Had the work got in the way?

“Enough about me,” his brother said. “How are you doing?”

“Fine,” Nash said. “Great.”

Kevin didn’t look convinced. “I didn’t think it was possible to pry you away from work.”

Nash shrugged, rather than admit the vacation hadn’t been his idea. “I’m here, ready to meet the family.”

“Yeah, right.” Kevin’s expression turned serious. “You’ve always been quiet, but since Tina died, it’s been worse than usual. Are you coming out of that?”

As Nash had never been willing to acknowledge what he felt about his wife’s death, he didn’t know if he’d recovered or not. Still it was easier to say, “Sure. I’m doing great.”

His brother shook his head. “You still blame yourself. It was never your fault.”

“Whose fault was it?”

“Maybe no one’s. Maybe it just happened.”

“Not on my watch.”

“You can’t control everything.”

Nash knew. The realization was one of the reasons he’d stopped sleeping, stopped eating, stopped living. But knowing that didn’t seem to change anything.

“Tell me about the Haynes family,” he said to change the subject.

Kevin continued to watch him for a couple of seconds, then nodded, as if agreeing to the tactic. “The couple I’ve met have been good men. They’re as surprised by all this as we are, but friendly enough.” He smiled. “They’re all cops.”

Nash knew there were four brothers and a sister. “You’re kidding.”

“No. They’re all—” He broke off and laughed. “Wait. I forgot. One of them is a rebel. He’s a firefighter.”

Which wasn’t the same as being a cop, but it was close. Kevin was a U.S. Marshal, Gage a sheriff. Nash worked for the FBI and Quinn, well, Quinn walked his own road.

“It’s in the blood,” he said.

Kevin nodded. “That’s what they’re telling me. Earl Haynes was sheriff of this town for years. He has a bunch of brothers and they’re all in law enforcement. Maybe we’re following our destiny.”

Destiny? Nash didn’t believe in that kind of crap. He’d gone to work for the FBI because he’d been recruited out of college. Of all the offers he’d received, it was the one that had appealed the most.

“I’ve seen Gage,” Kevin said. “We’ve known him and Quinn all our lives, played together, fought, made up. I’m having trouble getting that we were always brothers.”

“We acted like brothers,” Nash said. “Still, I’m with you. I figured we were good friends, nothing more.”

Did the new knowledge change anything? He wasn’t sure.

“The dinner tomorrow night is going to be a zoo,” Kevin said. “The guys, their wives and kids. If I can pull together lunch with just a few of the brothers are you interested?”

“Sure.” Nash didn’t like crowds.

Kevin jerked his head toward the ceiling. “There are a few empty rooms. Want to come stay here?”

“I’m okay where I am.”

“You sure?”

He knew Kevin thought he was avoiding contact with the world, but that wasn’t it at all. If his brother pressed him he would say that packing and unpacking was a pain, which was a lie, but would get him off the hook. The truth was something else. For the first time in two years, he’d actually felt a glimmer of interest in something other than work. He knew his sexual stirrings and physical hunger didn’t mean anything, but he was intrigued enough to want to stick around and see what happened next.

Nash hung out with Kevin and Haley until early afternoon, then headed back to Serenity House. When he entered the high-ceilinged foyer, he hesitated, not sure what to do with the rest of his day. As much as he wanted to check in with the office, he knew it was too soon. Calling now would simply prove his boss’s point.

He walked through the dining room and into the kitchen. The tidy room was empty. He strolled into the hallway and listened. There was only silence. A quick check of the garage told him what he’d suspected. He was alone.

The knowledge should have relieved him. He didn’t like a lot of company, preferring solitude to vapid chatter. He liked the quiet. Only not today. Right now he felt restless and out of place. It was as if his skin had suddenly gotten too small.

He turned toward the stairs and took three steps, then stopped. He didn’t want to read or watch TV. He considered another long drive, but that didn’t appeal to him. Finally, in desperation for a distraction, he moved into the back of the house.

In the utility room he found the washer still in pieces. He opened the lid and stared at the tub full of clothes and water, then studied the dial. After skimming the manual, he figured out the washer had stopped right before the spin cycle. He pushed aside the parts and tools, then settled on the floor. There was a schematic of the interior of the machine, along with a parts list. Nash laid the diagram flat on the floor and began sorting through tools and parts.

Over an hour later, Nash had found the problem and, he hoped, fixed it. He’d just started on reassembling the machine when he heard a door slam in the house. The wrench he’d been holding dropped to the floor.

He swore good-naturedly as he picked it up. If he was dropping tools in anticipation of seeing Stephanie, he was in even more trouble than he’d first thought. Finding her sexy was one thing, but actual nerves weren’t allowed.

He turned as the footsteps approached, but instead of the petite blonde he’d been expecting, a boy stepped into the room.

Nash remembered the other two kids had been younger and identical twins. So this one would be Stephanie’s oldest. He offered a smile.

“Hi, there.”

The boy didn’t smile back. He folded his arms over his chest and narrowed his eyes as he studied Nash. “You’re not the repair guy.”

“You’re right. I’m Nash Harmon. I’m a guest here.”

Nash wiped his hand on a paper towel and held it out. The boy hesitated, then slowly offered his own hand.

“Brett Wynne.”

They shook slowly. Nash had the feeling he was being given the once-over and judging from Brett's expression, he wasn't measuring up.

"Why are you messing with our washer?" Brett asked. "Guests aren't supposed to do that sort of thing. If you break it worse, Mom's gonna be real mad. Plus it'll cost more to fix."

The boy looked to be about eleven or twelve. Tall and skinny, with light blond hair and blue eyes like his mother. Of course his father could have had blue eyes, too.

He looked hostile, protective and painfully young. No kid that age should have to feel as if he was all that stood between his family and a hostile world.

Nash carefully set the wrench on the ground. Brett's fierce scowl and hostile words brought back memories from a long time ago. Back when Nash had felt he was the one responsible for making sure his mom and brother were safe. The accompanying feelings weren't comfortable.

"You have a point," he said quietly. "I am a guest here. The thing is, this morning the battery was dead on my rental car, so your mom gave me a jump. I wanted to pay her back for that. She'd been working on the washer when I found her and asked her to help me. She's a real classy lady, so I knew she wouldn't let me pay her. That's when I thought of the washer."

Brett's expression softened a little, but he didn't look a whole lot more welcoming. "What if you break it worse?"

"Then I'll pay for the repairs. The point of doing someone a favor is to make her life easier, not more difficult." He casually cleared some space on the vinyl floor covering. "I'm pretty sure I figured out what was wrong with the machine."

"Yeah?" Brett sounded skeptical. "Show me."

Nash scooted back to give the kid a clear view of the machine. "That part back there came loose, which meant this section moved forward. These two pieces got in the way, and this one ended up a little bent."

Brett crouched down and stared as Nash pointed to the problem areas. He explained what he'd done so far and how he was now putting the machine back together.

"I'll stop if you want," he said.

Brett sank onto the floor. His blue eyes widened in surprise. "You mean if I say not to do any more you won't?"

"That's right."

Brett glanced from the washer to Nash and back. "I guess it would be okay for you to finish up. Maybe you haven't made it worse."

High praise, Nash thought, holding in a grin. "Want to help me?"

"Yeah." Brett sounded eager. Then he gave a shrug. "I mean I'm not doing anything else right now."

Nash handed him the wrench and showed him where to tighten the edge of the casing. "Turn that there."

Fifteen minutes later, the washer was nearly back in one piece. Brett had given up being distant and sullen and now bombarded Nash with questions.

"How'd you figure out what had happened? You ever take a washer apart before?"

"When I was a teenager," Nash told him. "With computer chips and electronics a lot of home appliances are getting pretty complicated, but this washer's older. That made it easier to see what was wrong. Your mom had already taken it apart. I just poked around."

He didn't mention that Stephanie had been trying a combination of guilt and physical abuse on the old machine. Thinking about how she's stopped to kick it as she'd walked out of the room that morning made him smile.

"My bike chain came off once," Brett said. "I got it back on and tightened up some stuff, but I guess that's not the same."

"You're pretty mechanical," Nash told the kid. "You handle these tools well."

Brett pretended nonchalance. “I know.”

Just then someone cleared her throat. Nash glanced over his shoulder and saw Stephanie standing in the doorway to the utility room. The twins were right behind her, peering at him from either side of her hips. She didn’t look happy.

“I know you’re trying to help, Mr. Harmon, but this isn’t your responsibility.”

Before Nash could speak, Brett scrambled to his feet.

“It’s okay, Mom. I think Nash really fixed it. He knows about machines and stuff. We’re just putting it back together. Let’s test it.”

Stephanie’s doubt was as clear as her frown. “Brett, the washer isn’t a toy.”

“Good thing,” Nash said as he stood and looked down at her. “Because I wasn’t playing.”

Chapter Three

Had she already mentioned that the man was tall? Stephanie had to tilt her head back to meet Nash's dark gaze. Once her eyes locked onto his, she didn't think an earthquake would be enough to break the connection between them.

What exactly was the appeal? His chiseled good looks? The hint of sadness even when he smiled? A body big enough and muscled enough to make him the most popular guy in a "drawing the human form" class? Her sex-free existence? That voice?

I wasn't playing.

She knew what he'd meant when he spoke the words. He wasn't playing at being Mr. Repair. He was just trying to help. But she wanted him to mean something else. She wanted him to mean that he thought she was sexy, mysterious and, seeing as this was her personal fantasy, irresistible. She wanted him to mean he wasn't playing with her. He wanted it to be real, too.

Yeah, that and a nod from a genie would miraculously get the piles of laundry clean, too.

"Stephanie? Are you all right?"

Good question.

"Fine."

She forced herself to look away from his face and focus her attention on the nearly assembled washer. The scattered tools on the floor were enough to remind her of Marty, who had loved to play at fixing things. He knew just enough to be dangerous to both himself and her monthly budget. Like she needed that kind of trouble again.

"Tell me exactly what you did," she said. She would need the information to tell the repair guy.

Before Nash could speak, Brett launched into an explanation that involved calling tools by their actual names and pointing out various washer parts on a diagram so detailed, she got vertigo just looking at it. She did her best to pay attention. Really. It was just that the utility room was sort of on the small side and Nash was standing close enough for her to inhale the scent of his shampoo and the faint hint of male sweat. It had been a really long time since she'd seen a man perspire.

And it wasn't going to happen again anytime soon, she told herself firmly. Men, good-looking or not, weren't a part of her to-do list. She was going to put any illicit or illegal thoughts of Nash Harmon right out of her mind.

The bad news was she'd assumed that her reaction to him that morning had come from a lack of caffeine and low blood sugar. As she'd had enough coffee to float a good-size boat and she was still full from lunch, she couldn't blame her current attraction on either of those states. There had to be another explanation.

"Mom, you're not listening," Brett complained.

"I am. You got a little technical on me. I guess it's a guy thing."

She watched as her son tried to decide between being huffy at her inattention and pleasure at her calling him a guy.

"There's a simple way to ease your mind," Nash said.

Reluctantly she looked in his direction, careful not to get caught up in his lethal gaze.

"Let me guess," she said. "You're going to turn it on and prove to me that it works."

"Exactly."

He smiled and staring at that was nearly as dangerous. When his mouth curved, her stomach swooned. The sensation was more than a little disconcerting.

"Okay, let her rip." She bent down to the twins and rested her hands on their shoulders. "You two brace yourselves. If the washer starts to hiss and shake I want you to run for cover. Okay?"

They nodded solemnly.

The three of them watched as Nash closed the lid, then pushed in the dial. There was a second of silence followed by a click. Then, amazingly, the old washer chugged to life. She heard the sound of the tub turning, followed by water gurgling down the drain.

"I don't believe it," she said. "It might actually be working."

Brett grinned. "Mo-om. It is working. Nash and I fixed it."

"Wow!" She brushed his cheek with her fingers. "I'm impressed."

Adam tugged on her shirt. "I'm hungry, Mom. I want my afternoon snack."

"Me, too," Jason said.

"Meet me in the kitchen." She turned her attention back to Nash. "I don't know how to thank you. Of course I'll discount your room for the work. The last time the repairman was here, he charged me a hundred dollars."

"Forget it," he said as he crouched down and began collecting tools. "You helped me out this morning. I'm returning the favor."

"Jump-starting your car hardly compares with fixing my washer. I have to pay you something."

He glanced up. "Then I'll take an afternoon snack, too."

That wasn't enough, but it would have to do for now. Brett planted his hands on his hips.

"What do I get?"

"My undying gratitude."

"How about a new skateboard?"

She winced. The one he wanted had special wheels or a secret finish or something that cranked up the price tag to the stratosphere.

"We'll talk," she told her oldest.

"You always say that, but we never have the conversation," he complained as he stalked out of the room.

She watched him go and was pleased when he turned into the kitchen rather than heading toward the stairs and up to his room. Brett was twelve—nearly a teenager. She didn't want to think about handling a teenage boy all on her own. She didn't like to think about dealing with any of it all on her own. Unfortunately, she didn't have a choice. The past few years had taught her that alone was a whole lot better than marriage to the wrong guy.

She turned back to Nash. "How about coffee and shortbread cookies?"

He finished putting the tools in the box and stood. "Sounds terrific."

"I'll bring them into the dining room in about five minutes."

She started to leave, then stopped. The washer clicked over from spin to rinse. "I still can't believe you fixed that. I have laundry piled up to the ceiling. We've been running out of clothes. I really do appreciate your help."

"I was glad to do it." He leaned against the washer. "My work keeps me pretty busy. I'm not used to having a lot of free time and this gave me something to do."

She laughed. "Uh-huh. Next you'll be telling me I was doing you the favor by letting you work on the washer."

"Exactly."

"Nice try, Nash, but I don't buy it."

She headed for the kitchen. Every single cell in her body tingled from their close encounter. Did sexual attraction burn calories? Wouldn't it be nice if it did?

She started a fresh pot of coffee, then got out glasses for the boys. Brett poured the milk while she set out grapes, string cheese and a plate of cookies. By the time that was done, the coffee had finished. She poured it into a carafe, then set it on the tray, along with shortbread cookies, grapes and some crab puffs she'd been defrosting.

"Be right back," she told her children as she picked up the tray and walked toward the dining room.

Nash stood by the front window, staring out onto the street. When she entered, he turned and smiled.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome." She put down the tray. "Let me know if you need anything else."

"I will."

She would like to tell herself that he was talking about more than just the food. While she was busy imagining that, she could pretend that his gaze lingered on her face and that his relaxed stance belied pulsing erotic tension building just below the surface of his calm facade. Or she could be realistic and get her fanny back to the kitchen.

Being reasonably intelligent, she chose the latter and left Nash in peace. The poor man hadn't asked for her sudden rush of hormones. If she didn't want to embarrass them both, she was going to have to find a way to get her wayward imagination under control. If logic wasn't going to work, she was going to have to think of more drastic measures.

"Tell me about school," she said as she slid onto the chair between Adam and Jason.

Her twins were in third grade, while Brett had just finished his first year in middle school.

"Mrs. Roscoe said we're her best class ever," Adam told her. "We beat all the other classes." He gave his twin a triumphant grin.

Jason ignored him. "We got our summer reading lists today, Mom," he said. "I've picked out five books already. Can we go to the library this week?"

"Sure. You'll all want to think about summer reading. We're going to have to talk about how many books you'll be getting through. Are there book reports?"

Adam reached for the backpack he'd left on the floor and pulled out a folder. He passed a single sheet of paper to her.

Stephanie scanned the directions, then glanced at Brett. "What about you?"

He rolled his eyes. "It's up in my room. We have to do about two pages. I want to do mine on the computer. Are we getting a new one? You said we'd talk about it when school was out."

"You're right. And unless I'm reading the calendar wrong, school isn't out yet."

"We've got four days left."

"Which gives me ninety-six hours until you can start bugging me."

Brett tried to hide his smile, but she saw it. He'd been after her for a new computer for the better part of a year. While there was nothing wrong with the one they had, it didn't play the really cool games. She figured she could probably put him off until Christmas when her "twenty dollars a week" fund would have reached computer size. Then the new computer would be a family gift.

Adam bounced in his chair. "I have a new joke," he announced. "Knock knock."

"Those are baby jokes," Brett said as he took a cookie.

"They are age-appropriate," Stephanie told him. "I listened to yours when you were his age."

Brett sighed, then dutifully went through the joke with his brother who squealed with delight when he repeated the word who enough for Adam to ask him why he was being an owl. Jason giggled at his older brother.

As the three of them took turns talking about their day, Stephanie found her attention sliding to the man in the next room. He was sitting out there alone while she was in here with her family. She kept having to fight the impulse to invite him to join them. Which was crazy. She'd never once encouraged guests to befriend her children. Besides, if Nash was alone, it was by choice.

He was probably married, she told herself. Or he had a serious girlfriend back in Chicago. She knew he had family here—he'd mentioned the Hayneses, although not how he was related to them.

Indecision made her fidget in her seat until she couldn't stand it anymore.

"I'll be right back," she told the boys and stalked out of the room.

This was insane, she told herself. She was asking for trouble. Worse, she was asking for humiliation. She needed therapy.

As there was no psychologist standing by to offer advice, she walked into the dining room only to find Nash where she'd last seen him. Standing in front of the window looking out onto the street.

A quick glance at the tray told her he hadn't touched the food she'd brought him. He hadn't even poured any coffee.

He turned around and raised his eyebrows in silent query.

After clearing her throat, she tried to figure out what to say. Nothing brilliant occurred to her so she was left with slightly awkward.

"You must miss your family," she said.

His eyebrows lowered and drew together. "I haven't met them yet."

What? Oh. "I meant your family in Chicago."

"I don't have any there. I'm not married."

Score one for the hormones, she thought, trying not to feel or look relieved. The good news was that when Nash left, she would have a great time remembering all the surging feelings she'd experienced while he was here. It would be a lot more interesting than sorting coupons or ironing.

"Okay." She sucked in a breath. "You can tell me no. It's completely crazy and not even why you're here. I don't usually even ask. Why would you want to?" She shook her head. "Forget it."

She took a step back.

He blinked at her. "Was there a question in there for me?"

"I don't think so." She waved toward the kitchen. "We're just hanging out in there. The boys tell me about their day at school and they have a snack. You seemed…" She tried a different line of thought. "You're welcome to join us if you'd like. Or you can simply run screaming from the room and I'll get the message."

He looked surprised, and not exactly comfortable with the idea. Of course. He was a sexy, successful, single guy. Men like that didn't hang out with three kids and a single mom.

Heat crawled up her cheeks and she had a bad feeling there was a blush to match. "Never mind," she said brightly. "It was a silly suggestion."

She started toward the closed door that led to the kitchen, but before she'd gone more than two steps, he called her back.

"I would like to join you," he said.

She eyed him. "Why?"

He smiled and her internal organs did a couple of synchronized swimming moves.

"Because you asked and it sounds like fun."

"I'm not sure about fun, but I can promise loud."

"Close enough."

Now that he'd accepted, she felt foolish about her invitation, but it was too late to retract it. She moved to the table and collected the tray, then tilted her head in the direction of the kitchen.

"Brace yourself," she said and pushed open the door with her shoulder.

All three of her boys were talking at once. They barely noticed her, but the second Nash walked in behind her three pairs of blue eyes widened and three mouths snapped closed.

"This is Mr. Harmon," she said as she put the tray on the counter.

"Nash," he said easily.

"Okay. Nash. These are my boys. You've already met Brett, who is rapidly becoming a macho tool guy. And these two—" She walked to the table and put her hands on their shoulders. "—are my twins. Jason and Adam. Say hi to Nash."

The twins offered an enthusiastic greeting, but Brett didn't say much. His expression turned wary and Stephanie wondered if he was about to say something that would make her cringe.

"We're having chocolate chip cookies, grapes and string cheese," she said quickly in an effort to forestall Brett. "You're welcome to that or the shortbread."

"How about shortbread and grapes," he said.

“No problem.”

As she bustled around the kitchen, he pulled out one of the two empty chairs. Brett sat across from the twins, which meant Nash would be across from her. It was only a snack, she told herself. She could handle it. At least she hoped she could.

As she worked, she tried not to notice the silence. Her normally ten-thousand-words-a-minute kids were all staring at Nash. But before she could think of something to ease the escalating tension, Nash broke the ice himself.

He leaned toward Jason and Adam. “I’m a twin,” he said.

The boys grinned. “No way,” Jason said.

“Not identical, like you two. Kevin and I don’t look very much alike. But we’re still twins.”

“Cool.” Adam offered a shy smile.

Nash turned to Brett. “I heard school is out this week. Are you excited about summer?”

Stephanie saw her oldest wrestle with his innate excitement and his need to be standoffish.

“Summer’s good,” Brett said at last.

“There’s a community pool,” Jason said. “We go swimming every week. And there’s sleepover camp at the end of summer. And Adam and me are gonna play volleyball at the park.”

“Sounds like fun,” Nash said.

“Brett’s seriously into baseball,” Stephanie volunteered as she carried a plate to the table, then returned to collect the coffee. “His team made the city finals.”

“What position do you play?” Nash asked.

“First base.”

She could see he was itching to say more, but for some reason didn’t want to. As if wanting to talk to Nash was a bad thing.

Stephanie sighed. Brett considered himself the “man of the family.” He took his responsibilities seriously. While she appreciated the effort, sometimes she wished she could convince him that it was far more important to her for him just to be a kid.

Conversation flowed for about twenty minutes until she glanced at the empty plates in front of her three. “Looks like you’re done eating to me. Guess what comes next?”

Adam smiled shyly at Nash. “We do our homework now.”

“It’s when I used to do it, too,” he admitted. “I liked every subject but English. What about you?”

“I like ’em all,” Jason announced and pushed back his chair.

He carried his plate to the counter by the sink, then gave Stephanie a hug. She hugged him back. As she felt his small back and warm, tugging hands, she reminded herself that jerk or not, Marty had done one thing right. He’d given her these boys. They were worth all the heartache and suffering she’d endured along the way.

When all three of them had trooped out of the kitchen, she turned to the table. Nash would go now, she thought. Which was fine. She’d tortured him with her family long enough. Whatever feelings of loneliness he might have had would have been erased. No doubt he would be grateful for some solitude.

“Good cookies,” he said as he rose.

“Thanks. I won’t tell you how much butter is in each batch.”

“I appreciate that.”

He carried his plate and mug over to the sink, which was a bit of a surprise. Then, before she could say anything, he turned on the water and began to rinse them off.

Stephanie thought about rubbing her eyes. She had to be having some kind of hallucination. A man? Doing work? Not in her world.

“You don’t have to do that,” she said, trying not to sound stunned.

“I don’t mind helping.”

As he spoke, he collected the boys' plates and rinsed those off, too. Then he opened the dishwasher and actually put the plates inside. She couldn't believe it. She didn't think Marty had ever known where the dishwasher was, let alone what it was for.

When Nash reached for the glasses, she came to her senses.

"Hey, I'm the hired help around here, not you," she said as she stepped in close and took the glass from him.

Their fingers touched. Just for a second, but it was enough. Not only did she hear the faint ringing of bells, she would swear that she saw actual sparks arc between them. Holy wow. Sparks. She didn't think that kind of stuff was possible after age thirty.

Nash looked at her. His dark eyes seemed bright with what she wanted to say was passionate fire, but was probably the light from the overhead fixtures. Awareness rippled through her, sensitizing her skin and making her want to fling herself into his arms for a kiss that went on for at least six hours, following by mindless, intense sex. Right there, in front of the appliances.

She swallowed and took a step back. Something was really wrong with her. Seasonal allergies? Too much television? Not enough? She felt soft and wet and achy inside. She felt unsettled. All of this was so out of the ordinary, so unexpected and so extreme that it would be really hilarious…if it weren't so darned terrifying.

Nash wondered if Stephanie really was issuing an invitation with her parted lips and wide eyes or if that was just wishful thinking on his part. No doubt the latter, he told himself as he heard footsteps on the stairs.

The boys walked into the kitchen. Adam and Jason each had a backpack with them while Brett carried a math book and several sheets of paper.

Nash figured it was time for him to excuse himself. Homework seemed like family time. But before he could say anything, Jason patted the chair next to him and offered a winning smile.

"I have to finish my calendar for summer. I wrote something about each of the months. Wanna hear?"

Nash glanced from the boy to Stephanie who gave him a shrug, as if to say it was his call. When he looked back at Jason, the boy pulled the chair out a little.

What the hell, Nash thought. He crossed to the table and took the seat.

"So your calendar is only three months long," he said.

"Uh-huh. We did pictures. See—I colored fireworks in the sky for July, coz that's when it's the fourth and we always go to the park for fireworks."

Jason opened a large folder and withdrew a folded sheet of construction paper as he spoke. Nash admired the crayon depiction of fireworks, then bent close to see what Jason had written underneath.

"It's a poem," the boy said proudly. "The teacher said we could copy it from the board if we wanted. I can read it to you."

The last sentence sounded more like a question than a statement. Nash nodded. "Sure. Go ahead."

Jason cleared his throat, then read the poem. When he was finished Adam quietly pushed a spelling list toward him.

"I got 'em all right," he said in a low voice.

Nash studied the word list, and the big A at the top of the paper.

"You did great. There are some big words here."

Adam beamed.

The twins pulled out more papers and talked about their homework. When they'd explained everything they had to do, they started the work. But it wasn't a silent process. They asked questions, shared each step, bickered over the pencil sharpener and asked for more snacks, another glass of milk or even water. Stephanie kept gently steering them back to their assignments.

“They’re usually more focused than this,” she said as she pulled food out of the refrigerator. “The last couple of weeks of school are always crazy.”

Nash remembered what that was like—the unbearable anticipation of an endless summer with no homework. Being here with the boys reminded him of a lot of things. How he and Kevin were supposed to do their homework as soon as they got home, but with their mom out working, there was no one around to make sure it happened. Nash had always done his, but Kevin had usually ducked outside to play. Later, when their mom got home, they fought about it. Nash had retreated to his room to get lost in a book.

As he glanced at the three bent heads, he realized he didn’t have any children in his life. No kids of friends, no neighbors with little ones running around. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d spent any time with a child. It wasn’t that he didn’t like them; they simply weren’t a part of his world.

Had someone asked him what it would be like to spend an hour or so with three boys, he would have assumed time would go by slowly, that he would feel awkward and restless. But his usual underlying sense that something was wrong seemed to have faded. The twins were friendly enough and while Brett obviously didn’t want him around, Nash understood enough of what he was feeling not to mind. When Nash had been his age, he’d done exactly the same thing.

Stephanie came over and put her hand on Brett’s shoulder. “How’s it going?”

“Fine.”

Nash wasn’t sure that was true. Brett hadn’t written anything on his paper in nearly ten minutes.

Stephanie smiled at Nash. “Brett is in an accelerated math group. He’s already starting on algebra, and it’s a little tough. Unfortunately I was never a math person. Still, he’s way better at it than me.”

Brett winced. “Mo-om, I’m doing fine.”

“I know, honey. You’re doing great.”

Nash glanced down at the open book. “I remember algebra,” he said.

She drew her eyebrows together. “Let me guess. You were a math person.”

“Sorry, yeah.”

“Figures.”

“The thing I always liked about it was the rules. Once you learn them, you keep applying them. Things need to happen in a certain order, otherwise you get the wrong answer.”

She shook her head. “That would be me. The queen of the wrong answer. It was all that do-this-first stuff that made me crazy. Why can’t you just do an equation from left to right, like reading?”

“You can. Sort of. Like this problem here.” He pointed. “You do what’s in the parentheses first, then go from left to right.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s how the steps work. If you’re building a model car and you glue down the hood before you put in the engine, it’s not going to look right.”

She groaned. “Is this where I tell you I can’t put a model together, either?”

Brett tapped his pencil on the table. “Can I have my book back, please.”

“Sure.”

Nash handed it over. At that moment Adam claimed his attention to discuss what color green would do best on his mountains for his report on Wyoming. As Nash checked out the various options, he saw Brett read the first problem again, then start writing on his paper. When he’d finished his calculations, he plugged the answer back into the original equation and quickly solved it. His wide smile told Nash that he’d gotten it right.

Nash handed Adam a colored pencil, then caught Stephanie’s eyes. She mouthed “thank you.” Apparently she’d picked up his attempt to help Brett without actually helping. Her gaze darkened slightly as several emotions skittered across her face.

He tried to read them, but they came and went in a heartbeat. He was left with a sense of sorrow, as if she had something she regretted.

Of course she did, he told himself. Everyone did. Regrets were a part of life. But for the first time in a long time, he wanted to ask another person what was wrong. He wanted to learn more about her, to understand what she was thinking. He wanted to connect.

His interest was more than sexual and that scared the crap out of him. Feeling—getting involved—would be a disaster.

He told himself to get out of there right now. To leave before he got trapped. Before it was too late. But even knowing it was wrong to stay, he couldn't seem to force himself to stand and walk away.

It was just a couple of hours, he told himself. What could it possibly hurt?

Chapter Four

Nash stayed through dinner. Stephanie had no idea why, nor could she decide if it was a good thing or a bad thing. The man was nice enough, the twins already adored him even though Brett remained standoffish. She appreciated the opportunity to converse with an adult for a chance. So the situation should have been a big plus.

Except she didn't know what was in it for him. Why would a good-looking, intelligent man want to hang out with her and her kids? She opened the refrigerator and put the milk and butter back in the door, then frowned. That didn't sound exactly right. Nash's appearance and mental state didn't have anything to do with her confusion. Why would any man not be running for the hills? Weren't guys supposed to hate other men's children in a relationship? Not that he had any designs on her. Despite the fact that he made her long for satin sheets and champagne, she doubted he saw her as much more than an efficient hostess. After all, her luck just plain wasn't good enough to hope for more.

So why had he stayed? Why hadn't he retreated to the quiet and privacy of his room or gone out somewhere for dinner?

You could ask, a small voice in her head whispered.

Stephanie nearly laughed out loud. Sure she could, but that was so not her style.

"We're done," Brett said.

She turned around and saw that the table was indeed cleared, the dishes scraped and neatly stacked by the sink and the table wiped off.

"Very nice job," she said. "Everyone finished his homework, right?"

Three heads nodded earnestly.

She smiled. "Then I guess this is a TV night."

"All right!"

Brett pumped the air with his fist. The twins tore out of the kitchen. She heard their footsteps on the hardwood floor and was able to guess their destination.

"Stop right there," she yelled after them. "We have a guest. Use the TV upstairs."

"Why?" Nash asked from where he leaned against the counter.

She turned toward him, ignoring the continual sexual impact of his presence. Not only did she not want to make a fool of herself, but there was still a minor in the room. "The downstairs TV is for our guests."

He gave her a slow, sexy smile that could have melted the polar ice cap. "I'm not much of a TV watcher. It won't bother me if it won't bother you."

Stephanie figured she wasn't going to fight the point. If the man wanted to be generous, her kids would be thrilled. She smiled at Brett. "Looks like this is your lucky day. Go tell your brothers, and keep the volume down."

Brett grinned and raced down the hall. "We can stay down here," he yelled.

"Simple pleasures," she said as she turned toward the sink. "If only life stayed that easy."

"Complicated comes with growing up," Nash said as he also approached the sink. He was closer so he got there first.

As she watched, he turned on the water and began rinsing dishes. Just like that. He even used the sponge to clean off the worst bits.

Stephanie wanted to pinch herself to see if she was dreaming. He was helping again. Helping. Without being asked, without complaining. Just doing it.

Some of her confusion must have shown on his face because he looked at her and asked, "What's wrong?"

She wiggled her fingers toward the dishes. "You don't have to do that."

"I don't mind."

He didn't mind. Wow. Every time she had asked Marty to help, he'd howled like a wet cat, then had a list of fifty reasons why he couldn't. However hard she pushed, he pushed back harder. He threatened, cajoled, or had a temper tantrum to rival a three-year-old's. His goal had been to make the experience so miserable that she would stop asking. Eventually it had worked.

"So who trained you?" she asked. "I happen to know that most men aren't born being so handy around the kitchen."

He finished rinsing the dishes, then opened the dishwasher and began placing them inside. "I was married for a while, but most of my 'training' as you call it, came from being raised by a single mom. She worked a lot of hours and came home beat. I pitched in to help."

Wow times two. "You give me hope," she said.

He straightened. "In what way?"

For once her reaction wasn't about sex. "You seem like a great guy. Successful, articulate, not a serial killer—at least not as far as I can tell. You didn't have a father around, either. So maybe my boys will turn out okay, too."

He gave her another slow smile. "They're going to be great. You're doing a terrific job with them."

"I try."

"It shows."

The compliment left her feeling flustered and fluttery. She had to clear her throat before she could speak again. "If you don't mind me asking, what happened in your marriage?"

He put the last three glasses into the dishwasher. "Tina passed away a couple of years ago."

"I'm sorry."

The words were automatic. She figured Nash was in his early thirties, which meant his wife would have been around the same age. What would have taken such a young woman? Cancer? A drunk driver?

"What brought you to Glenwood?" he asked. "Or are you a native?"

The not-so-subtle change in subject ended any thought she had of actually asking her questions.

"Dumb luck," she said.

Nash picked up the dishcloth and rinsed it, then started to wipe off the counters. She was nearly dumbstruck. Rather than stand around with her mouth open, she forced herself to get the detergent out from under the sink and pour some into the dishwasher.

"We always moved around a lot," she said, trying not to stare as he finished up with the counters. "Marty had wonderful ideas of fun places to live and we wanted to experience them all."

Not exactly the whole truth, she thought sadly. This was the made-for-TV version of her marriage. The one she told mostly everyone. Especially her children.

"We spent eight months living in a forest and nearly a year working on a ranch. There was a summer on a fishing boat and a winter in a lighthouse."

Nash leaned against the counter and folded his arms over his chest. "With the kids?"

"It was a great experience for them," she said, trying to sound enthusiastic when all she felt was tired. "They have great memories."

All good ones. She'd done her best to ensure that. Whatever her feelings about her late husband might be, she wanted Brett and the twins to remember their father with a lot of love and laughter.

"I experienced worlds I didn't know existed." And would have happily died in ignorance of, given the choice. She pushed the Delay button on the dishwasher, setting the start time for midnight.

"I'd homeschooled Brett through third grade, which went well. He's very bright. But Marty and I were worried about socialization. We knew it was time to settle down."

It hadn't exactly gone that way, she remembered. Marty had wanted to keep moving, but she'd demanded that they settle. Despite having an eight-year-old and four-year-old twins, she'd flat-out told him she would leave him if necessary. The previous winter Adam had spiked a 105-degree fever

while they'd been stuck in the godforsaken lighthouse. With a storm raging around them, there'd been no way to get to the mainland and a doctor. She'd spent thirty-six hours in hell, wondering if her son was going to die. In the dark hours before dawn, right before his fever finally broke, she'd vowed she wasn't going to live like that anymore.

"As luck would have it, the day we arrived in Glenwood we got word of an inheritance. We fell in love with the town right as we found out we had enough money to buy a place and settle down." She offered a practiced smile. "This house was on the market and we couldn't resist. It was the perfect opportunity to have both a home and a growing business."

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