



TARA TAYLOR QUINN

"Tara Taylor Quinn's deeply felt stories of
romance and family will warm your heart."
—Jennifer Crusie, national
bestselling author

SHELTERED IN HIS ARMS

Tara Quinn

Sheltered in His Arms

«HarperCollins»

Quinn T. T.

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Sam Montford left Shelter Valley ten years ago. He's a direct descendant of the town's founder, the first Samuel Montford, and for him, Shelter Valley's expectations had become oppressive. Home had become smothering instead of sheltering. Sam returns to the town—and to his ex-wife, Cassie Tate—with a seven-year-old child. This is a complete shock to Cassie. When Sam left, he hadn't known she was pregnant. Or that she had lost their baby. Sam's back in Shelter Valley now, back to stay. But he refuses to become the man people expected him to be ten years ago. Can he be the man Cassie needs now?

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Dear Reader,

Welcome home! Even if you've never been to Shelter Valley before, you'll soon realize you've got a home here. Anyone with a big heart is welcome in this Arizona town, where folks look out for each other, sometimes struggle with each other, always share each other's pains and triumphs.

It's an especially exciting time here because Shelter Valley's own prodigal son, Sam Montford IV, heir to the town's founding family, is finally returning home after ten years of silence. And he's not alone. He has a seven-year-old daughter with him. His ex-wife, whom he still loves and who still loves him, is single and living in Shelter Valley again. Could be the makings of a happily-ever-after...

What I hope will really make you feel at home is the fact that all is not perfect in Shelter Valley. Just like anywhere in the world. We all have faults. And sometimes finding them in others is comforting, makes them more like us, allowing us to relate to them more easily. Sam Montford made a substantial mistake. But he's ready to atone for that mistake and to share with Shelter Valley the good things he's created in his life. He asks only to be forgiven.

And in Shelter Valley he has a chance of finding that forgiveness. This is the gift I wish for you—a true home, a sheltering home. A home where love is unconditional, acceptance a promise kept and forgiveness a reality.

Sweet dreams,

Tara Taylor Quinn

Tara Taylor Quinn is a popular writer for Harlequin's Superromance series; she is known for her deeply emotional and psychologically astute novels. *Sheltered in His Arms* is connected to her successful Superromance trilogy, "Shelter Valley Stories" (but of course can be read on its own).

Tara was first published in 1993 and has been a finalist for the prestigious RITA Award. She lives in Arizona with her husband and daughter. Besides being a full-time writer, Tara is a board member of Romance Writers of America.

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Sheltered in His Arms

Tara Taylor Quinn



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Shelter Valley is about friendships, the kind that go beyond the ordinary. It's about friends who become a family all their own. I lovingly dedicate this book to the three such friends I've been blessed with in my life:

Jeanine Lynn Clayton (1960-2000).

My childhood soul mate. An integral part of my life that transcends the tragedy this temporal existence handed us. Your life was and always will be a part of me. With me. Sitting on my shoulder.

Kevin Scott Reames.

My partner, my champion, my lover. You helped me find the me I was meant to become and loved the person who emerged. Together, forever. That's me and you.

Patricia Anne Meredith.

My own private angel. You continue to teach me to believe in things that matter, to hope, to find good in the world around me. Just as you do. My eternal soul mate.

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CHAPTER ONE

HER HIGH-HEELED evening sandals hadn't been made for sprinting across gravel. And the Montfords' desert landscaping was full of it. The darkness made things even worse.

But she had to get away—get out. She had to handle this news alone.

There was an old gnarled pepper tree in the corner of the yard and she hurried toward it. One branch had grown sideways, forming a natural bench with the other branches hanging down around it. Because of the balmy late-March weather they'd been enjoying in Shelter Valley, the tree was thickly covered with leaves. She could safely hide there.

For the moment. Until someone decided to turn on the outside lights.

"Ouch!" Cassie Tate's headlong rush from the house halted abruptly.

Damn!

She bent to pull a cactus needle from her shin. One quick jerk—a sting—and it was gone. When had her ex-in-laws gotten that cholla plant? It hadn't been there a few months ago, when she'd been over for a Christmas drink and gift exchange with them.

Unmindful of her new silk dress, Cassie slid onto the rough bark of the branch, its horizontal shape familiar to her. The first time Sam had ever kissed her had been right here...

Cassie looked around, her hands poised on the trunk as though she were ready to push off. Maybe it had been a mistake to come out here.

But where else could she go? The backyard was enclosed with an eight-foot-high stucco wall. She couldn't get out front—and to her car—without walking through the house.

Breathe, she reminded herself. She filled her lungs as much as her tight chest muscles would allow.

She had to be calm. To assimilate what she'd just heard. And what she was going to do about it.

One thing was for certain. She wasn't going to cry. She'd cried enough tears for Samuel Montford.

Glancing through the leaves surrounding her, toward the house where strains of piano music wafted from the living room, Cassie could see the lights of the party twinkling merrily. As though everything was normal.

And maybe for all those people in there, things were just fine.

Maybe all of them could welcome Sam home after his ten-year desertion. Maybe they could forgive. Forget.

Maybe she could, too. If she had a million years to try.

Sitting out here, on their tree, her mind wandered back to the boy she'd known and loved with all her heart. She thought of the passionate dreams he'd poured out to her beneath these branches. He'd wanted to save the world back in those days. Get rid of poverty, pain, injustice.

He'd promised to love her forever.

"Oh, God, Sam. Why?"

Her words sounded shockingly loud in the night. Cassie took a long, shuddering breath. How many times had she asked the same question over the past ten years?

"Can't you at least just leave me in peace?" she whispered, tears pooling in her eyes.

She used to dream of great things. Of love and family and children. Of happiness and warmth. Now all she hoped for was peace. It was the only option left.

"Cassie? You out here?"

It was Zack. Her partner. Her friend. He'd know how she was feeling. Without her saying a word, he'd know.

His footsteps were getting closer. Cassie pulled herself in, hardly daring to breathe as she waited for him to pass. She couldn't face him yet. Couldn't face anyone.

Not until she was sure she wouldn't fall apart. She'd done that once, back then, suffered a debilitating breakdown, and emotional collapse.

She'd done it after Sam had left her, after her baby girl had died, after she'd been told she'd probably never be able to conceive again.

But those dark days had helped her find the strength and awareness she needed. She'd gone on to finish college, to become a nationally renowned doctor of veterinary science. She was successful. She wasn't going to fall apart again just because her adulterous ex-husband had decided to return to town.

Though she couldn't help wondering why he was coming back. The way she remembered it, he hadn't been able to leave fast enough. And he hadn't been in touch with any of them since—other than infrequent calls to his parents to let them know he was okay. And to make certain that they were.

What had he been doing all these years? And with whom?

These were questions Cassie had tried so hard never to ask.

What had the years done to him? Another question she'd shied away from. But one that was apparently to be answered soon.

Were his eyes still that deep green? Did they still have that penetrating directness? Her stomach tightened just thinking about them. About what a look from him used to do to her.

One time, she'd been looking for him in the high-school cafeteria. Her class right before lunch had gotten out late and she hadn't seen him in line. She'd gone through, anyway. Bought a salad and a soda, and was standing there with her tray, wondering what to do when she'd seen him come in through the door at the back of the room. He'd been frowning—until he saw her. And then his eyes had lighted with such familiar, knowing warmth that her belly had fluttered, her knees had fluttered—and she'd dropped her tray.

Sam had always been a looker. Was he still?

Was his dark hair still as soft as the finest silk, still as thick?

Did he have any of the wrinkles she'd been noticing around her own eyes lately? Had he gained any weight?

Sniffing, Cassie wiped the tears from her cheeks. God, she missed him.

Missed the boy she'd loved since she was twelve years old. The man she'd married—and lost—more than a decade ago.

She missed the dreams. And the dreaming.

"Damn you, Sam Montford," she whispered, sniffing again. "Damn you for what you did. And for coming back now..."

The man might return to Shelter Valley, but as far as Cassie was concerned, he'd lost the right to call this town home.

MARIAH WAS STILL ASLEEP. Sam's heart swelled with love—and worry—as he glanced over at the child on the reclining passenger seat beside him. He should have sold the truck, bought a car. Something she could get into without climbing up on hands and knees.

Something that felt more like it belonged to a family than a roaming man.

Mariah might not know it, might not believe him when he told her, but they were almost home. At last.

In all the years he'd lived in Shelter Valley, the place had never felt as much like home as it did now. This journey back was so important. So life-changing. So right.

And so damn scary.

But he was ready.

The little girl stirred, her skinny legs stiffening as she stretched. Their boniness, visible beneath her new denim shorts, scared him. She'd been wearing pants all winter, and her loss of weight hadn't been as noticeable. Or maybe he'd just been too afraid to acknowledge that she was wasting away.

He had to get her to eat more. To eat, period. He wasn't going to let her die. He wasn't going to lose her, too.

"Good afternoon, sleepyhead," Sam said cheerfully, smiling at the little girl who'd stolen his heart in the delivery room seven years before. Her parents, his closest friends in the world, had insisted he be there with them. "How's my girl?"

Mariah looked at him.

That was all. Just looked. It was all she ever did anymore.

Heart heavy, Sam continued with cheerful chatter. Keep talking to her, the doctors had told him. Surround her with love. She'll never forget the tragedy, but she can recover.

He'd been talking for six months.

And Mariah had yet to say a word.

"You just wait until you meet your new grandparents," Sam told the child. "I was an only child, too, just like you. And my mom and dad were the greatest. You'll love them, but they'll love you more. Not that you need to let that worry you. That's just the way they are."

The landscape was painfully, blissfully familiar. Yet different.

"Mom makes the best chocolate chip cookies in the world." He glanced over again and decided to feel encouraged by the fact that Mariah was still watching him. Even if that was about all she ever did.

Maybe she was listening, too.

"Sometimes, when I was a kid, I'd sneak down from my bed at night, just to have another one of those cookies. I tried really hard to be as quiet as a mouse so I wouldn't get caught," Sam said. The smile he'd plastered on his face, became real as he remembered those days. "Every time a step creaked, my stomach would jump and I'd stand still and not breathe until I was sure my mom hadn't heard me."

Mariah blinked, her sad little face turned up toward his. Shelter Valley was going to be good for her. It had to be. If the answers weren't there, if the love in Shelter Valley wasn't enough to heal her, nothing would.

"The cookie jar was this big glass thing and the lid was really heavy and I'd have to lift it really carefully..."

The approaching sign said Shelter Valley, One Mile. The sign was new.

At least, it hadn't been there ten years ago.

Sam wiped his palm along his denim shorts.

"...the hardest part, though, was putting the lid back without making a noise. Especially because by that time I was always afraid I'd get caught and have to put the cookie back."

Sam slowed, approaching the exit. Mariah's gaze never left his face. She didn't look around, didn't show any interest at all in the place that was going to be home to her. He wondered how it was possible for someone with her naturally dark complexion to look so pale.

"I'd creep slowly back up the stairs, the smell of that cookie in my hand teasing me the whole way."

There was a new gas station at the Shelter Valley exit. And the huge old tree was still shading the east side of the road.

"It was sure a lot of work, but boy, when I finally made it back to my room and sank my teeth into that cookie, mmm." Sam grinned at Mariah. "It was worth it. Just for that one bite."

He passed the road that led out to the cactus jelly plant. The street sign still had those familiar BB gun dents put there by some guy who'd gone to high school with Sam's parents. No one had ever told Sam which guy, just "some guy."

A few scattered houses came into view, then disappeared as he drove past. He wondered what Mariah thought of them, as he tried to see Shelter Valley through her eyes. Through fresh eyes.

Not that she'd have any opinion of those houses. She wasn't seeing them. She was still staring at Sam.

"You want to know the funniest thing about my cookie escapades?" he asked, glancing over at her.

She blinked. A regular occurrence, but Sam chose to take this particular time as a yes.

"When I was in high school, my mom told me that she'd known all along I was stealing those cookies. She and my dad would sit in the family room and listen for me to come down the stairs..."

They'd smiled at each other, sharing their joy in their only son. She hadn't told Sam that, but he'd known. No parents had ever delighted in their child more than Sam's parents had.

Until the day he'd hurt them beyond belief.

"...all that work was for nothing." Sam finished his story as he slowed, entering the town proper.

Sunday afternoon had always been a sleepy time in Shelter Valley. It still was. Sam was relieved. He welcomed the comfort born of knowing this place. Craved its predictability.

Yearning for a drive through these remembered streets, for reassurance as he reacquainted himself with the place he'd always called home, for even a glimpse of the woman who still held such a place in his heart, Sam turned his truck and headed up the mountain, instead.

To the home he'd grown up in. He and Mariah had been driving for three days. His little girl needed to get those legs on solid ground—and since it had been two hours since their last stop, probably needed to go to the bathroom, too.

She didn't need a trip down her father's memory lane. Her father of only a few months...

"There it is, honey," he said, his throat tight as the huge house became visible, off in the distance. "See, it's just like I told you. A big beautiful castle up on the mountain."

Montford Mansion. The place he'd loved and hated with equal fervor.

Mariah had been staring at the insignia on his glove compartment, but when Sam spoke, her eyes turned toward him again.

"Look, Mariah, the orange trees are filled with blossoms."

Damn, it felt good to be home, in spite of all the resurrected pain the old sights were bringing him. The regrets.

The knowledge that he was going to have to see his Cassie with another man, married to another man. After all this time, she would've found someone to love. Someone who wouldn't betray her faith in him, her loyalty. She'd probably have several kids by now. She'd wanted at least four.

Reaching out, he stroked a couple of fingers lightly down Mariah's cheek. "You're the princess of the castle now, remember, sweetie?" he said, trying his damndest to help his daughter feel a little magic again, to believe in the fairy tales that thrilled most seven-year-old girls. He fingered one of the waist-length black braids he'd painstakingly tied when they were back in their hotel room in Albuquerque this morning. "That's why we did the braids, remember?" he coaxed. "So you can wear your crown like a real princess."

He'd bought the crown more than a week ago, before they'd left Wilmington, Delaware. With its glittering glass jewels, it had cost him almost a hundred dollars—no plastic piece of junk for his little girl. He'd have paid ten times that amount if it would make Mariah smile again.

Slowing the truck, overwhelmed by unexpected emotion, Sam wound around the curves that would take him up the mountain to his parents' driveway. His driveway, really. He was the only living heir to Montford Mansion.

Not that any of it meant a whole lot to Sam. He was the fourth-generation descendant of Shelter Valley's founder, but his heritage had been far more of a burden to him than a blessing.

That burden wasn't going to stop him from coming home. Shelter Valley was Mariah's only hope.

And maybe Sam's, too.

THE HOUSE LOOKED exactly as he'd left it. Driving slowly, Sam approached the circular drive, heart pounding in spite of his admonitions to the contrary. This wasn't going to be easy. He knew that. He'd come fully prepared to accept the hostility that was his due. Prepared to make amends as far as was humanly possible for destroying the hopes and dreams of those who'd loved him so faithfully.

Parking in front of the house, Sam sat and stared, taking in the heavy double doors, the stucco walls, the shrubbery under the huge picture windows. As a little kid, he'd been paid a buck an hour to clean up behind the gardener who trimmed those shrubs.

A buck an hour. To a kid who was a millionaire in his own right. But what had he known? He'd wanted to grow up and be a gardener someday. To make some of the dingy houses in town look as beautiful as his did. Even then, working with his hands had been all Sam cared about.

Sam's finger itched now, for the drawing pencil that was never far away these days. His mind was reeling with stories for next week's strip.

Mariah's small brown hand slid across the seat and stole into Sam's. Turning, he met the frightened eyes of his little girl—and felt traces of the heartache that would never ease.

"You're going to love it here, honey. See all the pretty flowers your grandma has growing in the yard?"

Mariah continued to gaze at him, unblinking now, and suddenly Sam wasn't at all sure about what he was doing. Unbuckling Mariah's belt, he pulled her across the seat and onto his lap, cradling her protectively in his arms.

Shelter Valley was her only hope. He knew that. The people in this town, with their huge hearts and warm smiles, would coax his little girl out of the silent world of terror into which she'd sunk. They'd teach her to smile again. To play. They'd make her laugh. Forget.

Maybe, someday, she'd even find the courage to love.

He wondered if his parents still had Muffy, the cocker spaniel he and Cassie had bought them shortly after Sam had left home to marry Cassie. The dog would be almost twelve years old.

Best not get Mariah's hopes up on that one. Or Sam's, either. He'd been very partial to that dog.

"It's going to be okay, baby, it's going to be okay."

Mariah shuddered, her little hand coming to rest in his again. Sam could only imagine the thoughts running through the child's mind—terrifying images of the tragedy that had torn her life apart.

Looking at the familiar front door of the big house that had been both prison and haven to Sam, he wondered if maybe he should go back to Phoenix, get a hotel room, tuck Mariah in for a nap and call his parents from there.

He'd sent them a brief note, almost three weeks ago, telling them he'd be arriving some time soon.

A brief note. That and a few very short phone calls were all the communication he'd had with them in the ten years since he'd left home in disgrace. They knew nothing about his life since. Nothing about Mariah.

And he knew nothing about them, other than that they were both healthy. Nothing about the state of his father's business, the small but prestigious investment firm James had founded thirty years ago. He knew nothing about Shelter Valley, except for what he'd seen on the drive in. From the moment he'd walked out of his and Cassie's house that Saturday morning, his parents had never mentioned her again. And after he'd left town two weeks later, they'd never mentioned Shelter Valley, either.

He'd never even received divorce papers, although he'd signed documents before he left town, allowing Cassie to terminate their marriage. He'd never given anyone a forwarding address.

He'd never expected to come home.

He'd purposely kept the time of his arrival vague. Hadn't wanted them to be waiting for him, or to have anyone else waiting to welcome him home. Hadn't been able to bear the thought of their not waiting, either, if truth be known.

But for Mariah's sake, he'd needed to arrive in town with as little fuss as possible.

Now, sitting outside his childhood home, he felt like a fool. How could he take his fragile little girl in there, with no idea of what she'd have to face. Sam was all she had left in the world. How would she react if his parents were rude to him?

Or worse, indifferent? Cold?

A chill swept through him, in spite of the child sweating against him and the Arizona sunshine beating down on his truck. He had to turn around. Go back to Phoenix. He couldn't risk creating any more anxiety or tension in Mariah's life.

His parents were going to love her. He knew that. But he also knew he had to smooth her way. Give them a chance to speak their piece against him without her witnessing it.

And maybe he needed a little more time than he'd realized, as well—

"Sam?" The voice came from far off, but Sam's heart recognized the call immediately. "Sam, is that really you, son?"

His mother came running out of the big front doors of Montford Mansion, almost tripped over her own feet as she came around to his side of the truck.

"Yeah, Mom, it's me," he said under his breath, before pulling open the door. Mariah's fingers dug into him, and she buried her face against his shoulder, just as his mother threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

"Oh, son, let me look at you," she said, crying, smiling, trembling all at once. "I've missed you so mu—"

Her words broke off, and Sam, watching her face, knew she'd seen Mariah. Her eyes filled with wonder, with curiosity—and fresh tears—as she pulled back.

Sam grabbed hold of her hand.

Taking a deep breath, offering a short silent prayer, he ran his other hand down his daughter's coal-black hair. "This is Mariah, Mom. I adopted her three months ago. She's been waiting to meet you."

CHAPTER TWO

“HEY! ZACK AND I are on our way to my folks’ for a barbeque and swim. You want to come along?”

Cassie jumped, her pen slashing across the journal subscription form she’d been filling out. The voice coming from her office doorway—when she’d thought herself alone in the clinic—gave her a shock. Not her partner’s voice, as she might have expected, but his wife’s. Zack would have made a lot of noise as he entered, to warn her that she wasn’t alone.

In case she’d been doing something private. Like crying. . . . Reaching for the remote just beyond her right hand, Cassie turned down the volume on the small television she’d been listening to while she worked.

“I’ve got reports to catch up on,” she said, smiling in spite of her refusal. Zack Foster had been her sole confidante and best friend for more than nine years. They’d met after she’d left Shelter Valley to finish her education in Phoenix. Now that he’d married Randi, she had a second best friend.

A friend who was far less predictable than Zack—

Randi leaned over Cassie’s desk, peering at the paperwork she’d just messed up. “Looks like important stuff to me,” Randi said, raising both eyebrows.

Cassie pointed to the pile of manila folders stacked in the tray on the far corner of her desk. “Those are the reports.”

“That pile doesn’t look as big as Zack’s.”

And he has time to take the day off, Cassie finished for her.

“He writes faster than I do.” She had no intention of crashing her friends’ family gathering, but Cassie didn’t mind continuing their banter. Even though she intended to stand by her refusal, she was actually enjoying herself. She enjoyed arguing with Randi over big issues and small ones. Randi’s professional sport days might be over, but the woman was a born competitor.

“Ah,” she was saying now, “but it takes Zack longer to figure out what to say.”

“And I have to supply forms to fill out. My medical supply rep is coming by first thing in the morning. Your husband tends to get a little testy when he doesn’t have the syringes he needs.”

Randi shoved aside the folders and perched on the corner of Cassie’s desk. “It’s not good for you to be here alone on a Sunday afternoon.”

Though Randi’s concern wasn’t necessary, Cassie was warmed by it. “The last million or so haven’t hurt me any.”

“That’s debatable.”

“I’m fine, Randi, really,” Cassie said, brushing a lock of red hair away from her face. She usually wore it pinned up or tied back, but since she’d been planning to spend the day alone, she hadn’t bothered with her hair. Or her clothes, either. She was wearing jeans she’d owned since high school.

Randi frowned, apparently not satisfied with Cassie’s assurances. But then, Randi was stubborn. It was hard for her to accept being wrong. It usually took her a couple of minutes to figure out that she was.

“How’d your meeting with Phyllis go yesterday?” Randi asked, referring to a mutual friend, psychiatrist Phyllis Langford.

“Wonderful,” Cassie said. “Even better than I’d expected.” Her enthusiasm for the pet therapy project she and Phyllis had discussed infused Cassie’s voice. “She gave me some great insights that I’m going to incorporate into my next article. And an idea for a case I worked on back east this winter. A woman who’d lost several babies and was suffering from acute depression. Phyllis thinks a puppy might satisfy her mothering instinct to some extent, perhaps helping her accept adoption as another choice.”

Randi scoffed, though Cassie knew full well that during the past months, working with Zack on his nursing-home project, Randi had been won over to the miracles that happened regularly through pet therapy. “You think a puppy who pees everywhere in the house, chews up her shoes and bites at her ankles is going to help the poor woman?”

“Brat’s giving you problems, eh?” Cassie grinned. Zack had adopted the dalmatian puppy the week before, when the owner of its mother had despaired of finding the runt of the litter a home. Randi, though, had been the one to name him— Miserable Little Brat, or Brat for short.

“It’s Zack’s dog,” Randi said, rubbing at the leather on her pristine white tennis shoe.

Cassie knew better. She’d been over at Randi and Zack’s for pizza a few days earlier and had seen Montford University’s seemingly tough women’s athletic director cuddling that puppy.

Until Randi had noticed Zack and Cassie looking. Then she’d shooed him away, pretending to scold, while passing him a pepperoni slice under the table by way of apology.

“I don’t know why he thought we needed another dog,” she muttered. “As if Sammie and Bear aren’t trouble enough.”

Two of their trained pet therapy dogs, Sammie and Bear weren’t any trouble at all. In fact, Zack had told Cassie that on a couple of occasions Randi had made excuses to take Sammie to work with her. Apparently, the dog was quickly becoming the mascot of the women’s athletic department.

Cassie had Randi’s number. The woman was strong when she needed to be and maintained an effective façade of toughness. But in reality, she was indeed the princess her family had always thought her. Tender, loving, frequently indulged. And kinder than anyone Cassie had ever known. With Zack’s encouragement, she’d gotten over her lifelong fear of dogs, and a latent love of animals had begun to emerge.

Although she and Cassie had graduated from Shelter Valley High School the same year, had grown up together in Shelter Valley—population two thousand when the university wasn’t in session—the two women had hardly known each other. Cassie had been completely besotted with her one true love, Samuel Montford the fourth, the town’s esteemed future mayor and savior of the world. And Randi had been absent a lot of the time, training for her career in professional women’s golf.

Neither woman’s life had turned out the way she’d planned. They were both back in Shelter Valley, Cassie without Sam, and Randi with a bum rotator cuff that had ruined her swing.

“You’d better get back to your husband, or he’s going to be in here looking for you,” Cassie told her friend. Cassie knew her partner. Zack had all the patience in the world; he just didn’t like to wait.

Randi shook her head. “No, he won’t. He said you were going to be pissed if we kept hounding you, so he refused to come in. As a matter of fact, he went to get some gas and wash the Explorer.”

Glancing at her watch, Cassie said, “Which means he should be pulling in right about now.”

Randi didn’t budge. “Other than the few times Zack and I’ve been able to coerce you over to our place, you’ve been hiding out in this clinic ever since you heard Sam was coming home,” she said bluntly. “You can’t keep hiding.”

Retrieving another subscription form from a sample issue of the journal, Cassie started to fill it in. “I’m not hiding out. And I can do whatever I damn well please. That’s the great thing about being single and living alone.”

At least, she told herself that often enough. And it was true. Sort of. She enjoyed living alone. She had to. Or live her life without enjoyment.

“It’s been three weeks,” Randi said. “He’s probably not coming back, after all.”

“It doesn’t matter to me one way or the other,” Cassie lied.

“Uh-huh.”

“Isn’t your family going to be getting mighty hungry?” Cassie asked, still concentrating on the form in front of her.

“Dinner’s not until five.”

Oh. Great.

“Look,” Cassie said, putting down her pen as she met her friend’s gaze. “My life with Sam was a long time ago. I’m a different person now, and I’m sure he is, too.”

“But that doesn’t mean—”

“He killed any feelings I had for him when he went to another woman’s bed,” Cassie interrupted, before Randi could say anything she might have a hard time denying.

It was taking everything she had to keep her mind on the right track. And her heart from splintering into a million pieces with the force of bitterness and regret.

Randi stood up, headed for the door. “You need to learn how to lie better before you go trying it again,” she said, getting the last word. “We’ll bring some barbecue by your place later tonight. You’d better be there, or I’ll make Zack come here and drag you out.”

No question, Randi had won that round.

But Cassie would have her turn. She wasn’t going to let anyone get the better of her again. Not her partner’s new wife. And not the ex-husband she hadn’t heard from in ten long years.

After three weeks of waiting, of constantly looking over her shoulder, of hiding out to avoid the chance of inadvertently running into Sam, Cassie’s nerves were a little raw.

But maybe Randi was right. Maybe he wasn’t coming, after all. His cryptic note had come three weeks ago. Surely it didn’t take that long to get to Shelter Valley, no matter where he’d been.

It was time to get on with her life. She wouldn’t give Sam the opportunity to rob her of it again.

Sam. Where had his letter come from, anyway? The postmark had been someplace back east. But the letter had been sitting on James Montford’s desk for a day or two before his wife had happened upon it in the middle of a party—a celebration to welcome their long lost nephew into the fold. She’d gone to the library to check on her guests’ sleeping babies, had come through James’s office on her way back to the party, and had been reaching for a tissue on his desk, when she’d knocked a pile of unopened mail onto the floor.

She’d recognized her son’s handwriting on the envelope with no return address. After ten years, she still recognized Sam’s handwriting.

Cassie knew she’d have recognized it, too.

What else about Sam would be recognizable?

No. She shook her head, pulled the stack of files toward her. She wasn’t going to spend another minute of her life thinking about something that hadn’t been real for a very long time.

He wasn’t coming, anyway.

THE CLINIC WAS NEW, built since he’d left town. Not too far off Main Street, it sat on a lot that had been vacant Sam’s entire life. With its fresh stucco finish and smoothly paved parking lot, the clinic spoke of success.

It spoke of Cassie.

Leaving his truck parked under the shade of a tree, Sam took Mariah’s hand, drawing as much comfort as he gave. Somehow, his having a child made facing Cassie more tolerable. He didn’t question that Cassie would have a family; it was all she’d ever wanted. He wondered briefly about the man she must have married—someone he knew?— then dismissed the thought. It occurred to him that in some ways, Mariah’s presence put him and Cassie on a more equal footing. They’d both moved on. She wouldn’t be the only one who was a parent now. They were both parents...although not of each other’s children. He slowly approached the door of the veterinary clinic. It was Monday morning; he wasn’t ready for this. Could hardly drag the air through his lungs. But he’d become a man who faced hardships and challenges head-on, and this was one of the biggest.

There were only a couple of cars in the parking lot. He hoped one was Cassie’s. And that she’d have a minute or two to spare for him. While he and his parents had spent a miraculous five hours talking the night before—about their lives and his, about Mariah—they’d never mentioned Cassie.

The unspoken message was very clear.

He'd have to clean up this mess on his own. And until he did, his parents weren't going to give him anything where Cassie was concerned. They loved her like their own daughter. Always had.

They were on her side.

Sam couldn't blame them. He'd be on her side, too, if there were any way for a man to be in two places at once.

"We're going to see an old...friend of Daddy's," he told the silent child who'd refused to leave his side in the eighteen hours they'd been in town.

His mother had been enchanted—as Sam had known she would be—with Mariah. Though the little girl was completely unresponsive, at least outwardly, Carol Montford hadn't lost any opportunity to make contact. To touch Mariah's hand. To smile at her, tend to her, stroke her hair. To get some food—any food—into the child's stomach.

His father was already wrapped around Mariah's little finger.

Mariah just didn't know it yet.

She didn't know she'd met her match in those two. They were going to love Mariah back to life. Period. Between him and his parents, she wouldn't have a chance not to become the vivacious, happy child she'd once been.

They walked across the parking lot. "Her name is Cassie and she's just about the prettiest woman you've ever seen," Sam said, remembering.

He had to do this, to see her first thing. It wouldn't be fair to either of them to accidentally bump into each other in town. And he hoped that seeing her at work would mean he wouldn't be face to face with her children. Or her husband. At least not yet. Unless it was in the form of a photo on her desk.

It was what he wanted for her, what he'd been imagining all these years. A husband who deserved her love, who cherished her as Sam had promised he would. All the children she'd dreamed of raising. It was the only way he could live with himself, believing that without him she'd managed to have everything she wanted. That she was happy.

"She used to be Daddy's best friend, a long time ago."

Mariah walked solemnly beside him, her long black hair in a high ponytail tied with a blue bow that matched the jeans overalls and pink-flowered top he'd chosen for her that morning. Before the disaster that had changed her life so completely, Mariah had insisted on choosing her own outfits every day. And on doing her own hair, as well. She'd looked a little lopsided a time or two—but Sam would trade that for the smile she'd worn any day.

She'd been so proud of herself back then. So sure that life was there just for her. Sure there wasn't anything she couldn't do, couldn't have, if she just got big enough.

She'd been sassy and confident and too smart for her own good.

And she'd chattered from the time she got up in the morning until she'd gone to bed at night, innocently sharing her every thought with anyone lucky enough to be around.

Sam had never tired of listening.

"Cassie is an animal doctor," Sam told Mariah now, as she hesitated outside the door of the clinic. "She's the one who gave Muffy to Grandma and Grandpa."

Muffy hadn't worked the magic on Mariah that Sam had hoped. The child, having always begged for a dog, had shown no pleasure at finding herself finally living with one.

But then, Muffy was old. And fat.

Sam had been saddened to see such obvious signs of the years he'd lost.

His parents had aged, too, but they still looked great. A little grayer, perhaps, a little more lined, but robust and healthy.

Apparently they walked a couple of miles every morning. And swam every afternoon. They were hoping to take Mariah out to the heated pool in the backyard with them this afternoon.

Sam wasn't sure he could persuade the little girl to let go of his hand long enough to walk into the next room, let alone outside the house. But he was willing to try. If anyone could reach Mariah, his mother could.

"Look, honey." He gently guided Mariah's head in the direction his finger was pointing. "See the plastic fire hydrant? That's for boy dogs to go to the bathroom."

Mariah might have been facing the fake hydrant, but he could see that she was still watching him out of the corner of her eye. Sam wished he knew what kind of expression could reassure the frightened child. A big smile? A calm, neutral look? A devil-may-care grin? He had no idea.

The inside of the clinic was as pristine and plush-looking as the outside. Brightly upholstered chairs lined the walls of the waiting room. At the moment, they were all empty.

There was a fancy digital four-foot scale along one wall. Sam supposed it was for animals. He liked the decor, the bright yellows and oranges, the tile floor that would serve for easy cleanup.

With Mariah by his side, Sam walked up to the waist-high solid oak receptionist's counter.

"Is Cassie in?" he asked, as though he stopped by often. As though he wasn't asking a question he'd been yearning to ask for the past ten years.

"Dr. Tate?" the college-age girl asked. "Yes, she's in her office." She glanced down at the appointment book open in front of her. "Is she expecting you?"

"No," Sam said, glancing down at Mariah's head. "I grew up with her here in Shelter Valley. I'm an old friend, just dropping in to say hello."

"Oh!" The girl's expression changed from professionally polite to warm and friendly. "You're visiting?" she asked, rising to her feet.

Again, Sam glanced at Mariah. "Uh, no," he said. "I'm moving back to town. Just arrived yesterday afternoon."

"Welcome back, then," she said. "My name's Sheila." She grinned. "I've only been in Shelter Valley a couple of years, but I feel like it's been my town forever. I love it here."

The town had a way of doing that to people. Unless you were the "savior of the world," as Cassie had jokingly called Sam. The heir apparent, future mayor and all-around best guy for the job. The man loaded down with everyone else's expectations.

"Hi, Sheila. I'm Sam. You going to Montford?" he asked, years of Shelter Valley friendliness automatically kicking in.

The girl nodded. "I was, but I got married and just recently had a baby. Now I work here full time."

Mariah's little hand was getting sweaty inside his. Releasing it, Sam slid his arm around her shoulders, as he smiled at the receptionist. "She's in her office, you said?"

"Shall I tell her you're here?"

"No," Sam said quickly, and then added, "I'd like to surprise her, if you don't mind."

He didn't want to take the chance that Cassie would refuse to see him.

"Oh. Sure." Sheila grinned at him again. "You just go through that door, and down the hall. Her office is on the right."

"Thanks." Sam led Mariah through the open door. "Is her partner in?" he thought to ask as he passed Sheila. There had been two names on the placard out front.

"Zack?" the girl said. "Not yet. His first appointment today is at eleven."

Wondering if Zack was her husband as well as her partner, Sam braced his shoulders and strode forward. As a Peace Corps member and then a national disaster-relief volunteer, he'd spent the past ten years rescuing people from sickening, tragic situations.

He could handle a ten-minute meeting with his ex-wife.

CHAPTER THREE

NO MATTER HOW MANY TIMES Cassie flipped through the pages of her calendar, there were no upcoming trips written in anywhere. She'd traveled so much over the past eighteen months, launching her nationwide pet therapy program in cities and universities across the United States, that Zack had been left to handle much of their Shelter Valley veterinary practice by himself. Her travel schedule was why she'd invited Zack, who'd been working at a practice in Phoenix, to go into partnership with her in Shelter Valley. His first marriage had just ended, and he'd been eager for a new start. And now, two years later, Cassie's wedding present to him and Randi was to stay in town a while.

But damn, a trip sure would be nice. Help her put life in perspective again.

"Hey, stranger."

Planner pages between her fingers, Cassie froze, staring at the month of May. It was coming up in a matter of weeks. She'd be—

"Cassie?"

She hadn't imagined the voice. There was only one man who said her name in just that way. With that slight emphasis on the second syllable.

Heart pounding, Cassie didn't know what to do. Sam was really back. After all this time.

She had to look up. To get through this. Making plans for May seemed so much safer.

Thank God, she was in her office. Private. No one was going to see if she messed up.

Except Sam.

He was standing in front of her desk. She could feel him there. She just couldn't bear to look at him. Couldn't be sure she wouldn't make a total idiot of herself and start to cry.

Sam hated it when she cried. Nearly as much as she did.

There was movement over there, close to Sam, but not really where he was standing. It drew Cassie's eye.

There, with her little hand clasped in a bigger one that could only belong to Cassie's ex-husband, stood a little girl. A very solemn, beautiful, dark-eyed little girl. She appeared to be part Native American.

"We—" Sam raised the child's hand "—Mariah and I just got into town last night. I couldn't be in Shelter Valley without seeing you first thing."

Oddly enough, Cassie understood that. She didn't like it, but she understood. She and Sam would never truly be strangers, or casual acquaintances who just had chance meetings on the street.

"You could have called first," she said, her eyes riveted on the child. His daughter? His daughter?

Pain knifed through Cassie, so sharp she couldn't breathe. When he'd left her all those years ago, he'd taken from her any hope that she might have children of her own. Taken away any hope of the family and the life she'd wanted. And now he had the nerve to waltz back into town with a child who should have been theirs.

"I was afraid you wouldn't see me," he murmured.

"You were probably right."

Was the child his? With her obvious coloring and that coal-black hair, the girl didn't look anything like him. Yet her white heritage was noticeable in those striking blue eyes.

Sam had green eyes.

"This is Mariah," Sam said, sounding less sure of himself as she continued to watch the silent little girl. "She's my daughter."

The knife sliced a second time. Lips trembling, Cassie nodded. And tried to smile at the child. After all, it wasn't Mariah's fault her father had hurt Cassie so badly.

“Hello, Mariah.”

The little girl stared wordlessly at her father’s waistline. Which, now that Cassie noticed it, looked as firm and solid as it always had. Clearly, Sam was still in remarkably good shape.

“You’re looking great, Cass,” Sam said, an old familiar warmth enlivening the words.

“Thanks.” Taking a deep, shuddering breath, Cassie forced herself to look up, to meet Sam’s gaze.

And then looked away again almost immediately. His eyes were exactly the same. They met hers—and touched her all the way inside.

Without waiting for an invitation, Sam sat in one of the leather chairs facing her desk, pulling Mariah onto his lap.

“How old is she?” she asked. Morbid curiosity.

“Seven.”

Cassie’s daughter would have been ten this year.

“So how’ve you been, Cass?” Sam asked, glancing around her office at the degrees on the wall behind her, the thick texts lining her shelves. “You’ve accomplished a lot.”

Cassie stared at the little television in the corner. Wishing she hadn’t turned it off after the news ended half an hour ago. It would have given her something to focus on. Taken her thoughts off the bitter pain that had already seized her.

Off the man in front of her.

“Your parents told you about the pet therapy program, I imagine,” she said. It was the sum total of her life’s accomplishments. Had they told him that, as well?

If this was just a guilt-induced duty call, he could leave now. She didn’t need his polite compliments. Or his pity.

The flood of anger felt good.

“They haven’t mentioned you at all,” he said quietly. “I don’t know the first thing about a pet therapy program. I’m just impressed with this office, the clinic, your degrees.”

Cassie shrugged. “I imagine you went on to greater things. You’re probably a lawyer by now.”

Not that she cared. She just figured he’d finished college and pursued postgraduate work. Entered some highly regarded profession. Sam had been the more intelligent of the two of them. He hadn’t particularly liked to hit the books, hadn’t enjoyed learning as much as she had, but it had all come so naturally to him. Even in high school he could ace a test with a five-minute look over his notes, while Cassie would study for an entire evening to get the same grade.

“I don’t even have a bachelor’s degree.”

Shocked, Cassie frowned at him. His hair was longer, his face lined with experiences she knew nothing about. “Why not?”

“I never went back to school after I left here.” There was no apology in the words. No excuse, either.

“But you had a perfect grade point, a future...”

“...that I didn’t want,” Sam finished for her, his jaw firm. Then he smiled, which instantly softened his face. It was as though he’d learned to control the emotions that had once flowed so freely.

When they were young, Sam had been the most passionate man she’d known. Passionate about everything, from kissing her to saving an abandoned dog on the outskirts of town. She’d loved that about him.

“So what’s this pet therapy business?” he asked. “Analyzing neurotic poodles?” He grinned in an obvious attempt to lighten the atmosphere, but his expression sobered when she didn’t respond. “Seriously,” he muttered. “Tell me.”

Mariah’s arm slid up around Sam’s neck, and she lay her head against his chest.

She was too skinny. And quieter than any child Cassie had ever seen. It almost seemed as though something was wrong with her. Her stomach seized at the thought. The little girl was so beautiful.

She couldn't imagine Sam with a handicapped child. Everything had always come easy to him. Perfection had been his for the taking.

"I, uh, developed a bit of a name for myself by using animals as a way to treat mentally, and sometimes physically, ill patients," she said slowly, her attention on Sam's little girl.

There was something heart-wrenching about her. Something pathetic in seeing her tucked so securely in Sam's arms.

Sam. She couldn't believe he was here. Sitting in her office. Damn him.

Her life wasn't ever going to be the same again, with Sam back in town. The memories, the reminders—they'd all be right in front of her. Mocking her. He'd just shot her carefully won peace all to hell.

Sam asked a few more questions—intelligent, thoughtful questions—about pet therapy, which Cassie managed to answer. Somehow, with him sitting there, work wasn't the first thing on her mind. It was an odd sensation.

A very unwelcome one.

SAM DIDN'T KNOW what he'd been expecting to find that morning, but the woman sitting across from him wasn't it. Her beauty was still as potent, her figure perfect, her hair still that glorious red. But despite all the similarities, he could hardly believe how much ten years had changed her. Was it just growing up that had made her so self-composed? So unemotional?

Or was it only with him that she was this way?

The thought sickened him. Saddened him. He'd carried the image of his vivacious and tender ex-wife with him every day of the past ten years, used it as a sword to punish himself—and as a reminder of the penance he owed.

"So who'd you end up marrying?" he asked now, forcing himself to confront reality, to see the woman Cassie had become, to not linger on memories of the days when he'd known her as well as she'd known herself. "You are married, right?"

Cassie shook her head, and Sam froze.

"You aren't married?" he asked, his shock more evident than he would have liked. She had to be married. It was all Cassie had ever wanted. Marriage and a family.

"There are a lot of successful single women these days," she said, her tone tinged with sharpness. "I would never have been able to accomplish everything I have if I was married. I've spent the past couple of years traveling all over the country, setting up pet therapy programs in universities and in hundreds of mental-health facilities."

Sam stared at her, not understanding. "But you wanted to be a wife and mother more than anything in the world," he said.

He hadn't been wrong about that. Had he?

Cassie's gaze slid away from him, her shoulders stiffening. "People change, Sam."

Mariah's fingers dug into Sam's neck; he rubbed her back reassuringly.

"You never had children?" He just couldn't take it in. Didn't want to. Didn't want to believe he'd had anything to do with her decision. It was one of the reasons he'd left town and never come back. So that Cassie could get on with her life.

Or that was what he'd always told himself. He'd assumed, without question, that she'd meet someone, marry, have kids. He thought briefly of his syndicated comic strip—another secret. The origins of the Borough Bantam were unknown to the people of Shelter Valley and yet it was based on them. Cassie was the gazelle. And in one of last month's episodes, the gazelle had given birth to twins.

"I don't have any children," she said, then stood as though dismissing him. "I'm happy your parents finally have you back, Sam," she said, then added, "You always were the light of their life."

Another too-familiar stab of guilt hit its mark. Sam also stood, sliding Mariah down to the floor beside him. The child's eyes were pleading when he looked down at her. She was ready to go. Now.

Odd. He hadn't realized that he was learning to communicate with her, to understand her, even without words. The thought brought a strange sort of comfort.

"I guess I'll be seeing you around," he said, guiding Mariah back into the hallway. He needed to tell Cassie about Mariah. And he would, as soon as he had a chance to talk to her alone. He needed to tell her the child wasn't his. Or not biologically, in any case.

Cassie had never married. God, he felt sick. And ashamed. A bone-deep shame.

"Okay" was all she said. So why did he hear, Not if I can help it?

After ten years, she still hated him so much. He deserved it; he knew that. Why had he been foolish enough to hope that the years might have dulled the consequences of his sins?

Mariah walked stoically beside him down the hall, which seemed to have grown a mile longer during his stay in Cassie's office, and he realized that if he was going to get through this, he had to concentrate solely on his new daughter—her needs, not his own. Just as they reached the door that would lead them back to the waiting room, she turned, looking over her shoulder.

"Cassie's a nice lady, don't you think?" he asked gently, his heart rate speeding up.

Mariah didn't answer him, but for the first time since her parents were killed, she'd shown an interest in something. It might not be much, but it was a start.

At that moment, Sam was willing to settle for anything.

"Let's go see if Grandma has lunch ready, okay?" he asked, squeezing Mariah's hand.

He might as well have been talking to himself.

CASSIE DIDN'T SEE Sam again for two days. She was walking home from the clinic on Wednesday evening—since she'd left her car at home that morning—enjoying the balmy Arizona spring day, trying to work up some enthusiasm for the cabbage rolls she'd made over the weekend and was going to have for dinner.

She'd had a good day. Had helped a collie through a difficult birth, managing to save all six puppies and the mother, as well. They'd been so adorable, she hadn't been able to resist when the collie's owner had offered Cassie pick of the litter. Now that she wasn't going to be traveling so much, she'd been planning to get a dog. And she'd always loved collies.

"Can we give you a ride home?"

Still reacting to that familiar voice, even after all these years, Cassie didn't stop walking. "No, thanks," she called, barely glancing Sam's way.

He drove a white truck.

She'd have expected him to drive a Lincoln Continental, or some other expensive car. But the truck seemed to suit him. Not that she really knew anything about Sam, or what would suit him. Nor did she want to.

Back to cabbage rolls. Yes, they'd be good. She'd treat herself to two. That would leave two more meals' worth in the freezer. It was a good thing they'd only take a few minutes to microwave. She was getting hungry and—

"I have a cousin."

Sam came up behind her, on foot, Mariah's bony little legs moving quickly beside him. Glancing back, Cassie saw his truck parked at the curb.

What did he want with her, for God's sake?

"I know you do," she said aloud. She realized that the news had to be a shock. When he'd left, he was the sole Montford descendant, the family's one hope. Now he'd come home to discover that an unknown cousin had shown up.

"You've met him?"

"Yes."

Mariah's hair was braided today. Cassie could just picture Carol fussing over the little girl. Her ex-mother-in-law must be about the happiest woman in Shelter Valley these days.

Cassie was genuinely thrilled for Carol. She'd always loved the woman like a second mother.

Her own mother didn't even know Sam was in town. Her parents had left at the end of March for the six-month cruise around the world that they'd been saving half their lives to take. Cassie was glad they were gone. She had no idea how they'd react to Sam's reappearance. Her father, who'd had four daughters and no sons, had taken Sam's defection personally.

He'd also been the one who had to tell Cassie that her baby girl had died.

"What's he like?" Sam asked, slowing his pace now that he was even with her. Mariah walked between them, staring ahead, it seemed, at nothing. "Ben, I mean. My cousin."

Watching the child, Cassie frowned. "He's very nice," she said, wondering what was wrong with Sam's daughter. Wondering how to ask. "He came to town last fall, fell in love with his English teacher—who wasn't really a teacher at all, it turned out." She gave a quick shrug. "It's a long story. They're married now."

"Mom said he's got a daughter Mariah's age."

Cassie nodded, wishing her house wasn't still two streets away. She couldn't do this. Walk casually with Sam and the child who'd never be hers, pretending they could be friends. "She's not actually his, biologically. Did your mom tell you that?"

"Yeah." Sam nodded, his free hand in the pocket of his jean-shorts. His long legs were more muscled than she remembered. "She said he married a girl his senior year in high school who claimed he was the father of her child."

"She let him support her for almost eight years before she told him Alex belonged to her boyfriend, who was in prison."

"Mom said that Ben's being awarded full and permanent custody of her, though."

"Her real father beat—" Glancing down at the head bobbing between them, Cassie broke off. "He wasn't a very good father."

"I gather Ben is."

"Obviously you haven't met him yet," Cassie said, "or you'd know he was."

Sam nodded again. "You're right, I haven't met him, but Mom's pushing for a get-together."

"Ben's a great guy. Looks a bit like you." In fact he resembled Sam enough that Cassie had had a hard time liking the man when she'd first met him. But he was Zack's closest friend. Nowadays Cassie not only liked and respected him, she admired the hell out of him. Ben Sanders was a real man in the true sense of the word.

Too bad Sam didn't share those particular genes.... Cassie stopped her reaction even as it took shape. She wasn't going to do this. She wasn't going to grow old and hard with bitterness, entertaining nasty thoughts. She was okay now. Happy with her life. Surrounded by friends and family who loved her.

"Just seems odd, after a lifetime of being the only Montford heir, to find out that I'm not."

"It's not like your inheritance meant a whole lot to you the past ten years." Damn her tongue. She turned the corner, Sam and Mariah staying in step beside her.

"It doesn't mean squat to me."

He'd certainly said so with great frequency. But until he'd left, turning his back on the money, the position, the town, she'd never really thought he believed it. She'd always thought the complaints were just a habit left over from when he was a kid, railing against expectations.

Everyone did that. Complained about what their parents expected of them. It was a normal part of growing up.

"Then what's the problem with sharing it?" she asked him now, thinking how little Sam appeared to need the Montford fortune, and how much Ben and his new family did.

"He can have it all," Sam said without bitterness, as though he still meant the words completely. "It just feels odd to have been one thing your entire life, only to find that it's not what you are at all."

Cassie nodded, glancing down as Mariah's arm brushed against her leg. The child, moving silently between them, didn't seem to notice.

Relieved when they reached her block, Cassie firmly turned her thoughts once again to cabbage rolls. They'd smelled so good when they were baking on Saturday night.

"This is it," she said, stopping at the bottom of her driveway. If he expected her to ask him in, he was mistaken.

Sam hesitated, looking at the house she'd bought a few years before, in one of the more affluent neighborhoods in Shelter Valley.

"Nice place."

"I like it."

"It's big."

"Yeah." She did most of her pet therapy work from an office here at home. And used the rest of the rooms to indulge her amateur interest in interior decorating.

Cassie was beginning to think Sam's daughter couldn't hear. The child didn't even turn toward the house they were discussing. Cassie had heard the adage about children being seen and not heard, but this was too much.

Besides, she'd never figured Sam for that kind of parent.

A familiar pain tore through her at the thought of Sam as a father. She had to stay away from this man, dammit! He could destroy every bit of her hard-won composure, and his very presence threatened the contentment she'd so carefully pieced together.

The child, however, shouldn't suffer for her father's sins. Her silence tugged at Cassie. Bending down, face level with the striking little girl, Cassie smiled. "It was nice to see you again, Mariah."

Mariah didn't respond. And Sam gave no explanation. Surely if the child was deaf, Sam would have said. And how could she ask, in case the little girl could hear and know they were talking about her?

"Have you had any of your grandma's cookies yet?" she tried again.

Neither a nod nor a shake of the head. Mariah's gaze seemed intent on the T-shirt tucked into Sam's shorts. Her fingers were clutching it. Hard.

Meeting Cassie's questioning gaze, Sam just shook his head.

"Well, if you haven't, you've got a treat in store," Cassie continued, simply because she didn't know what else to do. "They're the best."

"I told her."

Of course. He would have. He'd grown up with them.

They both had.

"Well, good night," Cassie said awkwardly.

"Night."

She didn't look back as she walked to her door, let herself in and locked it behind her.

But she knew Sam stood there watching her.

CHAPTER FOUR

MARIAH DIDN'T WANT to go back to that house. Sam was driving up the hill, so she knew they were going back there. She didn't want to. She didn't belong there.

Sam's house was for happy kids who didn't know bad stuff. And grandmas were for happy kids, too. Mariah wasn't like that anymore. She'd cried, made too much noise when the bad men came. That was why they'd killed her mommy.

Sam's mouth was all tight, except when he seemed to remember that Mariah was looking at him. Then he smiled a good Sam smile.

She used to think Sam's smiles made her feel happy. Now she didn't care whether he smiled or not. Smiles couldn't really do anything. They couldn't stop bad stuff. They couldn't save you from the horrible men.

Sam didn't have to smile. He just had to stay breathing. Mostly that was what she watched. To make sure he was always breathing.

Mommy had been still holding Mariah's hand but she hadn't been breathing—and the men had made Mariah let go of her. That was when they said Mommy wasn't coming back. But Mommy hadn't gone anywhere, she'd been right there with Mariah the whole time—so how could she come back, anyway?

Daddy had gone away with them after they hit him so many times and made his face bleed. When Mariah cried out for him, they yelled back at her and told her to shut up. If she made a sound, they were going to hurt Mommy. They said Daddy wasn't ever coming back, either. Sam said he'd stopped breathing, too. She hadn't known that about breathing before.

Daddy was put into a hole in the ground—

“You hungry, honey?”

Sam smiled at her now. Mariah didn't get hungry anymore. She just got tired from watching Sam's breathing.

Breathing stopped, and then some men shoved you into a hole in the ground. But first, sometimes, they cut you and made you bleed so much that a Band-Aid didn't work.

They scared you and did other things Mariah couldn't think about.

So she just thought about breathing. If she stopped breathing, they'd shove her in a hole, too.

SAM'S PENCIL SLID EASILY around the page, making a mark here, another there, until the familiar figures began to take shape. After so many years of drawing this cartoon strip, he was seeing it differently tonight. He was on overload with the past four days of memory and stimulation.

Borough Bantam. Sam's imaginary world was filled with non-human life, of the animal variety, mostly—each creature representative to Sam of the people he'd known all his life in Shelter Valley. There was the king—a grizzly bear—his father. His mother, the queen, a gentle brown bear. Will Parsons was a lion. His wife, Becca, Sam's readers knew as a book-reading lioness. There was Nancy Garland, a girl they'd known in high school; she was a gopher. Sam's parents had told him she was still in town, hostessing at the Valley Diner. Jim Weber, owner of Weber's Department Store, was a penguin. Hank Harmon was the big friendly skunk everyone in the Borough loved, in spite of his smell. Chuck Taylor was a leopard. And on and on...

Cassie was the gazelle. Graceful. Lovely. And unattainable.

He still hadn't found a moment away from Mariah—a chance to see Cassie alone. Although the more he thought about the whole damn mess, the more he wondered whether it would make a difference to her whether or not Mariah was his biological daughter. She was still his daughter. He had a child to raise, while Cassie did not.

And yet he couldn't understand why Cassie had made that choice—to remain unmarried and childless. Nor could he stomach the irrational fear that he was at least partially to blame.

Mariah was finally asleep; Sam had put her in the bed across from the desk at which he sat. His parents had given him a guest suite, as it had two beds and plenty of room for him and Mariah.

Sam hoped that it wouldn't be too long before Mariah hankered after the princess room down the hall. Its lacy white canopy, yellow walls, and pictures of tea parties were enough to tempt any little girl. Weren't they? As a teenager, Cassie had always loved his mother's fanciful guest room. The couple of times her family had been out of town and she'd stayed with them, she'd chosen that room. It had been updated since he left town—with new paint, different pictures, some fancy ladies' hats on a rack—but his impression was the same. He still felt like a clumsy oaf in ten-pound mountain boots whenever he walked in the door.

Characters appeared on the page in front of Sam, seemingly of their own accord. The pencil moved swiftly, filling in thought bubbles almost faster than he could think them....

The castle was in chaos. There was a stranger in their midst, a wild stallion. He claimed to know them. The king and queen had offered their usual warm-hearted welcome. Always trusting. Seeing good in the visitor although his heart might harbor unclean things.

The half-witted magistrate, so full of his own importance, didn't know that Borough Bantam had been invaded yet. Sam grinned as the rotund little worm slithered around his circle, certain that he was circling the world. That he controlled the entire globe. His bubble was easiest of all to fill. I am. I am. I am.

It was rumored that the newcomer—the stallion—posed a threat to the magistrate. The worm — Sam's version of Shelter Valley's mayor, Junior Smith.

Ten years older than Sam, Junior had just become mayor when Sam's father retired. That was the year before Sam left town. James Montford had suffered a bout of Crohn's Disease and needed to lower his stress level; as a result he'd stepped down from the mayoralty. That was when Sam really started to feel the pressure to run for mayor. The fact that he would win was a foregone conclusion. The office of mayor was of course an elected position, but politics in Shelter Valley had more to do with tradition than democracy. The town's mayor had almost always been a Montford—although, occasionally, a member of the less-reputable Smith branch of the family held office.

The newcomer sat off by himself, watching the confusion, detached. He couldn't care less about the worm. He was waiting. Though he didn't know for what. The plan would be made known to him in due time. He just had to be patient.

Sighing, Sam scribbled the finishing touch, the signature of Bantam's creator, S.N.C., and dropped his pencil. Then he tore off the piece of drawing paper, folding it carefully and sealing it in an envelope for mailing in the morning—on time to meet his deadline. He methodically put all evidence of the work he'd been doing in the battered satchel, which he placed back on the closet shelf. Patience was the lesson of the week—for the comic strip's new character and for him.

Sam needed to find a truckload of it somewhere.

ON THURSDAY NIGHT, Cassie was getting ready for bed with the eleven o'clock news playing in the background—from the console television in her bedroom, the little portable in her luxurious ensuite bathroom and the nineteen-inch set out in her kitchen—when the doorbell rang.

Assuming the caller was a patient with an emergency, she quickly spit out her toothpaste, wiped her mouth and pulled a pair of jeans on over her nightgown. Grabbing from the hamper the black, short-sleeved cotton shirt she'd worn to work that day, she drew it over her head while she made her way to the front of the house. It never occurred to her to be alarmed, to think anything dangerous might be waiting on her porch. This was Shelter Valley. A lot of people didn't even lock their doors at night.

She opened the door, and when she saw who was standing there with his hands in the pockets of his jeans, her heart started to pound so hard she actually felt sick.

"Why are you here?" she asked. It was too late to go back, to return to the lives they'd once lived. And for her and Sam, there was no going forward.

He shrugged, the dark strands of his hair almost touching the shoulders of his white shirt. His eyes glistened beneath the porch light. "I'm a little lost here, Cass," he said, giving her a glimpse of the past—a glimpse of who they used to be. Two people who told each other everything.

She couldn't do that anymore, could no longer be that person. Her hold on happiness was too fragile. Too tenuous.

"Perhaps you should go back where you came from, then," she said, trying not to cry as she rejected the intimacy he was offering.

"I belong here."

"Since when?"

He looked down at his tennis shoes and then back up at her. "Can I come in?" he asked softly.

"No!" There was nothing for them. No point. She'd built a life for herself inside this house—a house in which there was not one bit of evidence that Sam Montford had ever existed.

"Please, Cass," he said, his eyes begging her. "You know if we keep standing out here, everyone'll have us married again by morning."

"Which is why you need to leave. Now."

"I can't."

"Sure you can."

"I find myself needing a friend tonight, Cass. And you're the best friend I ever had in this town."

Why tonight in particular? Why did he need a friend now?

"Then why don't you go back where you and Mariah came from? You obviously have friends there." God, she hated what he was doing to her. How she was acting around him. But if she didn't get defensive, she'd crumble into little pieces at his feet.

She'd needed him so badly for so many years. And had broken down when she'd lost him. She'd learned that breakdown was not an exaggerated or metaphorical description. It was exactly what had happened. And it had taken a lot of years to rebuild herself, to repair all the damage. She just couldn't afford to allow Sam Montford to enter her life again.

"There's nobody back there. I'm all Mariah's got. Her family was killed six months ago," he said, and then rushed on as though he knew his time with her was limited. "Mariah saw the whole thing, Cassie, and I'm losing her."

Sagging against the big oak door, Cassie slowly pulled it back, gesturing Sam inside.

Not for him. Never again for him. But for that sweet child with the haunted eyes.

"Where is she now?" Cassie asked, leading Sam from the homey comfort of her living room in to the library she'd decorated with impeccable formality and never used. She took one of the leather chairs; Sam slouched down in the other.

"She's asleep," Sam said. "Thankfully, once I get her to give in and go to sleep, she usually stays that way. She used to have a lot of nightmares, but they've decreased in the past month or so. My mother's sitting with her."

Cassie sat forward, already preparing to kick him out. "Carol knows you're here?"

"No." He shook his head. "I told her I was going out for some air. She encouraged me to take an hour or two for myself." That sounded like Carol Montford. Tending to her family made her happy. And she'd had so few opportunities in the past ten years. There'd only been her husband, James, who needed little—and Cassie.

Sam grinned suddenly, shocking her with the intensity of the effect that smile had on her. "She warned me not to drink and drive."

In the grip of remembered companionship, Cassie said, "As if you ever would." Sam had always been responsible about stuff like that.

About everything.

Except fidelity.

"Is Mariah deaf?" she blurted out, nervous, needing to get him out of her house.

Eyes clouded, Sam shook his head. “No.” And then, looking around, said, “You don’t have a dog?”

Cassie’s toes were cold. She pulled her feet up on the chair, covered them with her hands.

“I’ve been traveling more than I’ve been home during the past couple of years,” she said. “It wouldn’t have been fair to have a pet and then desert it so often, but I did recently acquire a collie puppy. I’m waiting for her to be weaned from her mother before I bring her home.”

Why did it matter that he know this? That he not think her lacking—cold and immune to the animals she’d dedicated her life to assisting?

“I can’t believe how fat Muffy is.”

“You need to convince your parents to put her on a diet, Sam. She almost died a few months ago.”

They shared a concerned look. Muffy was special to both of them. They’d picked her out together as a comfort to Sam’s mother, who’d been so sad after Sam moved out.

“Her food was cut in half as of yesterday.”

That reminded her of Sam, the old Sam. See a need, take charge, make it better.

Or at least try....

“Why doesn’t Mariah speak?” she asked, focusing somewhere just to the right of his chin. There could be no more meeting of the eyes. Sam’s looks touched her in ways she could no longer welcome. “Does she talk to you? Is it just strangers she’s so shy with?”

Frowning, Sam lifted his hands, then let them drop back to his knees. “She hasn’t said a word in six months. To me or anyone.”

“You said her family died. What happened? A car accident?” The tragedy sure explained some of the sadness she saw in Sam’s eyes. The sadness reached out to her in ways she wanted to resist.

“They didn’t just die—they were murdered by a band of terrorist thugs hijacking the airplane Moira and her husband, Brian, and Mariah were on.” He shook his head. “They were the only family Mariah had, and my closest friends.”

Cassie swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. Mariah’s mother had a husband. “Where were they?”

“It was a small jumper plane leaving Afghanistan. The Glorys were the only Americans on board. The terrorists were part of an extremist group fighting for recognition.”

Cassie remembered with horror the reports she’d seen on the news. “Out of forty people on the plane, only ten survived,” she continued slowly, her heart heavy as she watched the despair on Sam’s face. “Six women, three men—and an American child...” Her voice trailed off. Mariah. “At least those terrorists were caught,” she said, the thought bringing little comfort.

Sam clenched his jaw, and his hands tightened into fists. “It was all over the news—another terrorist incident. Mom and Dad heard about it in Germany, but they had no idea, of course, that the tragedy had anything to do with me.”

“You weren’t with them?”

Sam shook his head, eyes dulled and faraway. Cassie had all but forgotten that she wasn’t going to look into his face anymore.

“I was in New Jersey. I’d been there a couple of years, working with a guy who’s restoring old houses. I came home from work one day to a call from an attorney in Delaware—which is where the Glorys lived when they weren’t on assignment somewhere in the Third World. Their will named me Mariah’s legal guardian.”

“You didn’t know that?” Cassie was confused. Apparently, he hadn’t been able to make a go of marriage with this Moira, either. It must have complicated things when she’d married his good friend—not that Cassie wanted to hear anything about that. But wouldn’t he, as Mariah’s natural father, expect to have custody of her in the event her mother could no longer care for the child?

Sam nodded. “I knew,” he said hoarsely. “I just didn’t think there’d ever be a need....”

His voice broke off, and he lowered his chin as though holding back deep emotion. He'd loved the woman so much?

Another stab of pain left Cassie feeling weak and tired.

"When I got to Afghanistan to collect Mariah, she was this silent huddle with big frightened eyes." He paused. "Immediately after the funeral, I moved into the Glorys' home and began adoption proceedings. I tried to make her life as normal as possible, surrounding her with familiar things, but she hasn't responded very much. She's been in counseling since the beginning, but there's only so much medical science can do. She's suffering emotional pain, not some kind of chemical imbalance they can medicate. There is no diagnosis of a disease. There are always medications, of course, but some things you have to come out of naturally, on your own. Mariah has to want to return to us."

"So she hasn't spoken at all?"

"Not a word."

"Not even when she saw you?"

Sam shook his head.

"It's obvious she adores you."

"We've always been close," Sam said softly, almost apologetically, as his eyes met Cassie's. "Without you, she was my only shot at having a child in my life."

Cassie ignored the first part of that statement. "You and her mother split before she was born?"

"Her mother and I were never together," he said, his expression gentle. "At least, not in any child-making sense. Mariah's not my biological daughter, Cass."

The breath slowly left Cassie's lungs. She felt dizzy, light-headed. But not relieved. Whether or not Sam had had sex with Mariah's mother made no difference to her; he'd certainly had sex with other women.

At least one while he and Cassie were married.

Because she didn't know what else to do, Cassie sat and listened while Sam told her about his best friends, the Glorys. All three of them—Brian, who was full-blooded Chippewa, Moira, a Peace Corps brat, and Sam—had met when they'd been leaving for a two-year stint overseas as Peace Corps volunteers.

Mariah's name came from a song she'd always loved. It referred to the wind. Sam said Mariah blew into their lives unexpectedly, but that she was vital to the very air they breathed.

While Cassie had been mourning their lost child, fighting to recover her life, Sam had been overseas making friends and helping other people, instead of caring for the wife he'd promised to love, honor and cherish. He'd been taking part in raising another child.

She'd have to tell him about that someday. When she was ready. When she felt she could get through the telling without falling apart. Emily's premature birth—and subsequent death a month later—wasn't something she spoke about. Ever. Even after all this time, the wounds were too raw. And it wasn't as though she owed Sam an explanation. He'd lost all rights to Emily when he'd deserted them.

Although she knew Sam wasn't responsible for the death of their child, any more than she was, she couldn't stop believing that if only he'd been there...

Yet, no matter how frozen her heart felt at this moment, Cassie was still glad to hear that he'd been doing something worthwhile during those years. Glad to know that, while he hadn't been there for his own child, little Mariah had been able to count on him.

Cassie had always figured he'd been enjoying the beds of coeds, like the girl he'd been with the night he should have been home with Cassie. Despite everything, she felt somehow consoled that this wasn't the case.

"We were pretty much the only family any of us had," Sam said, obviously lost in time. Cassie hated the stab of jealousy she felt as she heard the affection in Sam's voice for these unknown people.

She'd never been petty. Or possessive. She sure as hell wasn't going to start now. Sam was nothing to her. Less than nothing.

He'd betrayed her trust. Nothing was going to change that. Ever.

She might someday be able to forgive him. Had been aiming toward that goal for the past several years. But even if the day came when she could be truly free of the pain he'd caused her, the trust was gone. Once trust was broken, it couldn't be restored. It simply ceased to exist. How could you believe in someone you couldn't believe?

"Moir's parents were still alive back then, though they're both gone now." He shook his head grimly. "I'm glad they weren't around to know what happened to their daughter. They died of a viral infection in Africa, within a week of each other. Even when they were alive, they were always in service somewhere obscure. She saw them once a year if she was lucky. And Brian was an orphan."

Sam didn't bother to explain about his own aloneness. Perhaps there wasn't any point.

He gave a sudden laugh, and Cassie sensed sadness there as well as mirth. "I was the one who proposed," he said.

"To Moira, you mean?" So he and Brian had both been in love with the woman?

"No." He steepled his fingers in front of his chest. "They were such blind fools. Even after they were expecting Mariah, they couldn't figure out that they were crazy about each other. I had to point out the obvious and then drag them off to Atlantic City to tie the knot before they could talk themselves out of it."

Cassie had never had a friendship that close. Not since Sam. She envied him.

She had Zack, though. And Randi now, too. Zack had pulled her through some rough times in those first days after she'd made the decision to get on with her life and reenter college. At Arizona State, not Montford University. There was no way she could have gone back to Montford.

"When Mariah was born, I had to do most of the coaching because poor Brian was so scared seeing Moira in pain, it made him sick."

Sam had witnessed a birth, had coached another woman through those hours of pain. Another woman... This was why she couldn't be with him, why she couldn't spend any more time with him. Everything he said hurt too much.

"Tell me about Mariah," she said now, needing to get him back to the only thing that could matter.

Her life's work involved helping emotionally devastated people. And she hadn't been able to get that little girl out of her mind. Couldn't bear to have the child living so close, to run the risk of running into her over and over, without finding out if there was something she could do to help.

She wasn't interested for Sam's sake. Never for Sam. But because this was what Cassie did. What made her feel good about herself. What gave her a reason to get up in the morning.

Sam sat forward, his hands hanging helplessly. "Only she could tell us what's on her mind at this point. There were reports of the things that happened during the twelve hours the plane was held captive, but they varied depending on who was talking, where they were sitting. Every report was clouded by the witness's own terror. Not a lot of people noticed the mother and little girl sitting in the back of the plane—"

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