

Love Inspired
SUSPENSE
RIVETING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

VALERIE HANSEN

*Out of the
Depths*



Steeple
Hill

Valerie Hansen
Out of the Depths

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Love wasn't on Trudy Lynn Brown's to-do list, though she certainly needed someone to help her get rid of the vandals threatening her campground. And her best friend's brother fit the bill. Injured in a white-water rafting accident, Cody Keringhoven had come to Serenity, Arkansas, to recuperate and rebuild his broken faith and shattered dreams. Watching over the campground kept him in constant contact with the ever-surprising—and delightful—Trudy Lynn, whose sunny nature soothed his battered spirit. Yet the criminals would stop at nothing to drive her off her property....

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Cody stared at the crowbar in Trudy Lynn's hand and blanched. "What if he'd turned it on you?"

"I never thought of that." Leaning slightly toward Cody, she dropped the crowbar. "Pretty dumb, huh?"

"Yeah." There was a catch in his voice. He didn't try to hide it.

When she started looking woozy, he reached for her.

Trudy Lynn stepped into his waiting embrace. "I won't be stupid like that again, I promise."

"Good. I don't think my heart can take much more excitement." He heard a stifled sob and began to soothe her the way he would a frightened child. "It's okay. I've got you. You're safe."

She leaned back slightly to look at him through teary eyes and said simply, "I know."

VALERIE HANSEN

was thirty when she awoke to the presence of the Lord in her life and turned to Jesus. In the years that followed she worked with young children, both in church and secular environments. She also raised a family of her own and played foster mother to a wide assortment of furred and feathered critters.

Married to her high school sweetheart since age seventeen, she now lives in an old farmhouse she and her husband renovated with their own hands. She loves to hike the wooded hills behind the house and reflect on the marvelous turn her life has taken. Not only is she privileged to reside among the loving, accepting folks in the breathtakingly beautiful Ozark mountains of Arkansas, she also gets to share her personal faith by telling the stories of her heart for Steeple Hill's Love Inspired line.

Life doesn't get much better than that!

Valerie Hansen Out of the Depths



Count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.

—James 1:2–3

I never get tired of saying that Joe is the most important person in my life. He always will be.

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PROLOGUE

“She’s the last one.”

“I told you she would be. She’s real stubborn. We’re gonna have more trouble with her than we did with the others.”

“Nonsense. She’s a woman. Alone.”

“Not exactly. She’s got a lot of friends.” He winced at the string of curses that erupted from his surly companion. “Well, she does. And folks around here stick together. You oughta know that.”

“I don’t want to hear any more lame excuses. If you can’t handle this job, I’ll hire somebody who can.”

“You threatening me?”

“I never threaten. I promise.”

“Give me a few more weeks. I’ll up the pressure. She’ll cave. I know she will.”

“She’d better. I’m sick of waiting.”

“I don’t know why you’re in such a big hurry all of a sudden. It’s gonna turn out just the way I said. It’s a sweet setup. She doesn’t suspect a thing.”

“Yet.”

“Hey, don’t talk like that. She’ll be ready to pack her bags and head for the hills before much longer. She’s already jumpy as a cat.”

“She should be,” the man said with a self-satisfied snort. “She has plenty to be scared of.”

“You said there’d be no rough stuff.”

“That was before. Things are different now. I’m running out of patience. And time. I’ll step in and clear up the problem myself, once and for all, if I have to.”

“You wouldn’t!”

“Try me.”

“Whoa. Don’t get all het up.” He waved his hands in front of him, palms out, in a placating gesture. “You won’t have to do a thing. Two or three more weeks and Trudy Lynn Brown will be finished. She’ll be so down in the dumps she’ll be beggin’ for a chance to sell out.”

“Selling’s not enough. I want to see her business closed. Period. End of story.”

“Yeah, that’s what I meant.”

“Good. You’d better make sure that’s exactly what happens or she won’t be the only one in deep trouble.”

“I know, I know. But don’t forget about those kids she’s got workin’ for her. If they get in my way it might slow down our plans a tad.”

“Humph.” He raised his boot and brought it down on a passing beetle. Its shell collapsed with a sickening, deadly crunch. “Anybody who causes too many problems for me gets the same treatment as that bug. Including you. Best you remember that when you’re dealin’ with the lady.”

“Just promise me you won’t hurt her.”

“I’m through making promises, especially to you. Get her out of my way—or else.”

ONE

“Good morning! What a beautiful day,” Trudy Lynn said, stepping out onto the porch of her cabin to greet her elderly hired hand. “Don’t you love the Ozarks this time of year?”

“Yes’m.” Will took off his sweat-stained baseball cap and held it in front of him. “Morning, Miz Brown. Can’t say it’s too good, though. Maybe you’d best sit down.”

She shaded her eyes and braced for the worst. “What now?” The look on Will’s leathery face made her heart sink. “Not more of the same?”

“Fraid so.”

“Oh, no.”

It wasn’t fair. Not after all the sacrifices she’d made to keep this business going. She’d hung on and finally prospered when other campgrounds and canoe rentals around her had closed. This year, she’d even managed to buy a bit of new equipment.

“What did they do this time?” Trudy asked nervously.

“Took out three more of them new red canoes. Looks to me like we’d best put ’em in storage and use the old ones for now. You can’t keep buyin’ new ones if somebody’s gonna go knockin’ holes in ’em.”

“I know.”

Pensive, she stood at the porch railing and gazed fondly at the neat campsites arrayed beside the Spring River. Oaks and hickory had greened up, while dogwoods were almost done with their blooms. Every day, new varieties of wildflowers appeared, some with blossoms so tiny they could hardly be seen. The only thing spoiling the picture was the knowledge that someone despised her enough to try to ruin her.

“Okay,” Trudy told Will. “Take Jimmy and have him help you load what’s left of my best canoes on the spare trailer. I’ll tow it down to Serenity and rent a storage spot to park it. I just hate to back down like this.”

“What else can we do?”

“Nothing. We can’t stay up every night to stand guard and still hope to function well during the day, especially not when peak season gets here. Besides, it’s too dangerous for amateurs like us. And hiring a real security man would cost way too much.”

“How ’bout that ornery little dog of yours? We could tie him down by the boats. He’s sure to make a racket if anybody strange comes around.”

Trudy Lynn laughed softly and shook her head. “You know Widget barks at everything, including rabbits and deer. He’d sound false alarms and keep us running all night long.”

“Prob’ly.” The stooped old man nodded sagely. “Okay, Miz Brown, I’ll fetch Jimmy and we’ll load up them new canoes for you. He’s not gonna like doing it, though.”

“What my cousin likes or doesn’t like isn’t your problem, Will. It’s time he learned that his brains aren’t the only reason I hired him. It shouldn’t take all day to keep our accounts current. When he’s not busy in the office I expect him to lend a hand outside, not sit around playing computer games.”

“That, I gotta see.”

“You will. I promise,” Trudy Lynn said, smiling. “He’s my kin. I can always threaten to tell Grandma Earlene if he doesn’t behave. Otherwise, I’ll fire him, just like I did that Randall boy.”

The old man put his cap back on and hesitated, squinting against the bright sunlight. “You be careful who you rile up. So far, all we’ve lost is a few boats. I don’t want to lose you, too.” Smiling wryly he added, “I’d never find another job as easy as this one. Not at my age.”

She chose to take him seriously in spite of his jesting tone. “You be careful, too, you old coot. I’d never find another helper as savvy and hardworking as you are.” Will’s throaty chuckle warmed her heart. “Now get going.”

“Yes, ma’am. You gonna be tending the camp store?”

“No. The new girl’s a fast learner. She can cope with the store. Farley’s had enough training to handle canoe launches by himself till you’re free. As soon as you and Jimmy get that trailer hitched and loaded, bring the truck up here, and I’ll head for Serenity.”

“Yes’m.”

Watching Will shuffle away, Trudy Lynn marveled at his devotion. He was a jewel, all right, but he was no kid. How much longer could he keep working? Every spring she had to train a new batch of local teens because her prior employees had either grown up and moved away or sought better-paying, year-round jobs. Trying to operate both the campground and canoe rental without Will’s steady support seemed like an impossible task.

She huffed in disgust. If the vandalism kept on as it had been—or escalated—she might not have to worry about doing without Will. There wouldn’t be any business left to run.

Once in Serenity, Trudy Lynn decided to stop at Becky Malloy’s to unwind before driving back to camp. She knocked on the screen door of the old stone house and was welcomed with a pleasant, “Come on in! I’m in the kitchen.”

“It’s just me.” She pushed open the screen. “Mmm. Smells good in here. Has your aunt Effie been borrowing your fancy oven to bake again?”

Becky stuck her head around the corner from the kitchen. “Hi there! Nope, I’m the one making the mess. I hope my cookies turn out as good as Effie’s always do. I’ve got company coming tonight.”

“In that case, I won’t keep you,” Trudy Lynn said. “I just stopped by for a little commiseration.”

“I’m getting real good at that. Never dreamed how often I’d be called on to help people now that I’m a pastor’s wife. I’m busier than when I was church secretary.”

“How’s Logan doing? As a preacher, I mean.”

“As well as can be expected. There’ll always be problems. All churches have them, even Serenity Chapel.” She tittered. “Congregations would get along a lot better if they were made up of perfect saints. Unfortunately, there aren’t any of those available.”

“Amen. Which reminds me of why I stopped by,” Trudy Lynn said. “We were vandalized again last night.”

“No way!” Her friend’s mouth fell open. “What happened?”

“Somebody knocked holes in more of my canoes. I just dropped off the rest of the new ones at the storage yard over on Highway 395.”

“That’s unbelievable. What did the sheriff say this time?”

“I haven’t told him yet. Why hurry? He never finds any clues. I figured I’d stop by his office while I’m in town and fill him in.”

“Do you want me to ask Logan to look into it for you?” Becky asked.

“And distract him from his church work? Absolutely not. He’s not a detective anymore. Besides, he never did have connections around here—and I doubt anybody back in Chicago has it in for me.”

“You’re probably right about that.” A timer dinged and Becky went to the oven to remove a sheet of finished cookies and replace it with another that was ready to bake. “Well, if you change your mind, all you have to do is ask,” she said, resetting the timer.

“I know. Thanks.” Trudy Lynn eyed the tray. “I could be talked into tasting a few of those if you have extra. I was so upset I forgot to eat breakfast.”

“How about having a cup of tea with me, too? I need a break. I’ve been at this all morning.”

“Sure.” Trudy Lynn got two mugs from the cupboard and added tea bags while her friend put a kettle of water on to boil. “So, who are you expecting? Must be important to make you go to all this trouble. You hate cooking.”

“I can do anything if I set my mind to it. Dad told me oatmeal raisin cookies are Cody’s favorite so I made lots.”

“Cody? Your brother’s coming?” She felt the flush of her reddening cheeks. “I thought he was long gone.”

“He was.” Sighing, Becky joined her at the table. “He got hurt.”

“Oh, no! When?” Trudy Lynn immediately reached for her friend’s hand. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t even hear about it until yesterday. I guess Cody didn’t want anybody to feel sorry for him. Dad didn’t find out till Cody called and asked if he could spend a few weeks recuperating at his place.”

“How badly was he hurt?”

“Bad enough. His leg was broken. But that’s not the worst part. When he told his girlfriend he might always have a little trouble getting around, she ditched him.”

“The one he told everybody he was going to marry? That’s awful!”

“No kidding. Dad says he’s really down in the dumps. That’s why I invited him here. My father’s at work all day and Cody has nothing to do at Dad’s condo but brood about everything he’s lost. I figure, if he’s here with Logan and me, we can at least keep his mind occupied.”

“What about physical therapy? Won’t that help?”

“It probably would if he hadn’t refused to keep doing it.” Becky made a face. “He is one stubborn Viking.”

“I’d never thought of him that way before. He does kind of look like paintings of Eric the Red. So do you.” She blushed. “The reddish-blond hair part, I mean, not the Viking-raider-swinging-a-sword part.”

“Glad we got that straightened out.” Becky was chuckling. “Why don’t you stop by for supper tonight? Dad will be here and I’ve already invited Carol Sue to keep him company. We could use a fourth. You liked Cody when you met him, didn’t you?”

“Sure, but—”

“Then come. Will won’t mind babysitting your camp for a few hours. I don’t expect the party to last long. Dad wants to head back up north and Cody’ll probably be worn-out, especially after the long drive.”

“What if he’s not up to being in a crowd?”

“Then I’ll just wag my finger in his face and tell him to get over himself, like any spoiled baby sister would.” Her smile grew. “I’ll probably get away with it, too, since we don’t have a lot of history together. At least I hope I will.”

Trudy Lynn thought back to Becky’s odd past, being kept away from her brother and father because of her mother’s lies. She took a bite of warm cookie and chewed thoughtfully before answering, “I hope so, too.”

By the time she’d finally made up her mind on what to wear that evening, Trudy Lynn was disgusted with herself for being so uneasy. She was only having supper at a friend’s house, not going to a real party. It didn’t make any difference what she wore as long as she was presentable.

She made a face as she pulled the camp pickup into Becky’s driveway and parked. Apparently, her subconscious disagreed. She couldn’t recall feeling this concerned about her appearance for ages. Not that she wasn’t always dressed properly, especially on Sunday mornings. She just wasn’t usually as aware of the details, like whether her long, brown hair lay perfectly in place or her nails were neatly filed.

The muted silk dress she’d chosen for that evening was a favorite, partly because it brought out the misty-green of her hazel eyes. An attempt at highlighting her lashes with mascara, however, had had disastrous results. The brush had slipped and her right eye was still smarting.

Peering at her reflection in the truck’s rearview mirror, she ran one finger gently beneath her sore eye. At least it had quit watering so the remaining mascara was no longer making black smudges.

She didn't want Becky's big brother to take one look at her and conclude she'd been the loser in a fistfight!

Thoughts of Cody Keringhoven made her pulse jump. He was handsome, in a rugged sort of way. And when he'd smiled at her and his blue eyes had sparkled so mischievously, she'd tingled all over, in spite of her vow to never get involved with another man.

Funny, Trudy mused, stepping down out of her pickup and starting toward the house. She hadn't thought of Ned, her ex-fiancé, for ages. Perhaps she was finally getting over the disappointment of their breakup. It was high time.

Climbing the porch steps, she was about to knock when Logan pushed open the door and greeted her.

"Trudy Lynn! Glad you could make it. Becky told me she'd invited you."

"Am I early? I didn't see any other cars."

"No. Not at all." He ushered her inside. "Dan drove around back so Cody wouldn't have to wrestle with the front stairs while he's on crutches. Can I get you something to drink? We have iced tea, soda and lemonade."

"Nothing now, thanks. Where is everybody?"

"Becky's in the kitchen, chiseling supper out of the roaster, and Dan's showing Carol Sue the newest model of those fancy cars he sells. The last time I saw Cody he was parked on the couch in the living room. Why don't you go keep him company till everybody else gets back?"

"Maybe I should help your wife?"

"There is no help for her when it comes to cooking," Logan joked. "Besides, that's my job. I've gotten really good at salvaging burned food."

Trudy Lynn took a mock swing at him. "Cynic."

"Realist, you mean. Come on. I'll introduce you to Cody, just in case he doesn't remember meeting you before."

"Oh, that's flattering," she retorted, grinning. "I met him at church, and again right here in this house last Christmas, besides your wedding. If he doesn't remember me after all that, I'll be really disappointed."

They entered the modest living room together. Cody was seated on the brocade sofa with one leg propped stiffly on the coffee table atop a throw pillow. Dejection had affected him so deeply he barely resembled the vital man he'd been. It broke her heart to see such a dramatic, negative change.

Logan made brief small talk, then excused himself.

"Nice to see you again," Trudy Lynn said, trying to sound upbeat.

Cody barely glanced at her. "You'll pardon me if I don't get up?"

"Sure. No problem. Mind if I sit here?"

He shrugged. "It's a free country."

Choosing to ignore his moodiness she perched at the opposite end of the sofa, taking care to avoid bumping the coffee table or his elevated leg. "I'm certainly glad it is. And I'm thankful for the folks who keep it that way, too. Were you in the army like Brother Logan?"

"No."

"Oh." Trudy Lynn tried a different subject. "Becky tells me you guide raft trips."

He glanced at his injured leg, then scowled at her. "I used to."

"You will again."

"Not according to the doctors."

Oh dear. No wonder he was bitter. Becky hadn't told her enough about his injury to keep her from saying the wrong thing and now she had her foot planted firmly in her mouth.

"Have you gotten a second opinion?" she asked, hoping to salvage something encouraging from their conversation.

"What for?"

Trudy Lynn couldn't help the tiny smile that threatened to spread as she said, "To see if the second doctor is as sure about your leg as the first one was? I think that's what second opinions are supposed to do."

"Very funny."

"I figured it was worth a try." Leaning closer, she lightly touched the back of his hand. "Look, Cody, I know you've had it rough lately. We all face problems we can't understand, especially when we're stuck in the middle of them. It's how we let those situations influence us and shape our future that matters."

He pulled his hand away. "You have no idea what I'm facing. Don't preach to me, lady. I get enough of that from my family."

"I see."

Trudy Lynn's initial urge was to apologize and commiserate with him. She quickly decided that would be the worst thing she could do. If he wasn't ready to look for the bright side of his troubles, then so be it. She didn't intend to sit there and argue with him.

Chin up, she got to her feet and smoothed her flowing skirt. "Okay. Have it your way. You can wallow in self-pity all you want. I'm going out to the kitchen to help your sister. It's her I feel sorry for. I can go home. She's going to be stuck here with you for who knows how long."

The last thing she saw as she whirled and flounced from the room was Cody's expression of utter astonishment.

As soon as he was alone, Cody sank back against the sofa cushions. That woman didn't understand. Nobody could. He was still struggling to accept what had happened—and he'd been there—so how could anyone else have a clue as to what he was going through?

That fateful day had seemed perfect for running the rapids. "This is it," he remembered shouting. "Paddles inside!"

The bow of the raft had cut through the high side of the channel and plunged straight into an eddy. Behind him, the Slighman brothers had been whooping it up like the seasoned veterans they were. It was the two younger men in the front of the raft who'd had Cody worried. The guy on the right looked strong enough to bench press a semi truck, but he was acting way too nervous.

"Okay. Brace yourselves," Cody ordered. "Here comes the Widow-maker."

Busy keeping the raft away from submerged rocks, he only half saw his panicky client let go of the safety ropes, drop to the floor and curl into a fetal position.

"No! Get up! You're throwing our balance off!"

The pliable raft's pitch and yaw tossed the loose passenger around like a knot of dirty laundry in an overloaded washing machine. Cody strained to plot a safe course through the approaching cataracts. The trick was to be in the right place at the right time and let the river do the navigating. His biggest concern was how much deviation his passenger's erratic behavior had already caused.

"Sit on the floor and stay there," he roared. "Before you get us all killed."

Cody's muscles strained to master the treacherous river. His lungs labored, his body ached. Determination welded his cold, stiffening fingers to the oars. Squinting, he spotted a narrow, clear path ahead. Thank You, God.

Suddenly, the man he'd ordered to stay on the floor gave a strangled cry and thrust his head over the side. Cody had only two options: make a course correction and hope the water was high enough to skim submerged rocks, or press through narrows where the fool might be decapitated. He chose the rocks.

Blinding spray stung like tiny hailstones. Momentum lifted the raft high on the left side, depressing the right till it was pushed underwater, sick man and all. Helpless to do more, Cody watched his passenger wash over the side. Then, to his enormous relief, he noticed the man's hand was fisted around the safety rope.

“Feet first!” Cody shouted. “Lead with your legs.”

Instead, the frightened man grabbed an oar shaft.

Cody passed his free oar to one of the experienced rafters behind him and dropped to his knees.

“Let go before you wreck us!”

Instead, ice-cold fingers closed around his wrist. Already off balance, Cody was easily jerked out of the raft.

The frigid torrent closed around him, hammered against his chest, stole his breath. Muscles instantly cramped despite the protection of his wet suit. Something was wrong. Very wrong. Plunging into a glacial watercourse like the upper Tuolumne was always a severe shock, but he’d never experienced anything this excruciating.

Nearly out of his head from the knifing pain, he’d gritted his teeth and forced his eyes open. One of the Slighman brothers had taken over the oars and was steering toward shore. He’d thought then that everything would turn out all right.

How wrong he’d been. With every muscle nearly as knotted as it had been during the accident, Cody struggled to free his mind from the past. Perspiration dotted his forehead. He had the same intense reaction every time he was foolish enough to recall the events of that horrible day.

He had to get hold of himself before someone came back into the room and detected his temporary loss of self-control. Closing his eyes, he took a deep, settling breath and purposely visualized how he’d finally surrendered to his pain and had let the river carry him where it would.

Even now, he realized with chagrin, that terrible trip was far from over.

TWO

By the time Trudy Lynn reached the kitchen she was contrite enough to relate her whole conversation with Cody to her hosts. “And then I snapped at the poor guy and told him off. I always babble too much when I don’t know what to say. I feel terrible.”

“Don’t,” Becky said. “Sometimes the best way to show love is to disagree, especially when the other person is wrong. So, how did he take it?”

“I’m not sure. His mouth was still hanging open when I left him.”

“Good.”

“Good?”

Becky nodded sagely. “Sure. He’s a lot more likely to listen to sensible advice coming from someone like you.”

“He did say his family was getting on his nerves. I assumed he meant his father, but I suppose that could include you and Logan, too.”

“Probably. Right now, everything bothers Cody more than it normally would. He’s already gone through plenty.”

“What, exactly, is wrong with his leg? He said he won’t be able to go back to work. Is it that bad?”

“Could be. His knee was smashed. There’s a lot of scarring and stiffness. According to Dad, he’d have to regain a wide range of motion in order to be qualified to guide the kind of trip he loves. Might eventually have to undergo more surgery, too.”

“Oh, dear.” Thoughtful, Trudy Lynn glanced in the direction of the living room. “Now I feel even worse about the way I talked to him.”

Logan chimed in with a smile of encouragement. “Don’t worry. From what I’ve seen so far, Cody can take criticism as well as he can dish it out.”

“He certainly can dish it out.” Trudy Lynn gave Becky a pat of commiseration. “Like I said, it’s you I feel sorriest for. You’ll be stuck here with him.”

“Maybe. Logan had an idea. Until you told us how you stood up to my stubborn brother just now, I didn’t think it would work.”

Trudy Lynn took a step backward. “Whoa. I don’t like the sound of that. What kind of an idea?”

“A brilliant one.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” Looking from Becky to Logan and back, she was struck by how in tune they seemed. Thoughts, expressions and actions meshed as perfectly as if they’d been married for decades instead of mere months.

“Tell you what,” Logan said with a smile, “I’ll go keep Cody occupied while you ladies discuss how we can all work together to help him through this.”

Watching him walk away, Trudy Lynn felt decidedly uneasy. Logan Malloy was not only her pastor, he was married to one of her dearest friends. It was going to be hard to deny either of them anything, even if she hated their idea. And they knew it.

Folding her arms across her chest, she raised an eyebrow at her hostess. “Okay. I can already hear the train whistles, so if you’re going to try to railroad me into doing something, let’s get it over with.”

“It’s just a thought,” Becky insisted. “We don’t expect you to commit yourself right away. All we ask is that you consider doing it.”

“Consider doing what?”

“Hiring Cody.”

Trudy Lynn’s glance darted in the direction of the living room. She lowered her voice. “To do what? He can’t even walk, can he?”

“Not without crutches. But we all know it’s bad for him to sit around and dwell on his problems. If he doesn’t get out and try to do something for himself soon, he may never regain his agility.”

“Okay. Bring him down to the river to visit and I’ll have Will entertain him with stories about the old days. That’ll be plenty distracting.”

“Thanks. I’m sure it will help. But I was thinking about a job.”

“I can’t hire him.” Trudy Lynn was adamant. “I can barely afford the staff I have—and they’re fully capable of doing any job I assign.”

“I understand. It’s all right.”

“No, it isn’t. Why don’t you beg or plead or yell at me or something?”

“I told you there was no pressure,” her friend said. “There isn’t. Logan and I will be glad to take care of Cody for as long as he needs us.”

“Even if he never walks on his own again?” It was almost a whisper.

“Yes,” Becky said. “Even then. I may not have known him when we were children because of my kidnapping but he’s still my brother. I’m not going to give up on him.”

“Wow.” Trudy Lynn gazed at her friend through misty eyes and gave her a brief hug before she spoke from the heart. “I wish I had a sister like you.”

As soon as Becky had finished arranging a platter of roast beef and had filled serving bowls with the rest of the meal, she picked up the two largest dishes and gestured to Trudy with a nod of her head. “Grab those mashed potatoes and bring them along, will you? I’ll come back for the gravy in a sec.”

“No problem. This bowl isn’t that heavy. I can carry the gravy boat, too.”

“Okay. Just be careful, it’s...”

Trudy Lynn didn’t hear the rest of Becky’s comment because her voice had been muted when she’d passed through the archway to the dining room. Oh, well. At least they were through talking about Cody’s problems. That was a relief.

Following her hostess, Trudy was surprised and happy to note that the injured man was up and about. Logan hovered close behind him, obviously ready to assist if Cody had difficulty managing his crutches in the crowded room. Dan and Carol Sue another of the Malloy’s friends from church, had already taken their seats on the opposite side of the beautifully set table and seemed engrossed in a private conversation.

Cody approached laboriously. Pausing to let him pass, Trudy Lynn smiled for his benefit. She knew she had to continue to treat him as if he were just like everyone else. The hardest part was subduing the tender feelings that welled up every time she looked into his eyes and read the depth of his suffering.

Still carrying the food she’d brought from the kitchen, she stepped back to give him extra room to pass. On the opposite side of the table, Becky gasped.

Scowling, Trudy Lynn gave her friend a questioning glance and mouthed, “What?” Was she still too close? She thought she’d allowed Cody adequate space to get by, even with his crutches, so why was Becky acting nervous?

Drawing back, Trudy felt her heel hit the base of the wall. The only way to get completely out of Cody’s path now would be to duck back into the kitchen. Regrettably, she’d sidled away from the doorway while trying to accommodate him. There was no easy exit.

She pressed her back against the wall as he started to pass and raised both arms, meaning only to carefully lift the potatoes and gravy out of harm’s way.

Becky shouted, “Be careful!”

Startled, Cody faltered.

Trudy Lynn followed her friend's line of sight. If the pitcher and saucer of the gravy server had been one unit, the way she'd assumed they were, she'd have had everything under control. Unfortunately, they were two separate pieces. And the gravy-filled section was starting to slide!

She had only an instant to make a correction. Cody was too close! She had to protect him, even if that meant absorbing the worst of the mishap herself.

Dropping her arm, she pushed the leading edge of the saucer forward and gave it a quick flip. That wasn't enough to right the shallow pitcher but it did alter its trajectory and keep its contents from showering the injured man.

Everyone was shouting. Trudy couldn't use both hands to halt the spill because she was still holding the bowl of mashed potatoes. Her only recourse was to press the small pitcher against her chest and wait for rescue. Thankfully, the discussion in the kitchen had delayed the meal long enough to cool and thicken the gravy.

Cody quickly tucked one crutch under his arm and reached for the potatoes. "Here. Give me that."

"Gladly."

"Are you all right?"

She answered without looking at him. Now that she had a free hand she was focused on wiping globs of gravy off her bodice and catching them without dripping on the carpet. The task was daunting as well as disgustingly messy. "I've been better," she said wryly. "How about you?"

"Never touched me. I hope that dress isn't a favorite."

"Actually, it was." His undertone of mirth caused her to pause and look up. Amazingly, the corners of his mouth were starting to twitch into a smile. "I thought it matched my eyes."

"Only if they're part brown," Cody replied. He inclined his head to study her more closely. "They are kind of brown, with specks of green and maybe a little blue. The right one looks irritated. Did you burn it just now?"

Trudy Lynn made a face. Considering the state she was already in there was no use keeping up any pretense of poise or refinement. "No. The gravy wasn't that hot. If you must know, I jabbed myself in the eye with a mascara brush when I was getting ready to come over here."

"Are you always this accident-prone?"

"Not usually. I did want to be entertaining tonight, though. How am I doing?"

"Pretty good, actually."

The humor in Cody's voice reflected his smile and warmed her heart. "Glad to hear it." Her gaze briefly passed over the others and returned to him. "I'm sorry I made such a mess. If everyone will please excuse me, I think I'll go see if I can salvage my dignity—and my dress."

Her hostess had dashed to the kitchen for a handful of paper towels and was thrusting them at her. "Here. Blot."

Trudy Lynn shook her head. "It's too late for that. Just stand back so I can make a run for it before I start dripping on your floor."

"I'm not worried about the carpet," Becky said. "I'm worried about you. Want me to come help you get cleaned up?"

"No. Stay with your guests. And please don't wait dinner for me. The way my clothes feel right now I'll probably give up and go home anyway."

"And miss my sister's infamous cooking?" Cody asked, still smiling. "They tell me she's been working on this meal all day."

"I know. I can't apologize enough for being such a klutz." Starting to turn away she paused and stared directly at Cody. Careful to deliver her remarks with a straight face she added, "Even if my dress was okay I probably wouldn't stay to eat. I don't much care for roast beef and mashed potatoes without lots of gravy."

She could hear him chuckling softly as she hurried from the room. Good. At least one positive thing had come out of the worst social disaster of her life.

Reaching the guest bathroom on the ground floor, Trudy Lynn heard a ruckus behind her. Poor Becky. It sounded as if there was more trouble brewing.

She was turning the knob to open the closed bathroom door when Cody's strong, deep voice rose above the clamor.

"No!" he shouted. "Don't open that door!"

What a strange thing to shout, Trudy Lynn mused. She knew Cody couldn't be yelling at her. All the guests and their hosts were accounted for in the other room, so she certainly wouldn't be intruding on anyone. The sooner she got her dress rinsed out and could assess the damage, the happier she'd be.

An odd clumping sound echoed in the hallway. Ignoring it, she stepped into the bathroom and shut the door. Her eyes widened. Her breath caught. She wasn't alone.

An animal as big and furry as a black bear was napping on the floor. Before she could decide what to do, the creature opened its warm brown eyes, saw her, yawned and began to pant.

"You're a dog?" Trudy whispered. Her voice rose as she realized she was right. "You're a dog. What a relief!"

The animal apparently took her words as an invitation. It leaped to its feet with a lot more agility than she'd imagined anything that size could possess and in one lumbering, tail-wagging stride was crowding against her, clearly begging for attention.

Deciding to assert authority before the situation got out of control, she said, "Good boy. Settle down," and tried to push the overly affectionate canine away.

Using her hands was a mistake. The dog took one whiff of the traces of gravy on her fingers and proceeded to lick them with a pink tongue as wide as her palm.

Trudy giggled. "Hey, that tickles."

To her delight, the dog cocked its head and looked up at her as if it were in on the joke. Its nostrils twitched, sniffing the air. "Oh, no. Not the dress," she said firmly. "If you want any more gravy you'll have to wait till I bring you some in a dish."

The impromptu training session was going quite well until Cody banged on the door.

"What?" Trudy Lynn called.

"Are you okay?"

"Of course."

"Stand back. I'm coming in."

The sound of his voice had already excited the dog so much it was spinning in circles. When he burst through the door, it raised on its hind legs and put its broad front feet on Trudy Lynn's shoulders, bringing their faces nose-to-nose.

She twisted away. "Phew! Dog breath. Down boy."

"Sailor. Stop that." Cody gave the dog's collar a tug. It landed on all four feet with a soft thump.

Once again, Trudy Lynn held out her hands to her new canine buddy and let him lick her fingers. "He wasn't hurting anything. We were getting along fine till you showed up and distracted him."

"Nonsense. Sailor only listens to me. I took him to obedience school, but he's been a lot harder to manage since I got hurt."

"I'm not surprised. You've probably been acting overly cautious and he's sensing an opening to become the alpha dog. He'll gladly be the boss if you let him."

"You're crazy. He knows I'm still in charge." Cody tried to grab the dog's collar again and was almost pulled off balance for his trouble. "Go on. Get out of here," he told her gruffly. "I can handle this."

“Oh really?” Forgetting her stained dress and disheveled appearance, Trudy Lynn faced him, hands fisted on her hips. “And who’s going to handle you when you wind up in a heap on the floor or break your leg all over again? It won’t be your dog’s fault if that happens. It’ll be yours.”

Sailor had left his arguing companions and was cavorting around the cramped room like a hamster in an exercise wheel. A very large hamster. In a very small wheel.

“Sailor. Get over here,” Cody demanded.

The dog looked at him as if to say, You’ve got to be kidding. I’m having too much fun.

Trudy Lynn stepped forward and calmly said, “Sailor?” She pointed to the floor at her feet. “Come here.” As soon as he obeyed she added, “Good boy. Sit.”

“Beginner’s luck,” Cody muttered.

“Maybe.” She nodded toward the door. “You go first. I’ve decided to wash in the upstairs bathroom, instead.”

“Good decision.”

As soon as they were both safely in the hall and the dog was isolated in the bathroom again, Trudy apologized. “I didn’t mean to usurp your authority. I just wanted to show you how being firm will work with a big lummo like that. He’s a Newfoundland, isn’t he? I love him. I saw one like that win Best-in-Show at Westminster a few years ago.”

“Yes. I’d heard they were an easy breed to train. Too bad Sailor’s not as intelligent as he’s supposed to be.”

“Oh, I don’t know. He’s smart enough to have you buffaloed.”

“I told you. It’s different since I’ve been on these stupid crutches.”

“I imagine a lot of things are,” Trudy Lynn said. “And since I know you don’t want to hear my opinion about making adjustments to change, I’ll save my breath.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Are you about ready to eat?”

She glanced at her dress and grimaced. “I refuse to come to the table looking like this. Folks in Serenity may be relaxed and casual, but this outfit is way over the top. Give your sister my regrets, will you?”

“Nope.”

“What?”

“You heard me. I’m trying your training method. No.”

“That’s for dogs, not people.”

“Whatever works. Becky can loan you some clean clothes if you want. She’s already warned us we’ll sit there and wait for you till we starve, if necessary.”

“It would serve her right if I came to the table just like this,” Trudy Lynn said with disgust.

“That’s okay by me,” Cody drawled, raising an eyebrow and looking her up and down before breaking out in a quirky smile. “I think you should consider changing, though. Sailor’s losing his winter coat. I don’t mind gravy stains, but that black dog hair all over your skirt is probably a bit much, even for laid-back folks like Becky and Logan.”

In the end, Trudy Lynn gave in and accepted an oversize shirt and slacks from her friend’s closet. Hurrying to the table, she was relieved to see that the others had already begun to fill their plates.

Becky quickly explained. “Dad has to get going soon, so we finally started without you. I’m sorry.”

“Not a problem,” Trudy Lynn replied, smiling across the table at the older man. “Why don’t you stay over and leave in the morning when you’re not so tired? I know it’s a long drive.” She shot a quick wink at the woman seated beside him. “Besides, I’m sure Carol Sue would like to get to know you better. She’s a widow, you know.”

“Can’t. Cody’s going to need the extra bed,” Dan said pleasantly. “I suppose I could get a room at a motel.”

“Absolutely not.” Becky was adamant. “If you want to stay over we’ll make a place for you here. Somehow.”

“Or, I could put him up,” Trudy Lynn offered. She took a spoonful of mashed potatoes, then set the bowl down. “I almost always have a few empty cabins, Dan. If you stayed overnight at my campground, maybe you could help us by listening for the vandal who’s been wrecking my canoes.”

The platter of meat came her way and she grasped it firmly. Fork raised to choose a slice, she suddenly froze in midmotion. Her gaze met Becky’s, then darted to Cody and lingered.

He noticed immediately and scowled. “What?”

“Just thinking,” Trudy Lynn said.

“About what? Have I missed something?”

“No. I was just wondering. I do have some available cabins, like I said, and I could use help. Would you be interested in spending some time at my campground?”

Cody cast a disgusted look at the crutches he’d propped against the wall. “Doing what?”

Her growing enthusiasm made Trudy Lynn grin in spite of his dour expression. This was the answer to everyone’s prayers, including her own. “Watching. I can use an extra pair of eyes. That’s all you’d have to do. In exchange, I’d give you free room and board.”

“I can get the same deal right here,” he argued.

“Okay. What about Sailor? I have a river and woods for him to explore that are far from dangerous traffic. And you’ll get a rustic cabin he can’t possibly hurt, even if he sheds a truckload of hair. It’s perfect. How can you turn down an offer like that? Your poor dog can’t spend weeks shut up in a bathroom.”

“I know.” Cody was pensive. “What’s the terrain like?”

“Flat, mostly. My basic operation is down by the Spring River on an old floodplain. You’ll have to climb to get to the camp store, but if you need groceries or anything, I’ll be glad to bring them to you.”

“It might work.” He looked to his sister. “I know you had your heart set on having me stay here. At least you did until you found out I was bringing my dog. Would you be too upset if Sailor and I spent a little time roughing it?”

“Well, I suppose it would be okay, if that’s what you want. A city lot with no fence isn’t a good place for a dog. I’d hate to have to chain him up to keep him safe.”

Trudy could tell her friend was having a terrible time suppressing a satisfied grin. No wonder. Becky and Logan were getting everything they’d asked for, with one notable exception.

“There is a small catch,” Trudy Lynn said seriously. “I can’t pay you anything. I’m sorry.”

“When I worked, it wasn’t because I had to, it was because I loved my job,” Cody replied. “I have some investments that provide income. If you have Internet access I can tap into once a week, I’ll have everything I need.”

“I do! My cousin Jim uses it all the time. He keeps the camp books for me.” She smiled and arched an eyebrow. “I hate math. Give me a sunny afternoon, a picnic lunch, a cool river for swimming or canoeing and I’m as happy as can be.”

It wasn’t until Cody clenched his jaw and looked away that she realized how her innocent banter must have hurt him. Granted, her stretch of the Spring River wasn’t a thrilling rapids but the comparison was there just the same. She’d have to remember to watch what she said, at least for a while. There was healing for Cody Keringhoven in the peaceful beauty of her campground. She could sense it. That was the most important thing.

And if he actually managed to help identify the vandal who’d been plaguing her lately? Trudy Lynn bowed her head and let her hair swing against her cheeks to hide her insightful smile. If that

did happen, she might consider his success a very surprising answer to prayer, but she wasn't going to hold her breath waiting for it.

THREE

Getting Sailor into the back of her truck hadn't been nearly as difficult as Trudy Lynn had imagined it would be. Loading his master into the front seat, however, had turned out to be a real trial. Cody's behavior had been far too stoic to suit her. There was no way to tell if she'd accidentally caused him pain in spite of her monumental efforts to be careful, and that upset her greatly.

"You don't have to pretend you're invincible when you're around me," she told him after they were underway. "I'm not your sister or your father. If your leg hurts, I expect you to say so. I want to know what you're thinking."

"No, you don't. You may think you do, but you don't."

"Try me."

"Not in a million years, lady."

"I'm only trying to help. Why do you insist on being so difficult?"

"I'm not hard to get along with. All I want is to be left alone. I thought you'd figured that out. Isn't that why you offered me a free cabin? To get my sister off the hook and give me some privacy."

"That was part of the reason."

He huffed. "You don't think I bought that crazy story about vandalism, do you?"

"It's not a crazy story. It's true. I've had six new canoes ruined already." She absently kneaded the back of her neck as they drove farther from the heart of Serenity. "I get a headache every time I start to think about it."

"Headaches? Hah!"

The irony and contempt coloring his otherwise simple exclamation made Trudy Lynn stare. Cody was shaking his head and peering out the window as if he could see something terrible hidden in the darkness. Something invisible to her.

She was about to ask him if the bumpy road was bothering his leg when he shivered, then said quietly, "If you think a few wrecked canoes can give you a headache, you ought to try killing somebody, like I did, and see how much it hurts."

Trudy Lynn didn't know how to respond to his startling confession so she said nothing. Chances were, Cody was referring to an accidental death. She wasn't going to press him about it. Not yet. There would be plenty of time to assess the root cause of his depression after they became friends. And they would be friends, she decided. Even if she had to beat him over the head with tough love and kill him with kindness!

That thought made her want to smile. She would have surrendered to the urge if she hadn't been worried about giving Cody the wrong impression. The last thing the poor guy needed was to think she was laughing at his plight.

The most entertaining element of their situation was her own reactions to everything about him. It had been a long time since anyone had flustered her enough to bring out her klutzy side, nor had she been this personally interested in any man for ages. She wasn't a prude. She was simply fed up with exaggerated male egos, thanks mainly to her recent disappointment in the one person she'd thought she could trust to be faithful. Ned's disloyalty had taken her completely by surprise. Thus, she no longer trusted her instincts the way she used to.

Cody had been staring at her ever since he'd dropped his bombshell. "Well? Aren't you going to say anything?"

"About what?" Trudy Lynn huffed. "If you think I'm going to stick my nose into something that's none of my business, you have another think coming." One eyebrow arched and she gave him a cursory glance. "However, if you want to tell me what happened, I'll be happy to listen."

"Never mind."

“Okay.” She shrugged and concentrated on the curving road ahead.

“You really aren’t curious? I mean, suppose I’m dangerous?”

That brought a soft chuckle. “If I thought you were, I wouldn’t be here with you.”

Cody agreed. “If I had my choice, I wouldn’t be here with me, either.”

“That might be a little hard to accomplish.”

“No lie.” He was slowly shaking his head. “You know, as many times as I’ve gone over that day in my mind, I still haven’t figured out what I could have done to avert the accident.”

“Maybe it was meant to be.” Trudy Lynn saw his fists clench, so she elaborated. “What I mean is, maybe there wasn’t anything that could have been done, at least not on your part. Most disasters are the result of a combination of errors. You can’t hold yourself totally responsible.”

Cody snorted in disgust. “Maybe not, but the dead man’s relatives sure blame me plenty.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Have they been giving you a lot of grief?”

“Not as much as they’ve said they’re going to give me. I’ve been warned I’ll be sued. And so will the tour company I used to work for.”

“What did happen, exactly?”

He gave her a swift, telling glance. “I thought you weren’t interested.”

“Hey, I never said that. I just told you I wasn’t going to pry. You’re the one who kept talking about it.”

“True. I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to get your take on it. You are in sort of the same business.”

Trudy Lynn listened patiently, stifling any urge to interrupt his story by asking for details. By the time he was through, she’d heard enough to clarify the main points and make sensible comments.

“Surely, your clients signed a waiver of responsibility. Even I require that, and my trips aren’t nearly as hazardous as whitewater rafting.”

“Of course they did. The victim signed one just like everybody else. Only he lied about his age. He was big enough to be every bit as old as he claimed.”

“But he wasn’t eighteen?”

“Bingo. Just seventeen.”

“Do you have a lawyer?”

“If I need one. I’m still hoping his family will cool off and not file suit.” He unconsciously rubbed the knotted muscles in his thigh as he spoke. “I did all I could. If my knee hadn’t snapped when he flipped me onto those rocks, I might have been able to save him.”

“You did your best, in spite of being hurt, right?”

“Of course.”

“Well, then...” Trudy Lynn shrugged. “What more do you want from yourself?”

The look of disdain Cody shot at her was a clear rebuke. Trudy Lynn took her hands off the wheel long enough to hold them up in a gesture of surrender. “Okay, okay. No more unsolicited advice. But I’m right, and you know it.”

“Do you always have to have the last word?”

She laughed softly. “I try to.”

Fireflies were blinking a pale, luminescent green welcome when Trudy Lynn pulled through the double gates of her Spring River Campground. Thanks to the lateness of the hour and scarcity of overnight campers this early in the season, the place was unusually quiet.

The dirt drive meandered in a lazy, back-and-forth pattern toward the flats beside the river. “I’ll put you in a cabin near the canoe storage to give you a better view of the area where we’ve had most of our trouble,” she told Cody.

“You were serious?”

“Very. I really do need someone to watch for vandals.” She smiled over at him. “And, yes, I actually do have that problem, in spite of your doubts.”

“Okay by me. Sailor and I will be delighted to stand guard. Figuratively speaking, in my case.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Trudy Lynn said.

Pulling up in front of a darkened cabin she killed the engine, set the parking brake and climbed out. Sailor had been patient till they’d stopped. Now, he was straining at the safety tether that held him in place in the truck bed.

“Just a minute, boy. Settle down,” she said, pausing to give him a pat and ruffle his ears. “Daddy first. Then you.”

She circled in time to meet Cody face-to-face as he braced himself on his crutches and slid off the seat. “I could have helped you do that,” she said.

“I may be crippled but I’m not helpless,” he replied stiffly.

“Good. Then I suppose you can get your own bags?” Her eyebrows arched.

“Gladly.” Cody groped behind the front seat and pulled out both his canvas duffel-type bags, letting them drop to the ground at his feet.

Trudy Lynn reached for one of them. He stopped her with an outstretched hand. “I said, I can handle it.”

“I know what you said. But this is my camp and you’re my guest. I’m not pampering you. I’d offer to help carry anybody’s bags, whether they were able to or not.”

“That’s nice. Tell you what. Why don’t you let Sailor loose before he goes nuts? He gets really agitated if he thinks I’m going to wander off and leave him.”

“I can see that.” Trudy Lynn ordered the Newfoundland to sit before she unfastened the tether and lowered the tailgate. His exuberance in scrambling out almost bowled her over.

The dog had made two galloping circuits of the pickup and had come to a stop at Cody’s feet before Trudy Lynn rejoined him. “Looks like he’s happy now.”

“It doesn’t take much to please Sailor. Food, water and my company. They definitely are a family breed, just not suited to my sister’s fancy new carpet and furniture.”

“Well, we fixed that.”

She was about to reach for his bags again when Cody waved her off. “Wait. Watch this.” He pointed to the strap of the largest one. “Sailor. Bring it.”

The enormous dog took the handle in his mouth gently, as if it were as fragile as a kitten, and, with his bushy tail waving, proudly bore it along while his master headed for the cabin.

“What about the other one?” Trudy Lynn asked.

“He’ll go get that, too.”

She hurried ahead to open the door and flip on the lights. Any worries she’d had that Sailor might get excited and knock his master down were dispelled when she noted how cautiously the lumbering dog proceeded. When the first bag was safely delivered, Cody sent him back for the second.

“Wow. I’m impressed,” Trudy Lynn said. “How did you teach him that?”

“I can’t take credit. He was a natural. From the time he was a pup he carried things around. Loved my socks. I used to leave them on the floor just so he’d have something to pick up and bring to me.”

“A furry valet?”

“Something like that. He added more to the mess than he cleaned up, but his heart was in the right place so I encouraged him.” Cody’s smile widened as Sailor returned with the second bag, mission accomplished, and placed it at his feet. “It would have been a lot nicer if he hadn’t drooled, though.”

“So what? You were going to wash the socks anyway.”

“Right.” He surveyed the one-room cabin approvingly. “Looks cozy. Any special instructions?”

“Not that I can think of. If I’d known anyone was going to be staying here I’d have made up the bed ahead of time.” She was already moving across the room. “It’ll only take me a second.”

“Don’t bother.”

Trudy Lynn sent him a grin over her shoulder as she whipped the plaid bedspread aside, unfurled a clean sheet and bent to her task. “Why? Does your dog make beds, too?”

“Not yet, but I’m working on it.”

“Should be an interesting trick. Especially if you can teach him to stop slobbering while he works.”

Cody made a face. “Yeah. There is that problem.”

“This cabin has its own private bathroom,” Trudy Lynn explained while smoothing out the last wrinkle in the bedding. “Towels are in the cabinet over there. So are more clean sheets if you decide Sailor needs to practice his tucking skills.”

“Thanks. I think I’ll wait on that till we get home.”

“In that case, I’ll say good-night and leave you in peace.”

She was almost to the door when Cody said, “Thank you.”

There was so much true relief in his tone she turned and smiled. “You’re quite welcome. Both of you. I’ll get Sailor’s food and dishes out of the back of the truck before I go. Sleep as late as you want in the morning. When you’re up and about, I’ll introduce you to my staff. There aren’t many of us. Will and I stay overnight. The rest come to work when I need them.”

Cody’s eyebrow arched. “Will? Your boyfriend? Husband?”

“Will’s old enough to be my grandpa,” she said with a subdued chuckle. “There’ve been lots of times when I’ve wished we were kin. I guess old friend describes him best. He takes a real proprietary interest in this place. I don’t know what I’d do without him.”

“I hope he doesn’t mind my staying here.”

“Don’t worry. First thing in the morning, I’ll explain everything to him.”

“While you’re at it, would you mind explaining it to me, too? I’m still not sure how I wound up here.”

“Providence,” Trudy Lynn said with a wide, satisfied grin. “I needed more security and God sent you.”

That brought a wry chuckle from her guest. “If I’m the best God can do, I think you’d better start questioning His wisdom. I have.”

“What an awful thing to say.”

“Maybe. But I meant every word.”

She sobered, eyes wide, and nodded. “I know you did. That’s what makes it a lot worse than it would be if you were joking.”

Cody was so exhausted he didn’t bother to unpack. He sent Sailor outside, briefly, then lay across the bed, fully clothed except for his shoes. The Newf made himself comfortable on the floor and quickly fell asleep.

Sailor snored, as usual, while Cody stared at the rustic pine ceiling and wondered why his dog had so much more peace than he did.

Because he doesn’t think of the future, Cody decided. No worries meant no stress. Too bad he couldn’t share the dog’s easy ability to drop off to sleep anywhere, anytime.

Relating the details of the fatal accident to Trudy Lynn had brought the tragedy vividly to mind for the second time that night. Not that the young man’s death was ever far from his thoughts. That moment would never leave him, never let him rest the way he once had.

Why kept nagging at him, refusing to be rationalized away. Too bad it wasn’t a question that could be solved like a riddle that had an actual solution. There was no answer to his conundrum—at least not one that included the benevolent, loving God he’d sought and believed in as a lonely, motherless child.

In that respect, his sister, Becky, had more faith than he’d ever possessed. He wasn’t about to pretend he still had a strong belief in the Lord, even if that meant he didn’t fit her idea of the perfect

brother. As far as Cody was concerned, God had deserted him. Twice. No, make that three times. First when his mother had been killed, second when he'd prayed for the safety of his clients on the raft while fighting for his own life, and third, when Stephanie had walked away from the love she'd once sworn would last forever.

He looked down at his injured knee. It was throbbing in time with his heartbeats. Must be time for another pain pill, which meant he'd also need a glass of water. Well, so what? Why baby himself? He was going to ache all night anyway, just as he always did. At least the cabin was small enough to hop to the sink without crutches.

He swung his feet over the side of the bed and spoke to Sailor so the dog wouldn't be startled, leap up and topple him. "That's it, old boy. Scoot over. I'll be right back." The thick, black tail thumped on the bare floor.

Cody pulled himself upright by grabbing the headboard and stood quietly for a second to make sure he had his balance. The brace on his knee would keep it from giving out on him but there was always the chance of a sharp pain causing him to falter. He switched on the bedside lamp and started across the room. Seconds later, he heard a throaty growl behind him.

Grabbing the edge of the sink for support he stared at Sailor. The usually amiable, laid-back dog was fully alert. Had the vandals returned? Now that he'd switched on the cabin light, they'd know someone was close by. Would that be enough to scare them away? Cody hoped so.

Leaning against the kitchenette counter, he listened. Other than Sailor's rumbling, silence reigned. Whip-poor-wills had stopped calling to their mates, frogs had ceased their rhythmic chirping, and even the noisy cicadas were still.

He tensed. The first thing he needed to do was grab his crutches so he'd be more mobile. Second, he had to keep Sailor from going on the defensive and getting into trouble.

"Sailor, come," Cody whispered, giving a hand signal as well. Hackles up, the dog had risen and was facing the closed door, clearly standing guard.

"Sailor," he hissed, "get over here."

The protective canine reluctantly obeyed, edging closer until Cody was able to grab his collar.

The door creaked on rusty hinges. The first thing that poked through was the long barrel of a shotgun! Cody tightened his grip on Sailor, braced himself and waited.

A weathered old codger stepped into the room and took shaky aim. The man was clad only in boxer shorts and a sleeveless undershirt. At the ends of his spindly legs, his unlaced hiking boots looked as though they were at least as old as he was. Maybe older.

Before Cody could decide whether to yell at him, surrender, or burst out laughing, the old man commanded, "Freeze, mister. And call off your dog."

"I've been trying to," Cody said. "Don't shoot. We're unarmed." He raised his free hand. "You must be Will."

"What if I am?"

"Trudy Lynn, Ms. Brown, told me about you. She was planning to introduce us in the morning."

"Says who?"

"It's the truth. I'm Becky Malloy's brother, Cody Keringhoven."

"I s'pose you can prove it."

"I have my ID right here." Cody produced his wallet and held it out.

Will motioned with a jerk of his head. "Bring it over here. Real slow."

"That's about the only way I can move." He pointed to the crutches propped at the foot of the bed. "I'll do better if you'll hand me those first."

"You don't look crippled."

"Well, I sure feel it," Cody replied. "I just got up to take a pain pill. Mind if I do?"

“Guess not.” He lowered the muzzle toward the floor so it wasn’t pointing directly at Cody or the dog. “Miz Brown didn’t say nothin’ about puttin’ nobody in this cabin.” He scowled. “We hardly ever rent it, ’specially not this time of year.”

“So she told me. I’m supposed to be watching out for vandals while I’m here. I guess you know all about that.”

“Sure do. That’s what I figured you was when I saw the light.” Bushy gray eyebrows knit. “I tried sittin’ by that there window all night. Couldn’t keep my eyes open. That what you’re plannin’ to do?”

“Not tonight,” Cody said, drawing water and downing his medication. “Dad and I just drove all the way from Chicago. I’m beat. Maybe tomorrow.”

Thumbing the shotgun open to extract the shells, the old man nodded. “Suits me. Sorry if I scared ya. I’m goin’ back to bed. You be all right?”

“Fine. Thanks. See you in the morning?”

“You betcha,” Will said. “In case you’re wonderin’, I’m gonna go talk to Miz Brown before I turn in, see if your story checks.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Cody said with a grin. “She’s lucky to have you.”

“Sure is.” He eyed the now complacent-looking, panting dog. “Big fella, ain’t he? What’s his name?”

“Sailor.”

Will chuckled. “Well, well. Me, too. Spent many a happy year as a merchant seaman before I finally decided to settle down. I take it he loves the water.”

“I think he’d rather swim than eat,” Cody said. “Newfoundlands are related to Labrador retrievers, just bigger and a lot more hairy.”

“That’s the truth. Sure glad he’s yours to feed and not mine. What all does he eat?”

Cody immediately thought of Trudy Lynn’s messy introduction to Sailor’s fondness for beef gravy. Rather than mention it, he laughed then quipped, “Anything that doesn’t eat him first.”

“You’d best watch him around Miz Brown’s little mutt, then. That Widget’s got a nasty attitude.”

“Uh-oh. She never mentioned having a dog.”

“He’s more like family to her. ’Specially since that fiancé of hers, Ned What’s-his-name, took off.” Will grimaced and blushed. “Forget I said anything about that, will you? Don’t want her to think I’m carryin’ tales.”

“We won’t mention it again,” Cody vowed. “I had wondered why she was so fixated on this business. Guess she put all her energies into it after Ned left, huh?”

“Nope,” Will said. “Always was nuts about canoes and camping. This place was perfect for her, right from the start. I think that’s one of the things Ned didn’t take to. Miss Trudy liked the outdoors a lot more’n he did.” He lowered his voice to add, “You ask me, she loved the Ozarks every bit as much as she loved him, maybe more, and he knew it. Didn’t surprise me when their wedding didn’t pan out.”

Cody nodded sagely. “Thanks for telling me. It’ll keep me from putting my foot in my mouth.” He managed another chuckle in spite of the growing discomfort radiating from his sore knee. “Good thing, too. These days, it’s about all I can do to make my feet work together to hold me up. I can’t afford to be chewing on one of them.”

“And I’m standin’ here keepin’ you up and makin’ it worse. Sorry, mister...what’d you say the name was?”

“Just call me Cody. Keringhoven’s too hard to remember.”

“Cody, it is. I’ll look in on you in the mornin’, ’fore I start my chores, case you need anything.”

“Thanks. I’d appreciate that.”

“Glad to do it. Any friend of Miz Brown’s is a friend of mine.”

Nodding, Cody bid him a polite good-night and waited till the door had closed before gritting his teeth. The pain tonight was worse than it had ever been, except perhaps for the hours immediately following the physical therapy sessions he had submitted to while hospitalized.

Seeming to sense his master's need for solace, Sailor licked his hand.

"Yeah, it hurts something awful," Cody admitted. "You know that, don't you?"

Sailor wagged his tail so vigorously his entire rear half swayed.

"Just be sure to keep it to yourself, okay? I don't want my sister and her church ladies fussing over me."

That much was true. Still, he'd agreed to come to Serenity for a recuperation period, knowing Becky would undoubtedly try to meddle and insist she was doing it for his own good.

"I must have been taking way too much pain medication when Dad recommended this trip," Cody muttered. "I can't believe I agreed."

In the back of his mind, however, another idea was jumping up and down and screeching like a squad of teenage cheerleaders at a pep rally. Could Trudy Lynn have been on the right track when she'd mentioned the possibility of divine intervention?

Cody immediately rejected that notion. If God had wanted to intercede on his behalf, He was too late. About two months too late.

He snorted derisively. Make that a whole lifetime too late. Considering all that had happened, there was no way he could ever go back to the unquestioning faith he'd leaned on as a lonely, confused child.

Of all the losses he'd experienced, that loss of faith left him feeling the emptiest.

FOUR

Trudy Lynn made sure she was the first person to knock on Cody's door the following morning. Her arrival was heralded by a chorus of deep woofing and a call of, "Hang on. I'm coming."

Fidgeting, she waited. When Cody opened the door she greeted him with a wide smile and a cheery, "Good morning." His clothes were wrinkled. His day's growth of beard was nearly invisible due to his light coloring but his tousled hair showed he hadn't expected such an early visit.

Nevertheless, he smiled. "I thought you said I could sleep in?"

"I know I did. I'm sorry. I just wanted to apologize for Will. His mistake was my fault. I should have stopped by his cabin last night and told him you were staying here."

"At least he didn't shoot me. Or my dog."

"Thank God—literally." She pointed to Sailor who was sitting behind Cody and panting so heartily he looked as if he was smiling. "Want me to walk him for you?"

"Not a good idea. He hates leashes. He'd probably wind up walking you. Besides, he's already been out once this morning. You're not the only one who's an early riser. My furry friend got me up at dawn."

"Did you rest okay? Is the bed soft enough?"

Cody nodded. "Actually, it's almost too soft. The less I accidentally move while I'm sleeping, the better."

"How about now? How are you feeling?"

"Fine."

Trudy Lynn could tell he was far from fine but she figured, if he wanted to deny his pain, that was okay with her. Dwelling on it was probably worse for him, anyway.

"Glad to hear it. Have you eaten?"

"No. To tell you the truth, I haven't even brushed my teeth yet." He rubbed his palm over his cheek. "Feels like I need a shave, too."

"And a change of clothes. Did you sleep in those? They look like it."

"Sure did. After your friend Will scared us silly, I didn't have enough energy left to get ready for bed." He glanced at his dog with affection. "Sailor was a great watchdog. Stood right in front of me and kept the dangerous old codger at bay."

"Poor Will," Trudy Lynn said. "He was really disappointed when he discovered you weren't the bad guys, come to ransack a cabin."

"I hope he put on more clothes before he went to your place to tell you about it. When he showed up here he was dressed in boxers and hiking boots. If he hadn't been pointing a gun at me I'd have laughed out loud. He has the skinniest, ugliest legs I've ever seen, except maybe on a scrawny chicken."

"That's because you haven't seen mine." Trudy Lynn was instantly sorry she'd been so glib. Cody was now looking her up and down as if he'd just discovered she was a woman, and she didn't like the awareness his assessing blue eyes revealed.

"You look nice in those jeans," he finally said.

Flustered, she averted her gaze and unnecessarily smoothed the denim. "Thanks. Now, about breakfast. How soon do you think you can be ready?"

"Ready? Ready for what?"

"The best biscuits and gravy in Fulton County."

"Are you asking me to go out to breakfast?"

"No." Her brow wrinkled. "I'm cooking. Actually, it's all made. I took the biscuits out of the oven before I came down here." She brightened. "Oh, I get it. You're thinking of your sister's cooking. Don't worry. Mine has won prizes at the county fair."

“That’s a relief. But really, you don’t have to coddle me. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

“I know that.” She rolled her eyes. “Look, Cody. You might as well get used to folks being nice to you for no particular reason. Around here, people are friendly, period. It’s not because you have a problem or because we feel sorry for you. Okay?”

“Okay.” He shrugged. “I am a little hungry. How far is it to your place? Up the hill, right?”

“Right. But don’t try to walk it.” Trudy Lynn pointed to a squat, green, four-wheel-drive vehicle parked in the drive. “I’ll do a few chores, then bring the ATV back and pick you up. How much time will you need to get ready?”

“Ready to ride that? About six months should do it.”

“Cynic. I’ll do the driving. All you’ll have to do is shut up and hang on.”

His wry expression when he said, “That’s what I was afraid of,” was so funny she couldn’t help laughing.

Cody managed to shower and shave in short order. He didn’t think it would hurt to humor Trudy Lynn just this once. Besides, he wanted a chance to ask her more about the vandalism before he got Will’s opinion. He knew there wasn’t a whole lot he could do to apprehend whoever had been damaging the canoes but there was no reason he couldn’t at least try to get a description of them for the police. To his surprise, he was looking forward to having something constructive to occupy his mind for a change.

He was positive that he’d be able to mount the ATV successfully. How he’d stay on it once they were moving promised to be a bit trickier.

Trudy Lynn arrived in a cloud of dust and slid to a stop right in front of him. “Hop on.”

“What about my crutches?”

“We’ll clip them across the rack with a bungee cord. Come on. Gravy’s getting cold.”

Cody got on easily by keeping his injured leg straight and swinging it around and over, brace and all. Once he was in position behind Trudy Lynn, however, he was faced with the decision of whether or not he should slip his arms around her waist. His balance was off due to the knee brace and he didn’t want to wind up flat on his back in the dirt, yet he hardly knew the young woman.

“You’d better hang on to me,” she said, solving his dilemma. “This road’s kind of bumpy.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Not at all,” Trudy Lynn said. “I trust you.”

“Thanks.”

Cody did as she’d instructed, keeping his touch as light and gentlemanly as he could. Only in an emergency would he tighten his hold, he promised himself. Grabbing her like that would be a last resort.

It was a narrow waist, he noted. Yet Trudy Lynn wasn’t delicate or prissy the way Stephanie had been. She was a healthy, active woman who treated men as equals, neither elevating them to sainthood nor denigrating them for being male. Though her casual acceptance was going to take some getting used to, he found he liked it, liked keeping company with a woman who had no hidden agenda. Trudy Lynn wasn’t the type who picked out an engagement ring and started making wedding plans by the second date.

Whoa! Where had that thought come from? He didn’t intend to start dating anyone for a while, especially not his sister’s best friend. He’d been cured of any tendencies toward romance when Steph had dumped him. Besides, according to Will, Trudy Lynn was sort of in the same boat. Maybe that was why being with her seemed so pleasant. It was a welcome change to relax and not have to worry about whether or not he should consider a lasting relationship—or try to keep one from developing.

She broke into his thoughts with a question. “How’re you doing? Am I going too fast?”

"I'm fine." Out of the corner of his eye he saw a dark blur. "Uh-oh. I must not have shut the cabin door tight. We have company. Sailor came along."

"That's okay," Trudy Lynn said, raising her voice to be heard over the roar of the ATV's motor. "He's a sweetheart. I'm sure he won't be any trouble. He might pick up a few bugs if he wanders into the woods but you can always wet him down with flea and tick repellant if you have to."

"Does the stuff come in fifty-five gallon drums?" Her light laughter drifted back to him on the wind, lifting his spirits further.

"It must. They dip sheep, don't they?"

"Guess so. Since I won't be able to wrestle him into accepting the treatment, I'll have to leave it to you."

"In that case, we'll get him a flea collar instead. We can always fasten two together, end to end, if we can't find one big enough to go all the way around his neck."

"Clever. Are you always this smart?"

"Sure am."

She stopped the ATV beside a single-story offshoot tied to a larger, log building. "That's our store, camp office and laundry. I got tired of having to run over here to take care of late arrivals, so I built myself a connected apartment. Might as well live here. I'm on call night and day, anyway."

"It's very impressive," Cody said. "The whole campground is. No wonder you're proud of this place." The small yard bordering the private portion of the building was bursting with color. "I see you like to garden."

"Not if I have to fuss much. Those are all wildflowers that I've either transplanted from other parts of the property or started from seed. It seems like every day I notice something new starting to bloom." She shut off the engine. "Do you want to get off first or shall I?"

"Better hand me my crutches before I try anything fancy," Cody answered.

"Right." She giggled when Sailor galloped up and slurped the back of her hand. "I guess he remembers me."

Before Cody could answer, a yipping ball of brown-and-white fur raced around the corner. Teeth bared, it charged straight for the clueless Newfoundland.

Trudy Lynn screeched, "Widget! No!" and lunged, half on and half off the ATV, to intercept her little terrier. She'd have been successful, too, if Sailor hadn't practically bowled her over making his lumbering getaway.

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